

Close-up on... the Americas

The United States rose twelve places to 36th position. The release of Al-Jazeera cameraman Sami Al-Haj after six years in the Guantanamo Bay military base contributed to this improvement. Although the absence of a federal “shield law” means the confidentiality of sources is still threatened by federal courts, the number of journalists being subpoenaed or forced to reveal their sources has declined in recent months and none has been sent to prison. But the August 2007 murder of Oakland Post editor Chauncey Bailey in Oakland, California, is still unpunished a year later. The way the investigation into his murder has become enmeshed in local conflicts of interest and the lack of federal judicial intervention also help to explain why the United States did not get a higher ranking. Account was also taken of the many arrests of journalists during the Democratic and Republican conventions.

The index’s most spectacular fall is Bolivia (115th), which plummeted 47 places. Its institutional and political crisis has exacerbated the polarisation between state and privately-owned media and exposed journalists to violence because of their presumed links with the government or opposition. One state media employee was killed. Unlike Hugo Chávez’s government in Venezuela (113rd), Evo Morales’ government has tried to defuse the media war by repeatedly offering to talk with the opposition.

Peru (108th) still leads the way as regards the number of physical attacks on journalists, but the level of violence continues to be greater in Colombia (126th) and Mexico (140th), where armed groups and drug traffickers threaten the media’s survival in some areas. While the number of journalists killed in these two countries has fallen, more are fleeing into exile. There have been signs of opening by Raúl Castro’s government in Cuba (last in the Americas at 169th), but they have not changed the human rights situation. Twenty-three dissident journalists are still in prison and press freedom is still non-existent.

Jamaica (21st) and Trinidad and Tobago (27th) are joined in the top 30 this year by Surinam (26th), which has been included in the index for the first time, as has Guyana (88th). The latter’s low position is due to tension between President Bharrat Jagdeo’s government and the press, and to the state’s monopoly of radio broadcasting. Haiti (73rd) continues to rise slowly and Argentina (68th) has also improved, but Brazil (82nd) has barely shifted because of several serious cases of violence against the press.