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Ecuador: Threats and violence against government critics increases

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It has become commonplace in Ecuador for journalists, civil activists and opposition politicians to be threatened, harassed or subjected to violent attacks. Outspoken individuals regularly reported receiving death threats throughout 2004 and many more threats may remain unreported. |

Since December, however, the situation has deteriorated further, with civil society in Ecuador becoming more polarised following the actions of the country's Congress. In an extraordinary session called by the President, Congress removed 27 of the 31 judges sitting on the Supreme Court of Justice and nominated replacements, a move that triggered serious concerns over the independence of the judiciary.

Intimidation of critics has escalated since then. On 25 January, Orlando Pérez Torres, a journalist for *Hoy* (Today) newspaper who has written articles criticising the President and members of the judiciary was threatened at gunpoint. Mr Torres, who is also a professor at the *Universidad de las Américas* (University of the Americas) in the capital Quito, was walking to the university when two men approached him and pushed him against a wall. One of them put a gun to his stomach and said: "*Deja de joder, de fastidiar, de escribir pendejadas, sino te vamos a matar*" ("Stop f**king bothering writing bulls**t or you will get killed").

The attack followed a number of previous incidents of harassment, including anonymous telephone calls to his home asking him to reveal his address. Although he has reported these incidents to the police, there is no indication that an investigation has been opened and the authorities do not appear to have taken any measures to protect him.

More recently, the staff of the *Fundación Mariana de Jesús* (Mariana de Jesus Foundation), a religious aid and development organization that has criticised the way the country's Ministry of Social Welfare is run, received a bomb threat. On 2 March, staff at the Foundation was told a bomb would be activated in their office, also in Quito, if the organization's director, Francisco Peña, did not resign.

Mr Peña had previously reported an attack in which he was shot at by three men in a car park near the Foundation's office after he refused to give them the documents and laptop he was carrying. This came just after the closure of an investigation into the Foundation by the Ministry of Social Welfare. The investigation had threatened to close the organization down, but national and international opposition led to it not proceeding. The Foundation subsequently filed a legal complaint against the investigation arguing that it violated the organization's constitutional rights.

The most serious incident took place on 6 March against the socialist deputy Enrique Ayala Moor, rector of the *Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar* (Simón Bolívar Andean University), just two days after he expressed his opposition to the recent changes in the Supreme Court. His car was intercepted by a four-by-four | and several shots were fired at him.

The hypocritical response of the authorities to incidents of this sort is clearly illustrated by an incident in February 2004. Journalists Miguel Rivadeneira of *Radio Quito*, Marco Pérez of *Radio Tarqui*, Paco Velasco of *Radio La Luna* and Kintto Lucas of the agency *IPS* complained to Amnesty International that they had received various threats over the period September 2003 to January 2004 and they attributed these threats to their critical attitude towards the government.

Government authorities publicly condemned the actions against Miguel Rivadeneira | and stated that they would not tolerate any violation of the freedom of the press and would investigate these acts. In the very same month, however, the government announced that it was closing Radio La Luna and bringing charges against Paco Velasco for slander.

So far, only one person is known to have died in these incidents -- the driver of Carlos Muñoz Insua, the executive president of the Telesistema television network, who was mortally wounded when unidentified individuals | opened fire on Mr Insua's vehicle on 9 February 2004.

With more threats being made by armed persons; the likelihood is that this number will rise unless something is done.

The authorities need to act quickly to prevent this happening. Their lip service regarding violations against the press needs to be translated into reality. All reported incidents must be properly investigated and those threatening journalists, civil activists and opposition politicians in any way must be brought to justice.