

Latin America Watch

# 2022: the deadliest year for Mexican journalists and media workers

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# About the Author

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## Introduction

2022 was the most lethal year for the Mexican press in the last three decades<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, [15 journalists and media workers](#) were reportedly killed in the country last year, which is comparable to the number of [dead journalists in Ukraine](#) since the Russian invasion in February 2022, although Mexico is not officially in a war situation. What is more, in Latin America, Mexico is the most dangerous country to work as a journalist, as it accounted for half of the [30 deaths in the region in 2022](#). This article looks at each of the killings of journalists and media workers committed last year, from José Luis Gamboa, in Veracruz, on January 10, 2022, to Fredid Román, in Chilpancingo, on August 22, 2022. A table containing all the data concerning these crimes is available at the end of the article.



We propose to analyse the motives behind each of these homicides, and whether they were related to the victims' occupations as journalists or media workers. If so, we will also consider whether the victims were covered by a protection mechanism and whether they had received threats beforehand. Indeed, since 2012, Mexican journalists can benefit from the "[Protection Mechanism for Human Rights Defenders and Journalists](#)". Created in 2012, this mechanism enables journalists who face risk and feel threatened because of their work to apply for federal protection. [Six states](#)<sup>2</sup> have also developed their own protection mechanisms. Furthermore, we will study the *modus operandi* used

<sup>1</sup> The [Committee to Protect Journalists](#) (CPJ) has been keeping a tally of attacks on the press since 1992.

<sup>2</sup> Ciudad de México, Veracruz, Colima, Guanajuato, Guerrero and Puebla.



to commit such crimes, which will also enable us to have a better understanding of violence against the press in Mexico. Finally, for each homicide case, we will look at the state of progress of the investigation and of justice: have the material and intellectual perpetrators of those crimes been identified, arrested, and/or convicted? This will help us to assess the level of justice or impunity associated with homicides of journalists in the country.

### José Luis Gamboa<sup>3</sup> - Veracruz (Veracruz)



José Luis Gamboa was the first [Mexican journalist to be murdered in 2022](#). The man worked as an independent journalist and was also director of the Facebook page “Inforegio Network”. In particular, he was covering local politics in the state of Veracruz, which led him to criticise high levels of insecurity in the region and to denounce the “*cobro de piso*”<sup>4</sup> allowed by local authorities. The man was stabbed to death on January 10th, 2022, in the port of Veracruz. It is worth noting

that, a few days before his assassination, José Luis Gamboa had published a harsh criticism of the city’s port policy on social networks. In April 2022, the [victim’s nephew was arrested](#) for allegedly participating in the murder. According to the authorities, José Luis Gamboa’s death has not been linked to his journalistic work but rather to family problems. Nonetheless, Mercedes Gamboa, the victim’s sister, accused the Public Prosecutor’s Office, which would be using her son as a “[scapegoat](#)” given the lack of leads in the investigation. The journalist was not part of any protection programme.

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<sup>3</sup> Photo taken from

<https://aristeguinoticias.com/1701/mexico/asesinan-al-periodista-jose-luis-gamboa-en-veracruz/>

<sup>4</sup> “*Cobro de piso*”, or “protection racket” in English, is a form of extortion, in which a criminal group demands money from a store owner or company in exchange for agreeing not to harm them.



