

THE AMERICAS



UNITED STATES AND CHILE AFFECTED BY PROTESTS, BRAZIL CRIPPLED BY INSECURITY

The worldwide wave of protests in 2011 also swept through the New World. It dragged the **United States** (47th) and **Chile** (80th) down the index, costing them 27 and 47 places respectively. The crackdown on protest movements and the accompanying excesses took their toll on journalists. In the space of two months in the United States, more than 25 were subjected to arrests and beatings at the hands of police who were quick to issue indictments for inappropriate behaviour, public nuisance or even lack of accreditation

In Chile, where student protesters questioned the over-concentration of media ownership, violence against journalists included beatings, cyber-attacks and attacks on editorial staffs. Many of these assaults, often accompanied by heavy-handed arrests and destruction of equipment, were carried out by abusive armed police who were rarely called to account.

Neighbouring **Argentina** (47th) barely moved in the index but two other southern countries registered a marked decline – **Brazil** (99th, down 41) and **Paraguay** (80th, down 26). Violence was the dominant factor in these changes. In Brazil's north and north-east and in Paraguay's border regions, local corruption, organized crime and environmental damage proved to be dangerous topics for journalists and bloggers alike to tackle. Three were killed in Brazil in 2011. Although the vast country showed it was making efforts to combat impunity, justice was applied unevenly across regions and states and was subjected to powerful political pressures.

This was also the case in Paraguay, where one journalist was killed. Paraguay's media workers bemoaned the lack of a law giving access to public information like the one passed recently in Brazil.

The physical danger in Brazil was comparable to that in Peru (115th), where three journalists were also murdered. Peru, notorious for the frequency of attacks on the press, also stood out because of its large number of legal proceedings for defamation. The radio and television journalist Paul Garay Ramírez spent six months in prison, from April until October, for allegedly defaming a prosecutor.

In **Ecuador** (104th) and **Bolivia** (108th), whose positions changed little, the climate was still characterized by judicial harassment, issues of balance and pluralism, polarization and repeated attacks on the press. This was even more the case in **Venezuela** (117th), which nonetheless rose 16 places.

Colombia (143rd), where one journalist was killed as a direct result of his work, remained far down the list because journalists were repeatedly threatened, forced to stop working or forced to flee abroad (or to another region), particularly journalists operating in areas where there is fighting. Despite improvements in the judicial system, the country has not yet put its years of civil war behind it, nor the grim practices of the former DAS security service such as espionage, sabotage and smear campaigns.

Contrasting fortunes in Central America

Panama fell 32 places to 113th in the index because of a radio station owner's murder and the expulsion of two Spanish journalists who supported indigenous groups resisting the mining industry's attempts to take their land. A bad atmosphere, marked by smear cam-

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47, rue Vivienne
75002 Paris,
Tel. : 33 1 44 83 84 56
Fax : 33 1 45 23 11 51
presse@rsf.org
Read more :
www.rsf.org



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paings against individual journalists, prevailed between the government of President Ricardo Martinelli and much of the media.

In **Guatemala** (97th, down 20 places), already ranked low because of violent crime, habitual self-censorship and a lack of pluralism, a journalist was detained without proof in 2011. In the **Dominican Republic** (95th), a journalist was murdered several weeks after spending six days in detention on a defamation charge. Frequent instances of police abuse were reported.

In neighbouring **Haiti** (52nd), on the slow road to recovery after the 2010 earthquake, rising political tension in the run-up to the swearing-in of President Michel Martelly on 14 May did not reach the point where it affected the safety of journalists.

Similarly in **Nicaragua** (72nd, up 11 places), the political polarization during the run-up to Daniel Ortega's re-election as president in November turned out to have little effect on the work of journalists or their freedom of movement. Despite instances of serious threats, the country moved up several places, as did **El Salvador** (37th, up 14) thanks to a fall in the number of assaults.

Costa Rica (19th) topped the list of Latin American countries in 2011, a position for which it traditionally vies with **Uruguay** (32nd). Its ranking is in marked contrast to that of its Central American neighbour, **Honduras** (135th), which has languished at the bottom of the list since the coup in June 2009. The deaths of five journalists in 2011, two as a direct result of their work, as well as the regular persecution of opposition media and community radio stations, confirmed its notoriety as the hemisphere's second most dangerous country for the press after **Mexico** (149th, down 13 places).

Mexico continued its decline against the grim backdrop of the federal government's offensive against drug trafficking, which has cost 50,000 lives in five years. As well as journalists, five of whom were murdered in 2011, netizens who take a stand against the prevailing violence are now also becoming the targets for killings and reprisals.

Bringing up the rear in the hemisphere, **Cuba** (167th) released the last of its jailed dissident journalists on 8 March, the only one still held of those detained during the "Black Spring" of 2003. However, it did not fulfil the hopes this raised of an improvement in civil liberties and human rights. Crackdowns and short-term detentions continued to be a threat for journalists and bloggers outside state control.

As well as **Canada** (10th, up 11 places), which recovered the hemisphere's top ranking, **Jamaica** (16th), **Surinam** (22nd, up 13) and the seven-member **Organization of Eastern Caribbean States** (25th, up 32) also improved their position in the index thanks to an almost total lack of acts of violence or serious breaches of freedom of information.

There was a surprise of a different kind in **Trinidad and Tobago** (50th, down 20 places) as a result of a scandal involving spying on journalists, as well as moves to boycott radio and television stations and procedural abuses.

Conditions in **Guyana** (58th), where radio broadcasting is still a state monopoly, were similar and its ranking was unchanged.