

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.





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.