## Margarito Martinez<sup>5</sup> - Tijuana (Baja California)



Margarito Martinez was a photojournalist from Tijuana (Baja California). He was [assassinated](#) on January 17, 2022, outside his house. Back in December 2021, the victim suffered stigmatisation on social media from a particular user, the reason for which the *Yo Sí Soy Periodista* organisation demanded the protection of the journalist. However, Margarito Martinez never incorporated any protection mechanism. A few days after the journalist's death, two [narcomantas](#)<sup>6</sup> signed by the Sinaloa Cartel were found in Tijuana, blaming the Arellano Félix Cartel for the murder. The criminal group [would have paid 40,000 pesos](#) for the execution of Margarito Martinez. Indeed, the reporter was held responsible for the publication of photos in the media showing the face of David López Jiménez, one of the Arellano Félix Cartel's leaders. In August 2022, [David López Jimenez was arrested](#). He was sentenced in November 2022 for masterminding the murder. In February 2022, three other suspects had also been arrested for their involvement in the assassination: José Heriberto Ochoa Días, aka "El Huesos", Cristián Adán, aka "El Jaguar", and Adrián Nicolás Ramos, aka "El Uber", all linked to the Arellano Félix Cartel. "El Huesos" would have received an order from "El Jaguar" to have Margarito Martinez killed. "El Huesos" therefore recruited "El Uber" to carry out the murder. In December 2022, "El Huesos" and "El Uber" were both [sentenced to 25 years in prison](#). "El Jaguar", the third suspect, did not acknowledge having planned Margarito Martinez's murder, reason for which [another hearing will be held on April 28, 2023](#). In any case, the reporter's death is related to his journalistic activities.

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<sup>5</sup> Photo taken from:

<https://www.jornada.com.mx/notas/2022/01/18/estados/asesinan-en-tijuana-al-periodista-margarito-martinez/>

<sup>6</sup> A "narcomanta" is a message ("narcomensaje") left by a cartel on a banner, usually containing threats or explanations of criminal activity.



## Lourdes Maldonado<sup>7</sup> - Tijuana (Baja California)



Lourdes Maldonado was [executed](#) while she was inside her car, in front of her own house, in Tijuana (Baja California), on January 23 2022. The woman was a career journalist, who used to work for various local and national media, but also hosted radio and television news programmes. In particular, she covered local police and corruption cases. In October 2022, [three men were convicted for her murder](#): Guillermo Julián Castro, material author, and Kevin Alberto Villarino and Erick Eduardo Contreras, his accomplices. However, the intellectual author of the crime remains unknown to this day. It should be recalled that, a few days before she was assassinated, Lourdes Maldonado had made public a court decision in her favour. Indeed, the victim was in [litigation](#) against Primer Sistema de Noticias (PSN), a company owned by Jaime Bonilla, former governor of the state of Baja California, and for which she had worked. Lourdes Maldonado had denounced PSN for unjustified dismissal, unpaid wages, and non-payment of insurance, reasons why Mexican justice had ordered the seizure of the company's assets and payment of compensation to the journalist. In March 2019, Lourdes Maldonado had a [morning meeting with President AMLO](#) to warn him that she was "in fear for her life". In 2021, she was once again the target of intimidation attacks. What is more, Lourdes Maldonado belonged to Baja California's Protection for Journalists Programme ([Programa de Protección para Periodistas](#)), which included surveillance patrols, communication with the police and a panic button. But the assailant shot her just as the officers in charge of her protection retreated.

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<sup>7</sup> Photo taken from:

<https://cnnspanol.cnn.com/2022/01/24/asesinan-periodista-lourdes-maldonado-mexico-tercera-orix/>



## Roberto Toledo<sup>8</sup> - Zitácuaro (Michoacán)



Roberto Toledo worked as cameraman and video editor for *Monitor Michoacán*, a local media outlet that had received [death threats](#) due to its investigative work on corruption cases involving the government of the state of Michoacán prior to Roberto Toledo's death. The website also covered cases of Cartel violence in the region. On January 31, 2022, three men showed up at the media office, located in Zitácuaro (Michoacán). Roberto Toledo opened the door for them, before being shot dead. Two posters with threatening messages signed by the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG) were found on the crime scene, suggesting that the execution was not aimed at the cameraman, but rather at the news outlet itself. It is worth recalling that *Monitor Michoacán's* requests for protection, addressed prior to the incident to the Interior Ministry, were ignored. On March 15th, 2022, weeks after Roberto Toledo's death, Armando Lianred, director of *Monitor Michoacán* was also gunned down in his home, which led to the [shut down of the website](#).

