

The threat and the stigmatization: invisible intimidation for journalists and the media

*Report on the state of the Freedom of Press in Colombia in 2008**

During 2008, the Foundation for the Freedom of the Press (FLIP) registered 130 violations of press freedoms in Colombia. This number represents a decrease of approximately 20% in comparison to 2007, a year in which FLIP registered 162 violations. The 130 registered cases in 2008 involved 181 victims: 133 men, 35 women and 13 media outlets.¹

In 2008 there were no assassinations of journalists for professional reasons.² This fact needs to be emphasized in a country like Colombia where more than 130 journalists were murdered in the past 30 years. Despite the improvement this represents, the judicial investigations on crimes against members of the media in previous years have made little progress. The report shows some of these in detail.

Type of Violation	Violations	Victims
Threats	72	94
Inhumane or degrading treatment	31	58
Obstruction of journalistic work	21	23
Attack on infrastructure	2	2
Exile	2	2
Injure during coverage	1	1
Kidnapping	1	1
Assassination	0	0
Total	130	181

¹ The number of victims differs from the registered number of cases as several persons may be victimized by a single violation of the liberty of press. This is the case, for example, when a group of journalists is attacked during the covering of a public manifestation.

² There were two assassinations of persons linked with journalism. However, the facts as well as testimonies of authorities, colleagues and relatives forced the conclusion that these crimes had no relation to journalistic work.



Despite a 15 % drop in threats against journalists in 2008, compared to 2007, they remain the main form of intimidation tactic used against journalists and the most effective mechanism for keeping information from reaching the public eye. These threats often go unpunished, despite criminal investigations, making them the silent enemy of freedom of expression.

Public servants have also become the main authors of not only of obstructing justice (ten cases), but also of inhumane or degrading treatment (nine cases). FLIP recorded cases of mayors, councilmen and other members of public entities beating or insulting journalists after the publication of criticisms or allegations of corruption against their administrations.

Cases of assaults against journalists were particularly worrying during the previous year. The anxiety citizens' feel over government decisions or their emotion during public demonstrations resulted in aggression, insults and maltreatment against the press. In some cases, regional correspondents from national media were "put on trial" for editorial decisions made outside of their control. Additionally, journalists in other cases were classified as guerrillas or paramilitaries as a result of their coverage. In some cases the police were forced to protect the journalists.

Without discarding possible progress in terms of security and other external factors, one of the main reasons for the decrease in threats against journalist was that 2008 was not an election year in Colombia.

In the report on press freedom in Colombia in 2007 'The Challenge of Reporting,' FLIP conducted a detailed assessment of the structure and operation of the 'Program for the Protection of Journalists.' In this report, FLIP offers some figures on the operation of the Program during 2008 with a focus on a recent ruling of the Constitutional Court on the conditions under which the State must protect journalists at risk. In short, the Court established that the protection of journalists at risk cannot affect their freedom of expression. The ruling came as a result of a complaint launched by a beneficiary of the program.

During 2008 there were also reports of journalists who considered themselves at risk due to stigmatizing remarks and statements made by their own colleagues. Some of the latter were beneficiaries of the



Protection Program. In some cases, these stigmatizing statements came from public officials and individuals.

Along with the threats and other violations of press freedom, last year saw a different form of censorship: one less direct but equally damaging to the spreading of and the right to information in Colombia. It is the arbitrary distribution of state advertising, serving political objectives and used as financial pressure on journalists and media. This report provides an approach to the problem and some of the proposals that are being developed to deal with it.

Another aspect that may lead to an indirect form of censorship is the restriction of access to public information. During 2008, FLIP announced certain actions aimed at promoting the right to petition. In one particular case, the Supreme Court of Justice referred to public information and information about military matters. In a ruling that was relevant for investigative journalism the high court ruled that when the Army refuses to give information considering the compromise of national security, it should explain in what way national security would be compromised by the answer.

A final issue that deserved attention in 2008 is the legal actions taken against media and journalists. FLIP expressed its opinion in some cases when decisions led to censorship or implied lack of open constitutional jurisprudence.³

* *Translated by Colombia Reports.* www.colombiareports.com

³ See for example the cases of [Alejandro Santos](#) and '[Séptimo Día](#)'

