



## SILENCED VOICES: FRANCISCO PACHECO BELTRÁN

by Cathal Sheerin

In the early hours of April 25, 2016, Mexican Journalist Francisco Pacheco Beltrán documented on his website the extreme violence that had occurred a few hours earlier in his home state of Guerrero:

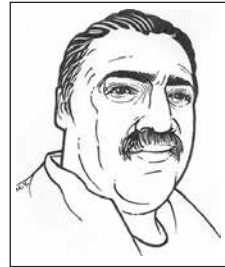


Illustration by Maxine Young

*Francisco  
Pacheco Beltrán*

A night of terror enveloped the tourist zone around the port of Acapulco when gunfights broke out at various spots along the Costera Miguel Alemán, closely followed by an organized assault carried out by an armed group on a hotel popular with the Federal Police. Social media users shared videos showing a heavy police presence on the streets. High caliber weapon fire could be heard coming from all directions. All this took place around ten p.m., when citizens were out for the night; many sought refuge in shopping centers for fear of being hit in the crossfire. For a short period of time, Acapulco became a virtual war zone, terrifying the citizens who have complained to the government over the lack of security and the violence into which Acapulco has descended: it is the most violent city in the country.”

When the shooting had died down, news outlets reported that one gunman had been killed and a police officer injured. But the “night of terror” was not over. It had yet to claim its final victim: Pacheco.

It was not yet daybreak when Pacheco left his house in the city of Taxco in order to accompany one of his daughters to the bus station. Having safely seen her off, he headed home. The night had been long and, as he turned into the road where he lived, he was probably thinking of catching a few hours’ sleep. That would have been around six thirty a.m., which is the time that his wife and another daughter heard what they described as the sound of firecrackers going off outside the house. Curious, and perhaps a bit annoyed, they went outside to see what was happening. What they saw was Pacheco lying in the road, soaked in blood, dead. He had been shot twice in the back of the head—executed. There were no witnesses.

Pacheco, fifty-five, had been a journalist for many years. He was editor of *El Foro de Taxco*, a reporter for *El Sol de Acapulco*, and a correspondent for the radio station Capital Máxima. Like many journalists, he also ran a personal blog where he posted reports online about the increasing violence and corruption in his state.

When Pacheco was murdered, he was—at that point—the fifth journalist to be killed in Mexico in 2016. January had seen Reinel Martínez Cerqueda and Marcos Hernández Bautista murdered; Moisés Dagdug Lutzow and Anabel Flores Salazar had been February’s victims. And, as this is being written, two more—Elpidio Ramos Zárate and Manuel Torres—have been added to the list.

At this rate, 2016 will quickly surpass 2015 as the most lethal year for Mexican journalists since President Enrique Peña Nieto took office in 2012. Taking the most up-to-date statistics available regarding lethal and non-lethal violence, free-expression organization Article 19 reports that there is an attack on journalists every twenty-two hours in Mexico.

According to Mexico’s National Commission for Human Rights, 109 journalists were killed, mostly because of their work, between the year 2000 and the start of 2016. Though the geographic focus of the violence may change—at various times it has been Veracruz,



Chihuahua, Guerrero, Tamaulipas, Oaxaca—the intensity never abates. In recent years, many journalists have fled Mexico; many more have chosen to remove their bylines from articles, preferring anonymity to death.

A few years ago I interviewed the Mexican journalist and poet Rolando Nájera. I asked him about what it was like to work and live in an environment where violence always seemed to be waiting just around the corner. This is what he told me:

My job has become riskier, and this has forced crime reporters to change the way they work. Many of them now work in groups where they can protect each other. I lived in Ciudad Juárez during the years of the worst violence, when they used to kill up to eighteen people a day, when they used to burn down businesses. The assaults, the extortion, the robberies, and kidnappings were everyday occurrences. The violence meant that people went out less frequently and locked themselves up in their houses. Juárez was converted into a ghost town, the streets were empty at night, and the people spoke of nothing except the violence. The daily question was, “How many did they kill today?”

With every murder, the victim seemed to be closer to you. At first, it was the body of a stranger discovered in the outskirts of the city, then it was an acquaintance, then a neighbor, then a friend, and then came the moment when it was a member of your family.

Some years ago, when I was the editor of *Periódico PM*, I was a victim of death threats made by criminals. They phoned me at home to tell me that they were watching me. They said that I should go to the window, from where I would see a van parked in front of my house... I didn't sleep very well in those days. I used to receive emailed threats every day because of my work. During that period, the newspaper received a direct attack. The reporter Eugenia Cicero and the photojournalist Jaime Murrieta (may he rest in peace) were beaten up by hooded men while they were trying to report on an incident...

When you see that so many innocent people have died and that no one does anything about it, it's difficult to trust the authorities. When you see how investigations are manipulated, when you see that there are never concrete results, it's difficult to trust. And because of this, people don't report crimes. So it's a vicious circle where impunity is the protagonist.

Most journalists killed in Mexico die because they expose either the drug trafficking cartels or corrupt public officials, or the links between both. Those who carry out the killings enjoy almost 100% impunity, largely due to the corruption and inertia that are endemic throughout the Mexican states. Police and employees of local administrations are often implicated in attacks on journalists: Article 19 reports that 41.5% of attacks in 2015 were carried out by public officials.

And at state level there is little aptitude or willingness to protect journalists who are under threat: in 2012 a "hit list" containing the names of a number of journalists who were to be killed was circulated in Veracruz State; when the worried reporters went to the authorities, the only help they received was the advice, "Get out of town." In many cases, local officials would rather keep their heads down (and intact) than delve too deeply into the "who" and "why" of so many killings

of journalists: murders are reported, details are taken, information is entered into databases, press statements are issued, and then the cases are let drift.

Pacheco's journalism criticized the Guerrero State administration generally, and the city administration in Taxco particularly, for their inability and, at times, seeming reluctance to tackle the worsening bloodshed on the streets. Guerrero's State governor, Héctor Astudillo Flores, had in fact asked journalists like Pacheco not to report on the violence in Guerrero. But Pacheco refused to be silenced, and then the violence silenced him.

Letters calling for a thorough investigation into the killing of Francisco Pacheco Beltrán may be sent to:

Héctor Astudillo Flores  
Gobernador de Guerrero  
Palacio de Gobierno  
Boulevard René Juárez #62  
Col. de los servicios  
Chilpancingo  
Guerrero, Mexico

You may want to use this [sample letter](#). Please also send a copy of your letter to your nearest Mexican diplomatic representative. In Washington, D.C., it is:

His Excellency Miguel Basanez Ebergenyi  
Ambassador of Mexico  
1911 Pennsylvania Ave., NW  
Washington DC 20006  
Fax: (202) 728-1698 Email: [mexembasua@sre.gob.mx](mailto:mexembasua@sre.gob.mx)

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