## Heber López Cruz<sup>9</sup> - Salina Cruz (Oaxaca)



On February 10, 2022, in Salina Cruz (Oaxaca), Heber López Cruz, founder of *Noticia Web*, a page of political news, was shot dead by two individuals while on his way home with his son. The perpetrators were both arrested by the municipal police on the very same day the murder was committed. One of the subjects is the [brother of Arminda Espinosa Cartas](#), a former Salina Cruz municipal official. One day before he died, [Heber López Cruz had revealed irregularities in the construction of a breakwater in Salina Cruz](#) involving the politician, who would have threatened the workers to vote for her in the next elections. The journalist had already received

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<sup>8</sup> Photo taken from <https://elpais.com/mexico/2022-02-07/la-ultima-historia-de-don-rober-el-reportero-asesinado-en-michoacan.html>

<sup>9</sup> Photo taken from <https://www.jornada.com.mx/notas/2022/02/10/estados/asesinan-a-periodista-heber-lopez-en-salina-cruz-oaxaca/>





death threats in 2019. His death is allegedly related to his journalistic activities, which have brought to light cases of local corruption.

### Jorge Luis Camero Zazueta<sup>10</sup> - Empalme (Sonora)



[Jorge Luis Camero Zazueta](#) was the sixth journalist to be murdered in 2022. On February 24, 2022, the director of the news portal *El Informativo* died from gunshots as he was leaving a gym in Empalme (Sonora). The execution would be related to [Jorge Camero's involvement in criminal activities](#), rather than to his journalistic career. Indeed, a couple of weeks before he was shot, Jorge Camero had to resign from his job at the town hall of Empalme, as a video circulating on social media accused him of having participated in the [kidnapping and murder of Daniel Palafox Suárez](#), a prominent local politician. Jorge Camero was also being investigated for small-scale drug dealing (*narcomenudeo*).

### Juan Carlos Muñiz<sup>11</sup> - Fresnillo (Zacatecas)



[Juan Carlos Muñiz's body was found lifeless](#) in his car on March 4, 2022, in Fresnillo (Zacatecas). The victim used to drive this vehicle when he wanted to get to the incidents he had to cover as a reporter for *Testigo Minero*, but also when he was working as a taxi driver. Indeed, like many journalists in Mexico, Juan Carlos Muñiz had two jobs, which highlights the [precarious situation of this profession](#). On March 8, 2022, [Emanuel de Jesús](#), alleged murderer of the reporter, was arrested. The suspect was already being investigated for other acts of violence such as aggravated kidnapping, robbery and criminal association. It should be recalled that [Fresnillo is one of Mexico's](#)

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<sup>10</sup> Photo taken from <https://www.24-horas.mx/2022/02/26/descartan-que-asesinato-de-periodista-jorge-luis-camero-fuera-por-su-profesion-lo-ligan-a-narcomenudeo/>

<sup>11</sup> Photo taken from: <https://cpj.org/es/2022/03/asesinan-a-tiros-al-periodista-mexicano-juan-carlos-muniz-en-zacatecas/>



[most violent cities](#), because of the cartels' dispute for control of the *plaza*. In such a context, [journalists in the region expressed their fear of covering incidents related to cartel warfare](#).

## Armando Linares<sup>12</sup> - Zitácuaro (Michoacán)



On March 15, 2022, [Armando Linares](#), director of *Monitor Michoacán*, was shot to death at his home in Zitácuaro (Michoacán), in front of his children. The incident came six weeks after the murder of Roberto Toledo, who worked for the same media outlet. It is known that Armando Linares was investigating corruption cases involving Silvano Aureoles, previous governor of the state of Michoacán, and Carlos Herrera, former mayor of Zitácuaro. *Monitor Michoacán* also published various articles in which the security forces of Zitácuaro were accused of corruption and extortion. The death threats against the media outlet seem to confirm that Armando Linares' death is linked to his profession as a journalist. [According to an anonymous source](#), the victim would have asked the authorities for protection as he feared for his life, and had even begun the process of enrolling in a protection mechanism. Nonetheless, [government officials](#) assured that the journalist would not have accepted such protection measures.. Two days after the murder, [the two perpetrators of the crime were identified](#): Carlos Geraldo Sánchez Mendoza and Magidel Urbina Chimal, against whom an arrest order has been issued. What is more, [gunmen threatened reporters](#) who were covering Armando Linares' funeral, which once again highlights the violence of the attacks against *Monitor Michoacán*. In such a context, the [media outlet ceased its activities](#).

