

# PARAGUAY



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INQUIRY REPORT

## JOURNALISTS ALONE FACING TRAFFICKING

**REPORTERS  
WITHOUT BORDERS**  
FOR PRESS FREEDOM



By Benoît Hervieu of the Reporters Without Borders Americas Desk, with help from the Forum of Paraguayan Journalists (FOPEP)

Last February, Reporters Without Borders released its first-ever [thematic report on organized crime](#), the main source of physical danger for journalists since the end of the Cold War. Produced with the help of our correspondents and specialists in several countries, that report underlined how difficult it is for the media to investigate the criminal underworld's activities, networks and infiltration of society. Aside from covering bloody shootouts between rival cartels, news media of any size usually seem ill-equipped to describe organized crime's hidden but ubiquitous presence.

Paraguay, which a Reporters Without Borders representative visited from 3 to 10 July, is a good example of these problems. Overshadowed by Brazil and Argentina, its two big neighbours in the Southern Common Market (Mercosur), it has long received one of the world's worst rankings in Transparency International's corruption index. It is also a major way station in the trafficking of cocaine from the Bolivian Andes to the Southern Cone.

While the level of violence is not as high as in Mexico, Colombia or some Central American countries, the persistent corruption, judicial impunity and influence of mafia activity on political and business activity prevent the media and civil society from playing a watchdog role. Although elections brought about a real change of government for the first time in 2008, Paraguay is still struggling to free itself from the code of silence and complicity that prevailed during the decades of dictatorship and affects the media as well. This was clear from interviews with journalists, observers and state officials in Asunción and Concepción, in the border cities of Ciudad del Este and Encarnación, and the Argentine border city of Posadas.





said Candido Figueredo, *ABC Color's* correspondent in Pedro Juan Caballero for the past 16 years. “This tragedy highlighted two things. Firstly, the decline of the old Paraguayan smuggling clans, such as the Fahd Yamil and Morel families, compared with traffickers operating at the international level. Secondly, the impossibility of doing truly independent investigative journalism in this country, which is still the case today.”

Far from ending the ties between organized crime on the one hand, and business and political sectors on the other, the fall of the dictatorship had spawned many new threats for media that had only just been freed from state terror.

**MEDIA FOR SALE**

Targeted or bought. That is the cruel alternative often confronting journalists, who are aware that “organized crime rarely warns before acting.” In Ciudad del Este, Mariana Ladaga thinks the risk of being killed “comes second” after the risk of being bribed. Argentine by birth and Paraguayan by adoption, Ladaga, 35, has worked for the past eight years as correspondent for the Paraguayan daily *La Nación* (not to be confused with the Argentine daily of the same name) and for *Radio 9.70 AM*, which belongs to the same group.

**CIUDAD DEL ESTE, 20,000 VISITORS A DAY**

Formerly called Puerto Stroessner and a hive of activity where 50 nationalities rub shoulders in a population of 300,000, Ciudad del Este is ranked third in the world, after Miami and Hong Kong, as a centre of tax-free commerce thanks to the Friendship Bridge which links it with the Brazilian city of Foz de Iguazu on the other side of the River Paraná. “An average of 20,000 visitors come every day from Brazil to shop in Ciudad del Este,” said Andrés Colman, former *Ultima Hora* correspondent and now head of the Forum of Paraguayan Journalists (FOPEP). “As the Brazilian federal tax department sets a limit of 300 dollars per person per month in duty-free purchases, smugglers are used to handle the rest. This city has adapted to trafficking and you can understand why Brazilian cartels such as *Comando Vermelho* from Rio de Janeiro and its São Paulo rival, the *Primeiro Comando da Capital*, have set up bases here, if not their headquarters.”



EVERY DAY, 20,000 PEOPLE CROSS THE FRIENDSHIP BRIDGE TO VISIT CIUDAD DEL ESTE

“Providing full, thorough coverage of trafficking is impossible,” she said. “We have neither the time nor the resources. And even if we did, where would we begin? In Ciudad del Este, trafficking in drugs or firearms is just one aspect of an enormous contraband activity that also involves legal products such as electronic goods. No one should have any illusions about all this intense activity. The city is still small, the ramifications of trafficking affect the press and I am just a correspondent.”

