

Colombia: A deadly place for reporters

OUR OPINION: PRESIDENTIAL WORDS CAN PUT JOURNALISTS AT RISK

The Miami Herald
Oct. 15, 2007

Colombia is one of the world's deadliest countries for journalists. Thirty-nine journalists have been killed there since 1992, the highest number in the Americas. For decades, drug dealers, insurgents and political operatives have used violence to silence the media. Recognizing this danger, the government provides protection to journalists at risk.

Forced to flee Colombia

This is why President Alvaro Uribe's recent comments about journalist Gonzalo Guillén strikes such a dissonant chord. The president's words have impact, and they can have devastating consequences. Last week on radio, Mr. Uribe accused Mr. Guillén, a correspondent for El Nuevo Herald, of slander. Later, Mr. Guillén received a flood of death threats and was forced to flee Colombia.

Mr. Uribe first criticized a book -- *Loving Pablo, Hating Escobar* -- by a former mistress of the late drug boss Pablo Escobar. Mr. Uribe denied the book's allegations that he had close ties with Escobar in the 1980s. Then he accused Mr. Guillén of having helped write the book and of slandering him.

Mr. Guillén disavows any connection to the book. He wrote to the president, demanding a retraction. "The pressure is great, kind of overwhelming," Mr. Guillén told El Nuevo Herald, The Miami Herald's sister paper. "I hunkered down right after I learned of a plan to murder me. Now President Uribe has put me in other people's cross-hairs, and it seems he's not concerned about it," Guillén said.

Mr. Guillén already had been under threat. El Nuevo Herald had received warnings of a plot against him. Three months ago, Colombia's national-security agency assigned two government body guards to protect him, concluding he faced "an extraordinary risk."

After Mr. Uribe's remarks, one of the guards was inexplicably removed -- even though the risk had increased.

Key to democracy

Mr. Guillén has worked for El Nuevo Herald for seven years. He has written on subjects from terrorist attacks by guerrilla groups to the ties between paramilitaries and Uribe administration figures. El Nuevo Executive Editor Humberto Castelló said Mr. Uribe has never asked for a retraction.

The media's capacity to report fully on government is key in a democracy. Yet it takes courage to be a reporter in a country as polarized as Colombia. Mr. Uribe should be careful to avoid remarks that might increase that risk. The country already has lost too many journalists to drug traffickers, guerrillas, political violence -- and forced exile.