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<sup>12</sup> Photo taken from

<https://cpj.org/es/2022/03/asesinan-a-disparos-al-periodista-mexicano-armando-linares-en-zitacuaro/>

## Luis Enrique Ramírez<sup>13</sup> - Culiacán (Sinaloa)



On May 5, 2022, the lifeless body of Sinaloense journalist Luis Enrique Ramírez was found on the side of a road in Culiacán (Sinaloa). The man was allegedly kidnapped near his home before being executed. Luis Enrique Ramírez worked for *El Debate* and also founded the news site *Fuentes Fidedignas*. He was recognised as an [influential journalist](#) for his opinion columns on the actions of the state of Sinaloa's politicians. The [Sinaloa Prosecutor's Office](#)

stated that the authors of the murder had been identified and that Luis Enrique Ramírez's death was not related to his work as a journalist. In July 2022, [authorities arrested Brisya Carolina](#), the partner of the alleged intellectual author of the crime, on charges of concealment of evidence. But in August 2022, the [woman was cleared of guilt](#), which means she can no longer stand trial for withholding information about the murder. To this day, the perpetrators of the crime have still not been put behind bars and the investigation seems to be stalled.

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<sup>13</sup> Photo taken from

<https://jaimefariasinforma.com/2022/05/05/confirman-muerte-del-periodista-luis-enrique-ramirez-en-sinaloa/>



## Yesenia Mollinedo Falconi<sup>14</sup> and Sheila Johana García Olivera<sup>15</sup> - Cosoleacaque (Veracruz)



On May 9, 2022, Yesenia Mollinedo, director of *El Veraz*, which covers local news, and Sheila Garcia, a reporter for the same outlet, were assassinated while they were leaving a convenience store in Cosoleacaque (Veracruz). The homicide has been confirmed to be [related to the journalistic practice of the victims](#) but another lead points to their alleged link to organised crime. In June 2022, Armando N., aka “El Trascabo”, hitman (*sicario*) [linked to the CJNG](#), was arrested for the double murder. A few months later, [Antonio de Jesus N.](#), aka “El Mara”, was also arrested and charged as one of the alleged murderers of the journalists. “El Trascabo” and “El Mara” both committed high-impact crimes in South Veracruz. The death of Yesenia Mollinedo and Sheila García is therefore [attributable to organised crime](#). It should be noted that [Yesenia Mollinedo had received threats](#) before her assassination, but never filed a complaint.

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<sup>14</sup> Photo taken from <https://cpj.org/es/2022/03/asesinan-a-tiros-al-periodista-mexicano-juan-carlos-muniz-en-zacatecas/>

<sup>15</sup> Photo taken from <https://politica.expansion.mx/estados/2022/05/09/asesinan-periodistas-yesenia-mollinedo-sheila-johana-garcia>



## Antonio de la Cruz<sup>16</sup> - Ciudad Victoria (Tamaulipas)



Antonio de la Cruz's murder on June 29, 2022 seems to have been [planned](#). The reporter was shot dead while he was driving with her daughter, in Ciudad Victoria (Tamaulipas). His murderers appear to be contract killers, since they acted quickly before fleeing the crime scene on a motorbike. However, to this day, the motive for the crime and its perpetrators remain unknown. Antonio de la Cruz used to cover agricultural, livestock and environmental issues. The journalist was also very active on social networks, where he had, for example, [published a bulletin critical of the deputy Gustavo Cardenas Gutierrez](#). It is worth noting that *Expresso*, the newspaper for which Antonio de la Cruz was working, had already been threatened in December 2018, when a [decapitated head had been left outside the media outlet's office](#) with threatening messages against its reporters.