Ladaga added: “It is very easy to fall into the trap of corruption. After I covered the seizure of a drug consignment at a clandestine airstrip, a man came to seek my husband and offered him 30,000 dollars for my silence. It turned out he had gone to the same school as my husband and knew other members of my family. I had to give up covering the story. I can risk my own life but not the lives of my loved-ones.” She nonetheless refuses to be discouraged and is pleased to have contributed to the recent publication of a list of *Comando Vermelho* members in Ciudad del Este. “No reprisals so far,” she whispered.

## CORRESPONDENT IN HELL

The situation seems to be even more precarious for journalists based in the 500-km-long northern stretch of territory consisting of the departments of Concepción, Amambay and Canindeyú. Adjoining Amambay’s marijuana plantations, Concepción’s arid, deserted and uncontrolled plains are ideal for trafficking. Almost bereft of tarmac highways, the region is full of dirt roads and clandestine air-strips that make it a major waypoint in the illegal import-export trade. The physical risks for journalists here are almost as great as the difficulty of pinning down the trafficking.

“Working in these departments is like being a correspondent in hell,” jokes Candido Figueredo, one of the two *ABC Color* journalists currently receiving armed protection. The other is Pablo Medina, who is based in Canindeyú. Jovial, eccentric and sometimes described as reckless, Figueredo is ready to live with a permanent police escort after two bomb attacks on his home and two on his car.

A Concepción-based journalist working for the same newspaper, Aldo Rojas has not requested the same kind of protection but does not play down the danger. “The presence of journalists at the seizure of a consignment is rarely welcomed by the authorities in this area,” he said. “We are often the witnesses of their sometimes serious abuses against isolated rural communities that are suspected of complicity in the trafficking, a suspicion that can also be levelled at the authorities themselves. The situation was exacerbated by the EPP’s emergence.”

“I just have to do a report about the police officers specialized in combating the EPP to get a warning from the EPP in the form of a leaflet,” said Justiniano Riveros, the CIM



ABCCOLORREPORTERCANDIDOFIGUEREDOGOES NOWHERE WITHOUT AN ESCORT

## GANGSTERS POSING AS GUERRILLAS

It was in the department of Concepción that the Paraguayan People’s Army (EPP) emerged at the start of the previous decade. With a core of about 15 members, this small guerrilla group quickly moved from revolutionary struggle to trafficking, hold-ups and abduction. Its evolution is similar to that of the Brazilian cartels *Comando Vermelho* and *Primeiro Comando da Capital*, also originally urban guerrilla groups, and to a large extent to Colombia’s FARC, to which it pays a percentage of its ransom earnings in exchange for weapons. The EPP’s accumulated capital is estimated at around 5 million dollars. Its most notorious “feat” continues to be the abduction and subsequent murder of former President Raúl Cubas’ daughter, Cecilia Cubas, in 2004. It does not like being described as gang of ordinary criminals and includes the “bourgeois press” in its targets. It was the EPP that was blamed for the bomb attack on the Asunción headquarters of the privately-owned TV station *Canal 9* on 12 January 2011.



said: “The local Paraguayan media cannot cover trafficking or other subjects that are very sensitive. It is both politically dangerous and economically counter-productive.” Andrés Colman, the president of the Forum of Paraguayan Journalists (FOPEP), went further, blaming certain regional media “that are complicit in gangster methods, practicing extortion journalism and using the threat of publication to blackmail people.”

Although the charge is serious and hard to verify, it highlights a dilemma for Paraguayan journalists in the interior. Either opt to work for media that censor themselves from the outset, under pressure. Or work as the correspondents for national media, exposed to the fashion for abusive lawsuits as well as security risks.

