

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

February 8, 2022

The Honorable Antony Blinken
Secretary of State
2201 C St NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken:

We write to express deep concern about the ongoing killings of journalists in Mexico and to seek greater insight into U.S. efforts to support press freedom in the country. While the bilateral partnership between our nations remains strong, the U.S. must urge the Mexican government to seriously improve efforts to protect journalists.

On January 23, 2022, Lourdes Maldonado López, a journalist who covered corruption and politics and who publicly expressed fear for her life to President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, was shot to death in Tijuana. She is the fourth journalist murdered in Mexico in January. The other three were Margarito Martínez Esquivel, José Luis Gamboa, and Roberto Toledo – all of whom also reported on the nexus between criminal groups and local authorities. This is especially troubling given that nine journalists were killed in all of 2021, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. Press advocacy groups have documented the killings of over 140 Mexican journalists since 2000, many of whose deaths are believed to have been directly tied to their professional work. Indeed, Mexico remains the deadliest country for journalists in the Western Hemisphere and one of the deadliest and most dangerous worldwide.

Despite the Mexican government's establishment of the Protection Mechanism for Human Rights Defenders and Journalists in 2012 – a program intended to strengthen protections for journalists and defend press freedom – the dangers journalists face have not abated. Reporters Without Borders ranked Mexico 143rd out of 180 countries in its 2021 World Press Freedom Index, and more than 50 journalists have been killed since President López Obrador came to power in 2018. It has become increasingly clear that current efforts to protect journalists are inadequate and that the U.S. must work alongside Mexico to develop a more comprehensive plan to reduce the violence that destabilizes Mexico and specifically impacts journalists.

This includes dramatically improving accountability for those who have sought to silence reporters. Mexico has one of the highest rates of impunity in the world, with more than 95% of crimes against journalists going unpunished. Journalists who report on sensitive political issues or who dare to criticize armed gangs that have destabilized communities often face severe harassment and even abductions – leading them to face the choice of fleeing to escape the violence or potentially suffering deadly consequences. However, journalists who document the involvement of organized crime in politics are not the only ones who face danger. Alarming,

even those who report on mundane local issues face severe risks to their safety, including the risk of murder.

Given these conditions, we are dismayed that President López Obrador continues his bellicose rhetoric against the press. One day after Ms. Maldonado López's funeral, the president reiterated his government's support for free speech, but simultaneously said that "very few journalists, women and men, are fulfilling their noble duty to inform. Most are looking to see how we fail." These comments follow a familiar pattern of President López Obrador consistently disparaging journalists for daring to criticize his administration. He has also singled out NGOs that work to promote and defend press freedom, like Article 19, which he claims is working actively against his government. The years-long violence against journalists in Mexico cannot begin to lessen as long as the country's leader continues to normalize hostility towards freedom of expression.

This inability or unwillingness to confront individuals who target journalists extends to numerous other Mexican government officials as well. The State Department's recent human rights report documents that "43 percent of physical attacks against journalists in 2019 originated with public officials, of which 75 percent came from state or local officials and 7 percent stemmed from federal officials and members of the armed forces." It is clear that Mexico's rampant corruption – including ties between Mexico's drug cartels, political figures, and security forces – has normalized the widespread impunity seen in the country. Ultimately, the troubling relationship between public officials and drug cartels must be confronted if all Mexicans, including journalists, are to be protected. Ensuring that all Mexicans feel safe and secure in Mexico is in both of our countries' best interests.

We are pleased that the State Department publicly condemned Ms. López's murder and reiterated U.S. support for Mexico's journalists. We also welcome the Mexican government's pledge to investigate the killing and look forward to transparency with regards to their findings. However, the persistent attacks on reporters demonstrate the continuing need for Mexican officials to rein in the violence and directly address the impunity that enables these attacks. Moreover, the recent nationwide protests that Mexican journalists led denouncing the killings in January signal that the need for greater protections remains as strong as ever.

As such, we request that the State Department provide detailed information on what specific steps the agency will take to ensure that there is transparency and accountability for the recent murders of journalists, and to better address the crisis of freedom of expression in Mexico. We also request an overview of the steps the Department has taken to address and mitigate pattern of cooperation between drug cartels and individual members of Mexico's government. In addition to your written response, we urge State to schedule a briefing with our respective offices on this issue to better understand what actions Congress may take to help as well.

The United States has long been among the staunchest defenders of press freedom across the globe. We maintain that credibility both by standing up to our adversaries and by being honest with our friends and allies. The U.S.-Mexico relationship is strong and united by shared values, but we must not forget that the vital work of journalists remains a cornerstone of any democracy – including Mexico's. Thank you for your prompt attention to this issue.

Sincerely,



Tim Kaine
United States Senator



Marco Rubio
United States Senator