

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

June 6, 2022

The Honorable Antony Blinken
Secretary
U.S. Department of State
2201 C St NW
Washington, DC 20520

The Honorable Samantha Power
Administrator
United States Agency for International Development
1300 Pennsylvania Ave NW
Washington, DC 20004

Dear Secretary Blinken and Administrator Power:

We write to express our profound concern about the current surge of journalist killings in Mexico and the increasingly hostile environment that the free press faces in the country. As the 10th anniversary of the Mexican government's Federal Mechanism for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders and Journalists approaches this July, we urge the State Department to prioritize the protection of the media and condemn the violence against journalists in our diplomatic engagements with the López Obrador administration. We also encourage the State Department and USAID to prioritize the protection of free media and the investigation of homicides against journalists in our development assistance to the Mexican government. We also request that these agencies take steps to evaluate the deficiencies associated with the Protection Mechanism, encourage legislators and Administration officials who are revising the mechanism to incorporate lessons from past initiatives, and deepen interagency and interstate cooperation on this critical issue.

Despite the rollout of the Protection Mechanism and other initiatives intended to protect journalists in Mexico, 145 journalists have been killed in the country since 2000,¹ including 11 in 2022 alone.^{2,3} During the same period, Mexico has consistently ranked among the countries with the most unsolved journalist murders per capita.⁴ Journalists who investigate corruption and organized crime, particularly cases that involve public officials, are at even more risk. Numerous NGOs have sounded the alarm on this issue, citing the increasingly dangerous environment for journalists, inadequate resources for investigating crimes against journalists, and President López Obrador's personal attacks on press freedom. Furthermore, though public officials are often complicit in these murders, they are rarely investigated by state and federal authorities. This

¹ <https://www.article19.org/resources/mexico-state-must-take-immediate-action-after-murder-of-three-journalists/>

² <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/5/10/two-mexican-journalists-killed-taking-2022-death-toll-to-11>

³ <https://www.cnn.com/2022/05/10/media/mexican-journalists-killed/index.html>

⁴ <https://cpj.org/reports/2021/10/killers-of-journalists-still-get-away-with-murder/>

environment and prevalent impunity allow for crimes to continue against members of the media.

In October 2020, the Mexican Congress eliminated the independent funding that supported the Protection Mechanism. At the time, President López Obrador said he supported eliminating the trusts that provided the independent funding because they were “totally autonomous.”⁵ Now the program depends on the Interior Ministry to pay for protection measures, but funds have been consistently cut. Eliminating the Protection Mechanism’s financial independence has made it more difficult to protect at-risk journalists and human rights defenders. Furthermore, President López Obrador has made clear that the safety of journalists and protection of the free press is not a priority for his administration. In fact, President López Obrador has frequently denigrated and intimidated independent journalists, and activists in daily press briefings.

Several of the Mexican government’s programs intended to combat this long-standing trend receive significant funding from USAID. For example, the Protection Mechanism, which provides bodyguards, panic buttons, and other protective measures to at-risk journalists, has been supported by USAID for years. This year’s killings and the increasing level of violence suggest these measures have not been effective in meeting their intended goals. In February of this year, an audit by the Superior Auditor of the Federation (*Auditoría Superior de la Federación*), the supreme audit institution of Mexico, found deficiencies in the hiring of bodyguards, completing thorough investigations and prosecutions, and in the training and skills of the personnel that provide services contracted by the Protection Mechanism in 2020.⁶ The audit also found that the Mechanism does not currently have the proper resources, human or technical, to provide an effective service to those it is meant to protect. Funds for the Protection Mechanism have been consistently cut by the Ministry of the Interior and the report shows that the funds available are being mismanaged.

These concerns are echoed by reports from OHCHR⁷ and the European Union (EU),⁸ which both found that the Protection Mechanism is underfunded and that widespread corruption at all levels of government combined with an insufficient justice system have led to almost total impunity. In fact, the EU found that at least nine individuals enrolled in the Protection Mechanism have been killed and 95% of journalist murders go unsolved. This strongly suggests the Protection Mechanism is not being properly implemented and should not be the sole tool of the government in addressing violence against journalists. Furthermore, the lack of cooperation between state governments, federal agencies, and the justice system, as well, as between the Mechanism and the Special Prosecutor's Office for the Attention to Crimes Committed against Freedom of Expression (FEADLE) has undermined the Protection Mechanism's effectiveness—with deadly consequences.