Most of the journalists that Reporters Without Borders met in the provinces complained of being isolated. Many of them also deplored the fact that the public was inured to the existence of trafficking and seemed indifferent to their fate. With the partial exception of *ABC Color's* correspondents, all of them deplored the lack of support from the media for the idea of insurance coverage against the risks to which they are exposed.

Carry a gun? Roa never goes anywhere without a revolver in his car but this limited “protection” does not help to defuse the tension and mistrust which makes it hard to find sources. “There is not always a direct threat, but a latent threat is always present, we have internalized it,” Roa said. “One day I learned that a Colorado Party politician had hired an individual living in Ciudad del Este to kill me. The politician ended up falling from power and the case did not go any further. Nonetheless, I do not rule out the self-censorship option completely, for my family's sake.” Or seeking support from the other side of the Paraná.

## POOLING INFO ACROSS THE RIVER

Whether approved, tolerated or opposed by their editors, the pooling for information among rival journalists often takes place when they are exposed to threats. “We do not go out alone and we swap information and sources even if we sometimes keep certain exclusives to ourselves,” said one correspondent in a typical comment. This is especially the case in the border areas, where colleagues from the other side are often less concerned for their physical safety.

In Posadas, the capital of the Argentine province of Misiones, Matías Falconi seems more relaxed. He works for the crime and general news section of *El Territorio*, the region's leading daily with a print-run of 20,000 copies. Out of a total of 32 salaried employees, his section has four reporters, two of them specialized in organized crime. He spoke of the difficulties of covering this complex and often hidden phenomenon.

“It's true, the physical threat is much less for us than our Paraguayan colleagues,” he said. “But we encounter the same problems as them. We also lack the human resources to fully cover this reality. Our sources have difficulty talking and do not necessarily have any interest in doing so. We have also had a lot of surprising cases like the interception of a prison service truck carrying two tons of marijuana, which says a lot by about the possible complicity of certain officials. We are also told about consignments that have been abandoned without anyone being arrested. That prompted the federal government to react and demand more concrete results.”

As well as cooperation between government agencies on either bank of the River Paraná, there are also regular contacts between news media. “We are a bit like war correspondents,” said *El Territorio* editor Roberto Maack. “We cannot do without this solidarity between Argentine, Paraguayan and Brazilian journalists. This pooling of information needs to be developed but should not lead to a greater concentration of media ownership. It could nonetheless follow the example of the special pull-outs that the leading newspapers sometimes produce.”

Maack added: “For example, *Folha de São Paulo* in Brazil and *Clarín* in Argentina organized a joint team to follow trafficking from one end of the chain to the other. This initiative resulted in an eight-page special report. This example should be followed by journalists like us, who are on the ground every day, although it should obviously be adjusted to the scale of our resources and should take account of our different readership.”

## DELAYED ACCESS

Do the Paraguayan media have the means to do this? In Argentina, Falconi of *El Territorio* is tempted to envy the fact that they deal with a single drug agency. “Paraguay has a specialized agency, the National Anti-Drug Secre-



ariat (SENAD),” he said. “It is not the same in Argentina, where the federal police, the prefecture (maritime police), the gendarmerie (border police) and Misiones provincial police are all rivals along the 150 km of river border between the two countries. Which of these official sources do we trust?”

The reasons for envy stop there because Argentina has legislation ensuring public access to official information but similar legislation is still pending in Paraguay, where the authorities fear that it would encourage media audacity and sensationalism.

The news director of *Radio 1 de Marzo 780 AM*, a privately-owned national radio station based in Asunción, Vladimir Jara produces the only weekly radio programme – called “Punto Rojo” – that is solely about organized crime and drug trafficking. As such, he was the target of threats and illegal phone-tapping by SENAD officials in 2007.

“I took the risk of reporting a case of internal corruption and I suspected there could be an attempt by anti-drug agents to compromise me,” Jara said. “The threats against me did not have the expected judicial follow-up, but the

matter subsequently subsided. Now criticized above all by the EPP, Jara recognizes that the SENAD has evolved positively in terms of results and image in the past two years.

