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Mexican reporters fear gangs

A war is waged on newspapers' ability to inform

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NUEVO LAREDO, Mexico - A drug war is ripping apart northern Mexico, but you won't find many details about who's behind it in the local newspapers. Journalists - after their colleagues have been killed, kidnapped and threatened with death - have stopped investigating organized crime.

"It's the new trend of drug gangs: Journalists are warned, paid off or killed," said Daniel Rosas, the managing editor of the daily *El Manana*, the oldest newspaper in this border city south of Laredo, Texas. "Drug battles have become bloodier, and gangs have no code of ethics. They don't respect human life; why should they respect reporters?"

El Manana, founded in 1932 after the Mexican revolution with a motto to promote freedom of expression, has been censoring itself since its editor, Roberto Javier Mora Garcia, was stabbed to death on March 19, 2004.

Earlier this year, a former *El Manana* reporter, Dolores Guadalupe Garcia Escamilla, died after being shot outside her home. She'd gone to work for a radio station and named officials as involved in the drug trade before she was killed.

Official news only

El Manana, whose walls are covered with images of past front pages, now reports only official news, its editors said. Other newspapers along the northern frontier followed after their reporters were killed, kidnapped or threatened. They said corruption, impunity and lack of police support made it almost impossible for journalists to research rampant violence accurately.

That means they don't follow up on the 173 people who've disappeared since last fall throughout the state of Tamaulipas, deemed by journalism organizations the most dangerous place for reporters to work in Mexico. Twenty-three others missing are Americans from Texas.

There have been at least 108 execution-style murders since January.

Self-censorship

"We still inform the community of what's happening but are more careful of what we say. It's a painful decision. We are hostages to self-censorship, and it's worse than censorship," said *El Manana*'s publisher, Ramon Cantu Deandar.

Cantu, 39, has grown cynical about covering organized crime in this city of nearly half a million people. "What's the point of investigating? We can't win. Drug mafias have billions and billions of dollars. They own this city: They buy police, government officials, investigators, you name it," he said.

In the past 18 months, six journalists have been killed along the border: four in 2004 and two in 2005. Two other journalists have been killed elsewhere in Mexico.

Their editors regarded the six as hard-core investigators of the violence that erupted in 2003, when the leader of the Gulf Cartel, Osiel Cardenas, was jailed, sparking a battle for control of Nuevo Laredo, the largest land port to the United States and the crucial crossing point to Interstate Highway 35, which runs to Canada.

All alone

"We're completely alone in this business. We don't trust any state or federal authorities, and crime keeps on growing. It's more visible, and there's seldom any punishment," said Jorge Morales, the editor of *El Imparcial*, in the Sonora state capital of Hermosillo, south of Arizona. Morales dismantled *El Imparcial's* investigative team after one of its crime reporters, Jose Alfredo Jimenez Mota, disappeared April 2 after telling colleagues he had to meet a source he was afraid of.

Accusations

Gunmen attacked Jorge Cardona, a reporter for the Televisa TV network, on Feb. 7 at his home in Monterrey, in northern Nuevo Leon state, after he aired a report in which a masked informer accused a paramilitary group associated with the Gulf Cartel, called the Zetas, of involvement in the disappearances of Americans in Nuevo Laredo. The source said the Zetas were backed by municipal police and had an informer in the army.

The FBI later told the Associated Press that the report was generally accurate.

Police now guard the entrances to the paper's headquarters. It wasn't till early this month that a new editor took Mora's place.

"I have to live up to Mora's reputation as a moral, ethical and probing journalist," said Omar Eli Robles, who had been a reporter at *El Norte*. "Of course, I'm a little afraid, but danger is part of the job."

Asked, however, if he'd tell his reporters to go back to investigating drugs and corruption, he demurred. "When and if this war ends," he said.

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