We believe the new focus on security cooperation within the U.S.-Mexico Bicentennial

⁵ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/11/03/another-blow-mexican-journalists-and-human-rights-defenders>

⁶ <https://www.eleconomista.com.mx/politica/Fallan-medidas-para-periodistas-y-defensores-de-DH-20220220-0089.html>

⁷ https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CESCR/Shared%20Documents/MEX/INT_CESCR_FCO_MEX_37549_S.pdf

⁸ https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0078_EN.html

Framework for Security, Public Health and Safe Communities, and the 10th anniversary of the Protection Mechanism provide the State Department and USAID with the opportunity to evaluate our cooperation and find effective ways to hold the Mexican government accountable for its ineffectiveness at addressing violence against journalists.

It is particularly important for the United States to seriously engage with the programs it helps fund, analyze their effectiveness, and determine what changes are necessary to ensure the program's success. As the number of journalists killed in Mexico increases, the United States government must exert pressure on President López Obrador's administration to relay the importance of supporting free press and civil society. We submit the below questions and recommendations in hopes of encouraging a frank assessment of existing journalist protection initiatives and to encourage forward-facing partnership between our two countries on this important issue.

Therefore, we ask that the State Department and USAID:

- Provide information on how it plans to promote the protection of journalists and other human rights defenders within the new U.S.-Mexico Bicentennial Framework;
- Provide a detailed plan for working with the government and subnational governments of Mexico to conduct transparent investigations on the killings of journalists;
- Provide an analysis of the success and challenges of currently funded USAID and State programs intended to protect journalists and promote freedom of expression and freedom of the press;
- Urge the Government of Mexico to take concrete, prompt, and effective measures to strengthen national, state, and local institutional efforts to protect journalists and freedom of the press;
- Collaborate with the Government of Mexico to implement a set of comprehensive strategies for prevention, protection, reparations, and accountability in order to ensure that journalists can continue their activities without fear of reprisal and without restriction;
- Urge that Mexican authorities provide sufficient, immediate funding for the Federal Mechanism for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders and Journalists, as well as oversight and inter-government cooperation so it effectively fulfills its mission;
- Urge the Government of Mexico to implement recommendations from the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

Thank you for your timely response to our questions. Freedom of the press and freedom of assembly are essential for a healthy democracy.

Respectfully,



Joaquin Castro
Member of Congress



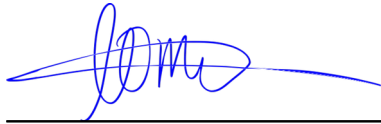
Raúl M. Grijalva
Member of Congress



Jesús G. "Chuy" García
Member of Congress



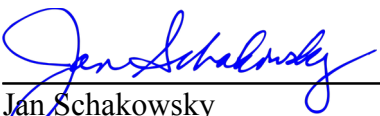
Veronica Escobar
Member of Congress



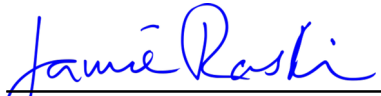
Ilhan Omar
Member of Congress



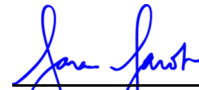
Eleanor Holmes Norton
Member of Congress



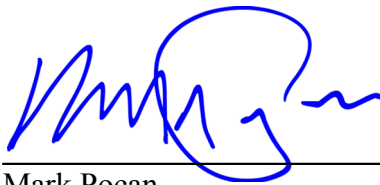
Jan Schakowsky
Member of Congress



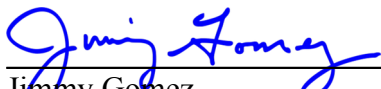
Jamie Raskin
Member of Congress



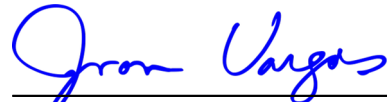
Sara Jacobs
Member of Congress



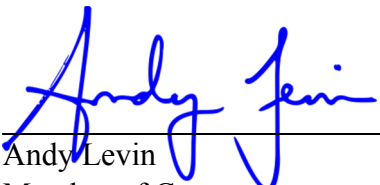
Mark Pocan
Member of Congress



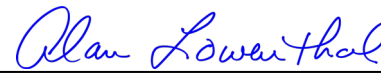
Jimmy Gomez
Member of Congress



Juan Vargas
Member of Congress



Andy Levin
Member of Congress



Alan Lowenthal
Member of Congress



James P. McGovern
Member of Congress

CC:

The Honorable Brian A. Nichols

Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs
Department of State

The Honorable Marcela Escobari

Assistant Administrator
Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean
USAID