Appointed as head of the SENAD on 26 April 2011 (Day of the Journalist), Mercedes Castiñeira is the first woman to run the agency. In a show of a concern for transparency, she listed annual seizures but went on to criticize “media that are in a rush and are guilty of inaccuracy and even of jeopardizing our credibility.”

Referring to the recent seizure of 370 kg of cocaine, she said: “The media had heard talk of 400 kg so they started asking the inevitable question, namely, where had the difference gone. But as far as my agency was concerned, it was just the difference between the initial estimate and the actual amount seized. The difference between media time and our time generates this kind of problem and complicates the job for us. Too many journalists want spectacular results at once, and, if necessary, are ready to sacrifice their sources.”



ARGENTINE JOURNALIST MATÍAS FALCONI ACKNOWLEDGES THAT HIS PARAGUAYAN COLLEAGUES RUN GREATER RISKS



SENAD CHIEF MERCEDES CASTIÑEIRA: "JOURNALISTS OFTEN MAKE OUR JOB MORE COMPLICATED."

## MODEST HOPES, FEAR OF "MEXICANIZATION"

Carmelo Caballero, a lawyer who was deputy security minister from August 2008 until last month, praised the government for launching a systematic intelligence effort to trace trafficking networks back to their source, something that had not been done in the past. He also praised efforts to provide more information to the media, which "often tends to imagine that the situation in Paraguay is comparable to Kosovo at the height of the war."

There was recognition of the government's efforts from CIRD director Alvaro Caballero, who said: "The government has acted with more openness towards civil society since Fernando Lugo took office in 2008 and has fostered more awareness of the problems, especially this year as part of the country's bicentenary."

The new mood also seems to be affecting journalists. FOPEP, which was founded five years ago and now has 80 members, joined the Forum of Argentine Journalism (FOPEA) and the Brazilian Association of Investigative Journalism (ABRAJI) in organizing an unprecedented international meeting at the Triple Frontier on organized crime and the media's coverage of the subject. The challenge of investigating such a subject is not one that can be tac-

kled alone. The lesson applies both to the media and to the governments that are supposed to respond to it. Caballero, the former deputy minister, is aware of this. "The intelligence work cannot be done without help from other countries and will never be able to make up for the lack of control at the borders, for which we do not have the human resources," he said. The challenge of providing security and protection will be all the more daunting in the run-up to the 2014 Football World Cup and the 2016 Olympic Games in neighbouring Brazil.

"There is a danger that the police sweeps being carried out in Rio de Janeiro's favelas ahead of these events could prompt an exodus of Brazilian traffickers to their Paraguayan bases," said the Ciudad del Este-based journalist Ladaga. She even talked of a future "Mexicanization" in a region that the Mexican cartels are already beginning to penetrate. The Asunción-based Jara thought such fears were exaggerated but he predicted "increased competition between crime organizations." That, however, is exactly what plunged Mexico into chaos, to the great misfortune of its population and journalists.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Together with the FOPEP representatives who participated in this fact-finding mission, Reporters Without Borders believes that the following initiatives should be undertaken urgently with the aim of improving the ability of journalists to operate in Paraguay:

- A reform of the judicial and penal systems leading to better administrative supervision of the activities of judges and police officers with the aim of ending impunity in cases of murders of journalists and the most serious violations of media freedom
- Adoption of an access to information law that ensures that journalists and the general public are able to question and audit government policies.

- Passage of legislation ensuring better regulation of the financing of the media and any other entities or organizations that produce news and information of public interest, with the aim of protecting them from any kind of infiltration or money-laundering by organized crime.
- Restrictions on lawsuits in which exorbitant damages are demanded as they endanger the personal economic situation of journalists and sometimes the survival of their news media. Reporters Without Borders hopes that a precedent will be set by *ABC Color* journalist Sandra López's acquittal on 1 July on charges of defaming and insulting a CEO whose management she had questioned.



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