



R. Dominicana

Años 1997-2000



1997



## 1997 World Press Freedom Review

The major potential threat to press freedom in this South American nation during 1997 was a proposed new privacy law, debated a day after the death of Diana, Princess of Wales in a car crash in Paris on August 31 after apparently being chased by paparazzi photographers.

Ecuador's National Congress introduced the Bill, which laid down prison sentences and fines for those publishing the contents of communications deemed private. There was furious opposition to the Bill from newspapers, media and other organisations, which called it a gag law, because it converted any journalistic investigation revealing secret documents into a criminal act. In the end, the protests were so loud and so persistent that the Bill was scuttled after the first debate in Congress. The daily newspaper, Hoy, to come under fire from the continued government of President Abdala Bucaram early in the year. And even after Congress dramatically deposed Bucaram on February 6 - on the grounds that he was "mentally unfit to rule" - after just six months in the post, his former Ministers maintained their attacks on the newspaper.

In June, Benjamin Ortiz, editor of Hoy, was sued for 10,000 million sucres (nearly US\$3 million) for publishing a report describing the irregular intervention of Leonidas Plaza Verduga - state attorney-general during the Bucaram regime - in the collection of victim' insurance after a plane crash in Manta port, The examining magistrate, Pedro Gaibor, transmitted the case as a criminal one, but the public outcry forced him to change is mind. The case is still under investigation,.

Early in the year, the authorities also attempted to prevent the circulation of Hoy by putting pressure on distributors. The newspaper's reporters and administrators were forced to go out on to the streets to sell copies themselves.

Several journalists were physically prevented from going about their business this year. Military personnel confiscated material from journalists



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and stopped them freely reporting an explosion inside military headquarters in the zone of Balbina, some 25 miles outside the capital, Quito, in which three people had been killed and dozens others injured. Among the journalists affected in the military's heavy-handed move, Martin Berneti, a photographer for the French news agency, Agence France-Presse, had his film confiscated, as did a Teleamazonas reporter and cameraman as they got off a helicopter. A journalist and photographer from Hoy were prevented from boarding a private helicopter in which they intended to cover the explosion from the air.

On August 19, Gerardo Mora, a photographer from the newspaper, El Universo, was roughed up by members of the Presidential Guard in Quito. His film was also seized.



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## 1998 World Press Freedom Review

The press freedom situation in Ecuador has improved since the dismissal in February 1997 of President Abdalá Bucaram on the grounds that he was “mentally incompetent.” Under his successors, interim President Fabián Alarcón, and the new President, Jamil Mahuad, who took office on August 10, relations between the government and the media became less antagonistic, although some problems remain. In particular, a new constitution, which went into effect in August, contains provisions which threaten freedom of expression. Incidents of political violence directed against the media continued, and journalists from Peru - reporting on the long-standing border dispute between Ecuador and Peru - were prevented on several occasions from carrying out their profession.

Ecuador’s vigorous press are in local, private hands and - with the exception of two government-owned radio stations - represent a wide range of political views. However, some degree of self-censorship in the print media occurs, particularly with respect to politically sensitive issues or stories about the military.

On January 22, journalists working for the daily, *Hoy*, were attacked outside the paper’s building by an armed crowd. The incident followed the publication of several stories about the misappropriation of aid intended for victims of El Niño. The demonstrators, made up mainly of civil servants, carried signs supporting Carlos Chiluiza, the deputy finance minister of Guayaquil, whom the newspaper reported was linked to the scandal. President Alarcón condemned the attacks, although no legal action was taken against the demonstrators. The next day, supporters of Congressman Héctor García, a member of the party of deposed president Bucaram, punched several reporters in Guayaquil who asked about the possibility of a link between García and contraband connected to the El Niño emergency.

*Ecuavisa* TV reporter Rolando Panchana’s family was targeted by



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assailants in February after he reported that highway tolls may have gone to Congressman Franklin Verduga, brother of President Alarcón's former interior minister, IAPA reported. Unknown individuals kidnapped the journalist's brother and stole his car. Some days later, other persons slipped into a farm belonging to the journalist's father and killed the overseer there. Panchana's mother was kidnapped and held in her car for more than an hour before being dumped on the Guayaquil ring road.

On March 3, Leónidas Plaza Verduga, attorney general under the Bucaram government, filed a lawsuit against the daily *Hoy* for more than US\$4 million in compensatory and punitive damages, IAPA said. *Hoy* had published an investigative report into questionable actions by Plaza Verduga in connection with the insurance payments to the victims of a plane crash in the city of Manta.

In April, Felix Narvaez, a journalist investigating government corruption, was the target of two attacks, AMARC reported. The windows of a vehicle used by the journalist were broken while he was working on April 11 and documents in the car related to an investigation he was conducting were stolen. According to Narvaez, the documents contained information about the use of large sums of money by former government minister Cesar Verduga, who fled to Miami after a warrant for his arrest was issued. Several days earlier, Narvaez had been attacked by unknown assailants. Although the attackers tried to make it appear as though their motive was robbery, they later returned the journalist's wallet, credit cards, and cash.