## Ernesto Méndez Pérez<sup>17</sup> - San Luis de la Paz (Guanajuato)



On August 3, 2022, an armed commando broke into a bar owned by journalist Ernesto Méndez's family, in San Luis de la Paz (Guanajuato). [Four people were killed in the attack](#), including Ernesto Méndez. The man was the editorial director of the newspaper *Tu Voz*, which publishes on local politics and violence in the state of Guanajuato. Nevertheless, Ernesto Méndez would have been killed for an [extortion case](#), related to the bar owned by his relatives. Roberto N., aka "El Borrachito", was [arrested and sentenced to trial](#) for the crime. The other hitmen (*sicarios*) who participated in the attack are still wanted. Relatives of the journalist reported fearing for their safety and claimed that the authorities did not provide any protection. Although Ernesto

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<sup>16</sup> Photo taken from <https://noticias.imer.mx/blog/quien-era-antonio-de-la-cruz-el-periodista-asesinado-en-tamaulipas/>

<sup>17</sup> Photo taken from <https://lopezdoriga.com/nacional/abren-cuatro-lineas-de-investigacion-sobre-el-asesinato-del-periodista-ernes-to-mendez/>



Méndez's murder does not seem to be related to his journalistic practice, it is worth recalling that the journalist had a [history of violent threats](#).

### Juan Arjón López<sup>18</sup> - San Luis Río Colorado (Sonora)



Juan Arjón López's body was found on the side of a road in San Luis Río Colorado (Sonora) on August 16, 2022. The journalist had been reported missing days before and had been last seen on August 2, 2022. Since then, we know that the [vehicle in which the journalist was kidnapped was found](#) and that one suspect was arrested. Authorities mentioned several investigation leads, one of them related to his journalistic activities. Juan Arjón reported on a wide range of topics for the "A qué le temes" website, including local politics, cartel violence, and environment. On the other hand, it has also been reported that Juan Arjón [had many personal problems](#) and had been living in a rehabilitation centre since March 2021. What is more, the journalist also had received [complaints](#) for small-scale drug dealing (*narcomenudeo*).

### Fredid Román<sup>19</sup> - Chilpancingo (Guerrero)



Fredid Román was the 15th and last journalist to be murdered in Mexico in 2022. On August 22, 2022, the director of *La Realidad* was shot by two individuals on a motorbike, while he was getting into his car, in front of his house, in Chilpancingo (Guerrero). Fredid Román's death could be related to [his son's assassination](#), for which the columnist had been demanding justice. Fredid Román's son worked as a chicken delivery man in a market in El Ocotito and was shot dead, on July 1st, 2022. It should be recalled

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<sup>18</sup> Photo taken from <https://elpais.com/mexico/2022-08-16/identificado-el-cadaver-de-juan-arjon-lopez-el-decimocuarto-periodista-muerto-con-violencia.html>

<sup>19</sup> Photo taken from <https://elpais.com/mexico/2022-08-22/acribillado-a-balazos-el-decimoquinto-periodista-en-mexico-fredid-roman.html>



that the latter's murder occurred in the context of a [series of attacks](#) targeting men working for the poultry industry in Guerrero. Indeed, two criminal groups, [Los Tlacos and Los Ardillos](#), have been fighting for control over the production and sale of chicken in Chilpancingo. In such a panorama, the murders of [Fredid Román and his son could have been masterminded by David Barrientos](#), chief of the Citizen Police of El Ocotito and armed wing of Los Ardillos.

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## Concluding remarks

- 1) In the overwhelming majority of cases, the murders of journalists in Mexico in 2022 were related to their professional activity. Assassinations for other motives, such as personal issues, the victim's alleged involvement in criminal activities, or extortion, remain isolated cases.
- 2) Journalists covering sensitive issues such as corruption and political scandals, organised crime, cartel violence, and human rights, are particularly vulnerable to threats and attacks. It should be emphasised that the 15 journalists murdered in 2022 in Mexico used to cover local stories, or to work for local media. This shows that violence against journalists occurs primarily at the local and state levels.
- 3) Most murders of journalists follow the same pattern: contract killing or murder-for-hire. The perpetrators ("*sicarios*") execute their victim on a motorbike, using a firearm, before fleeing. The victim's daily movements and habits are often monitored before the crime is committed. This highlights the fact that murders of journalists are often premeditated and planned, usually by members of criminal groups or influential local politicians.
- 4) Crimes against journalists tend to be perpetrated in places they frequent on a daily basis: in front of their home, in their car, at the gym, in a convenience store, on board a taxi, in a bar, at their workplace, or even inside their house. These murders sometimes occurred in front of the victim's family members, which underlines the violence with which crimes against journalists can be committed. The reported abandonments of the victim's body at the side of a road or inside a vehicle, as well as the possible abduction prior to the murder, constitute further indications of this violence. The brutality of the killings is such that it has even led to the closure of a media outlet, *Monitor Michoacán*.



