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Colombia: journalists caught in cross-fire

Journalists are under siege from all actors of the increasingly brutal Colombian armed conflict, Amnesty International said today as the organization's UK Section presents Colombian journalist Ignacio Gómez with its annual international media award.

Ignacio Gómez, an investigative journalist from the Colombian newspaper *El Espectador* and director of the Press Freedom Foundation, has recently had to leave the country fearing for his safety after learning that his name was on a paramilitary death list. The award is a recognition of Ignacio Gómez's lifelong commitment to investigative human rights journalism under the most dangerous of circumstances.

"The case of Ignacio Gómez is a clear example of the campaign of terror Colombian journalists are increasingly subjected to," Amnesty International said.

"The ever more polarised Colombian situation is making it increasingly difficult to carry out independent information work, and journalists are -- as many sectors of civil society -- finding themselves caught in the cross-fire of the armed forces, their paramilitary auxiliaries and armed opposition groups."

"Covering controversial issues such as human rights violations or the links between the armed forces and the paramilitary has transformed journalism into a life-threatening activity," the organization added.

In the past nine months, eight journalists have been killed, several of whom in connection with their human rights-related reporting. Since the beginning of the year, many more have been attacked and kidnapped, and dozens have had to flee the country. For journalists working in conflict zones it is often difficult to identify the authors of the attacks.

In a recent incident, one of Ignacio Gómez's colleagues at El Espectador, Jineth Bedoya, was abducted by armed men believed to be right-wing paramilitaries, detained and tortured physically and mentally for hours. During her ordeal she was repeatedly told her name and those of four colleagues, including Ignacio Gómez, were on a death list.

Among those who had to leave Colombia for their own safety in March this year was Francisco Santos, news editor at leading daily El Tiempo, involved in anti-violence campaigns, and founder of an anti-kidnapping organization. In his articles he often condemned violations of humanitarian law by armed opposition groups, especially kidnapping, and provoked anger in high-ranking army officials when he accused right-wing extremists linked to the armed forces of killing of journalist and political satirist Jaime Garzón in August 1999.

"Free and independent reporting of human rights issues and on violations committed by all parties to the conflict is a crucial element to improve the human rights situation and to advance the peace process," Amnesty International said.

"All warring factions must respect the journalists' right to safely carry out their professional activities and to exercise freedom of expression," the organization added, calling on the Colombian authorities to take all appropriate measures to ensure the safety of communications professionals.

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