On June 2, Peruvian journalist José Jara was assaulted in the middle of a press conference held to cover the return of President Alarcón, the Lima-based Institute for Press and Society (IPYS) reported. Having determined that he was Peruvian, military officials asked him to leave the conference, then dragged him off forcibly. He was released shortly afterwards, but his rolls of film, tape recorder and documents were confiscated.

In July, several journalists were the victims of political violence, RSF



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said. Pedró Jiménez, a reporter with the television channel *Ecuavisa* was attacked on July 13 in Guayas by supporters of Alvaro Noboa, the Roldosista party presidential candidate. On July 20, José Solís, a journalist with *Hoy* was also attacked by Noboa's supporters in Guayaquil. The next day, Jessica Maridueña of *Radio CRE* and Tito Mite of *Teleamazonas* were attacked and insulted by a group belonging to the Roldosista party.

On August 13, Ecuador's foreign minister, José Ayala, who was kept on by the new president, Jamil Mahuad, to continue negotiating a peace accord with Peru, barred a Peruvian *Reuters* correspondent from a briefing on the border conflict. According to the Foreign Press Association of Ecuador, Gustavo Oviedo, a Quito-based journalist, was excluded from a briefing with the Foreign Minister because of his nationality. A ministry spokeswoman said that "the ministry reserved the right to invite who it wants to the briefings."

Ecuador's new constitution, which came into effect on August 10, contains provisions that pose a threat to freedom of expression, according to IAPA. Particularly disturbing is the constitution's provision that the right to disseminate information be granted on the condition that the information is objective, truthful and timely. The constitution also requires that journalists must uphold societal values and imposes on the media the obligation to participate in the promotion of education and culture, and the preservation of ethical values.



## 1999 World Press Freedom Review

Ecuador's major news media outlets – newspapers, television and radio – are in local, private hands, except for two government-owned radio stations. Ownership of the media is broadly based – although the law limits foreign investment in broadcast media – and journalists say they are able to report without hindrance.

The Constitution provides for freedom of speech, and the authorities generally respect this provision in practice. However, defamation remains a criminal offence punishable by up to three years in prison. There is some degree of self-censorship, particularly with respect to politically sensitive issues or stories about the military, and the media is generally non-confrontational and measured in tone.

Using a law promulgated by the last military regime that requires the media to give the government free space or air time, the government can and has required TV and radio to broadcast government-produced programmes featuring the president and other top administration officials.

On April 30, the National Congress imposed a ten percent tax on the distribution and circulation of newspapers and magazines. Journalists called the tax a threat to press freedom and demanded that it be revoked.

Opposition parliamentarian and former journalist Jaime Hurtado González of the Popular Democratic Movement was shot dead on February 17. Another former journalist, Alexis Ponce, spokesman for the Permanent Assembly for Human Rights, received death threats from an anonymous caller on the day of Hurtado's killing. The names of both men were found on a death list which included ex-president Rodrigo Borja, as well as another journalist, Belén Andrade.

On May 22, Joaquín Hernández, an editorial writer for the Quito daily, *Hoy*, was shot at by police officers in a patrol car. Police officials later apologised and promised an investigation into the incident. Police officers attacked a photographer for *Hoy* on July 7 and confiscated his equipment



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while he was covering demonstrations in Manta.

In August, executives of *El Telégrafico* reported that the government was withholding official advertising in an apparent attempt to punish the paper.





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## 2000 World Press Freedom Review

The last twelve months has been a tumultuous period for Ecuador, during which it has faced earthquakes, a national day of strike, the resignation of members of the government, a bombing campaign and a change in the country's currency. All of these events have contributed to a great deal of uncertainty in the country and the government has struggled to cope with these varied problems.

On 24 January, one of the world's most short-lived attempts at a coup occurred in the country. Only three hours after the three man junta announced that it had deposed President Jamil Mahuad, it was announced that one of the leading participants was withdrawing his support. Shortly afterwards, the junta handed power back to the vice-president. Later in the year, the teetering government faced protests and a day of strike by all the main unions. In one serious incident during the protests several students were wounded by police using shotguns. In response to the growing turmoil and in recognition of the country's continuing economic conditions, the government of Ecuador elected to adopt the American dollar and take its faltering currency out of circulation.

Fortunately, it would appear that these problems have not impinged on press freedom. The country has been able to maintain its free and vigorous media which fully involves itself in discussion and criticism of the problems faced by Ecuador. However, self-censorship does exist and often the views of the newspapers reflect the narrow views of their owners. Furthermore, the press has often been loath to criticise the military or the related armaments industry.

In the area of press freedom, the main press violation in the country this year was not orchestrated by the government but by a previously unknown terrorist group calling itself the People's Liberation Army (PLA). The group claimed responsibility for a number of parcel bombs sent in February. According to reports gathered by *Reuters*, the group is a Marxist



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organisation which has made threats against U.S. citizens and those affiliated to the U.S.

On 16 February, Ecuadorean journalist and former politician Rafael Cuesta was injured by a parcel bomb sent by the PLA. Cuesta, a news director with the *TC* television channel, received cuts to his face and hands and was treated at a local hospital in the port city of Guayaquil. “Apparently a package or letter arrived with his name on it and when he opened it, it exploded”, a staff member at the TV channel told reporters. “He was alone in his office, and when we arrived after all the noise we found him hurt.” Another letter bomb was sent to Indian leader Marco Murillo but police dismantled it safely.