- 5) Several cases were preceded by death threats, whether or not reported to the authorities. Some victims had even joined protection mechanisms, which raises the question of their effectiveness. What is more, human rights organisations have also denounced the impunity of these crimes. We have seen that, in many cases, the investigation is stalled, with several crimes remaining unsolved to this day. In other cases where the perpetrators have been identified, they have not always been arrested or convicted. Finally, the arrest of the material perpetrator of the crime does not necessarily mean the arrest of its intellectual author, i.e. the person who masterminded the assassination.

## Appendix

Name	Media	Date and location of assassination	Relevant information
José Luis Gamboa	Independent journalist Director of the Facebook page "Inforegio Network"  Coverage of local politics issues	January 10 Veracruz (Veracruz)	Death could be related to personal issues
Margarito Martínez	Independent	January 17	Death related to Martínez's





	photojournalist	Tijuana (Baja California)	profession as a journalist  Murder attributed to the Arellano Félix Cartel  Intellectual and material authors arrested and convicted
Lourdes Maldonado	Independent journalist  Coverage of local politics issues	January 23 Tijuana (Baja California)	Material authors convicted, but intellectual author remains unknown  Death could be related to a litigation against the former governor of Baja California  Beneficiary of the journalist protection mechanism
Roberto Toledo	Cameraman and video editor for <i>Monitor Michoacán</i>	January 31 Zitácuaro (Michoacán)	Death related to Toledo's profession as a journalist  Murder attributed to the CJNG
Heber López Cruz	Founder of <i>Noticia Web</i>  Coverage of local politics issues	February 10 Salina Cruz (Oaxaca)	Death related to López Cruz's profession as a journalist  Murder involved local political authorities
Jorge Luis Camero Zazueta	Director of <i>El Informativo</i>	February 24 Empalme (Sonora)	Death related to Camero's involvement in criminal activities
Juan Carlos Muñiz	Reporter for <i>Testigo Minero</i>  Coverage of cartel-related violence in Fresnillo	March 4 Fresnillo (Zacatecas)	Material author arrested and convicted  Death probably related to the context of violence in Zacatecas
Armando Linares	Director of <i>Monitor Michoacán</i>  Coverage of corruption cases	March 15 Zitácuaro (Michoacán)	Death related to Linares' profession as a journalist  Material authors identified but not arrested



			Led to the closure of <i>Monitor Michoacán</i>
Luis Enrique Ramírez	Founder of <i>Fuentes Fidedignas</i> , columnist for <i>El Debate</i>	May 5, Culiacán (Sinaloa)	Stalled investigation, unknown motive for the crime  Material and intellectual authors identified but not arrested
Yesenia Mollinedo and Johana García	Director of <i>Veraz</i> , and reporter for <i>Veraz</i>	May 9, Cosoleacaque (Veracruz)	Double murder probably related to Mollinedo and García journalistic practice / organised crime  Material authors arrested and convinced
Antonio de la Cruz	Reporter for <i>El Expreso</i>  Coverage of environmental issues	June 29 Ciudad Victoria (Tamaulipas)	Motive for the crime unknown  Planned murder  <i>El Expreso</i> already targeted in 2018
Ernesto Méndez Pérez	Editorial director of <i>Tu Voz</i>	August 3 San Luis de la Paz (Guanajuato)	Death related to an extortion case  Not all the perpetrators have been arrested
Juan Arjón López	Independent journalist, member of <i>Grupo de Comunicadores y Periodistas Independientes</i> (GCPI)	Between August 2 and 16 San Luis Río Colorado (Sonora)	Several investigation leads, including Arjón's journalistic practice  Death could be related to personal issues or involvement in criminal activities
Fredid Román	Director of <i>La Realidad</i>	August 22 Chilpancingo (Guerrero)	Death could be related to cartel violence in Chilpancingo



