Killing the Messenger

2020

Foreword from our Director

At least 52 journalists died in 2020 doing their job or because of it. Compared with a pandemic that has killed some 2 million people in the same period, that figure may look relatively small. It isn't.

In a year when newsgathering in the field was reduced to the bare minimum everywhere because of Covid-19, the death toll should have gone down. But it is in fact higher than in 2019 and it doesn't include Covid-19 victims. Of the hundreds of journalists and media workers officially killed by the virus, some were retired but many others were still active in journalism, newsgathering in hospitals, giving voice to the victims, or stalking the corridors of power for answers, providing good information to the public at a time when it could truly make the difference between life and death. The majority of the Covid-19 victims were journalists working in countries where proper PPE, which Western journalists have largely been able to access, was all but nonexistent or unaffordable. Because we can't know whether they contracted the virus on the job, we were not able to add them to our tally.

Still, the identities and work of the 52 journalists whose death we can officially remember here, paint a clear picture of how serious the threat against journalists remains worldwide. As the world's attention was focussed on the global pandemic, armed conflict continued with indiscriminate bombings and violence in Syria killing four journalists, ISIS or the Taliban targeting seven others in Afghanistan's simmering conflict and four more killed in Iraq.

But the vast majority lost their lives in countries considered "at peace" but where impunity and violence are rife, such as Mexico where 11 died, or Duterte's Philippines where four were gunned down, or Nigeria, India and Honduras which recorded three deaths each.

Out of the 52 journalists killed in 2020, only five were killed in the context of a larger incident. Everyone else was individually picked out, targeted, hunted down and assassinated because of their work. The cruelty and barbarism of some of the killings evoke the growing aggression being directed at our profession everywhere. While it is essential to record the statistics, the numbers themselves leave much of the human story out.

One of the journalists killed in 2020 was 43-year-old Julio Valdivia from Mexico. Julio left home early every morning without waking his wife and four children – the youngest 2, the oldest 10. With his blue scooter he zoomed around his hometown in the state of Veracruz to report for his newspaper on the local drug cartels' overnight murders. It was a grim beat and he only made the equivalent of $50 a week. His body was found dumped by a rail track, having been decapitated with a chainsaw by unknown killers.

Radio journalist Maxwell Nashan, who covered his local government's Assembly, was kidnapped from his home in northern Nigeria. He was found unconscious, gagged and

bound, not far from where he lived. He'd been hacked with a machete and later died in hospital. His computer was the only thing stolen from his house. He was due to get married a few days later.

And, in India, Rakesh Singh wrote in a daily newspaper in Uttar Pradesh about local corruption. He was attacked in his house by three men, doused with alcohol and set on fire. The attackers locked him in and left him to burn alive. As he was dying in hospital, 90 percent of his body covered in burns, a friend filmed his whispered last words: "This is the price for reporting the truth." He was 37 years old.

Two courageous women journalists were also killed, respectively mother and daughter of equally brave women. In Afghanistan, 25-year-old Malala Maiwand was a broadcaster and a women's rights activist in Jalalabad. Described by friends and colleagues as bold and articulate, she worked at regional television station Enikass. She was also the only woman cricket commentator in the country. Malala was shot dead with her driver on her way to work. Her mother, a women's rights activist, had been shot dead 5 years earlier.

In Mexico, Maria Elena Ferral, a veteran journalist investigating crime, corruption and the police, was shot dead in the street of her home town of Papantla by assassins on a motorbike. Maria Elena's police protection had been recently withdrawn. Two months later, her daughter Maria Fernanda, a university student and a budding journalist herself, survived an assassination attempt. In an open letter published by Pen America, Maria Fernanda asked readers around the world not to forget journalists like her, and asked for help to remain alive.

Those who kill journalists hope their work and their stories will die with them. Countering that in 2020 was "The Cartel Project", one the most inspired initiatives of the year and a way to answer the call of colleagues like Maria Fernanda and so many others who are in danger.

In an unprecedented collaboration, coordinated by Forbidden Stories, a global network of investigative journalists came together to carry on the work of reporters who were threatened, censored or killed. Working together across 18 different countries over the course of the year, the journalists behind "The Cartel Project" produced a series of five investigations into the Mexican cartels's global spread. The stories were sent out simultaneously by 25 international publications in December 2020 – a powerful example of how to raise the stakes for the perpetrator. Not only does a project of this kind ensure the story does not die with the journalist, it actually makes sure the world will read it.

– Elena Cosentino, INSI director

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Cover image: A journalist mourns by the grave of TV reporter Adeeb al-Janani who was killed in an attack on Aden airport on 30 December 2020. © Ahmad AL-BASHA / AFP; This page: Mourners carry the coffin of Iraqi journalist Yussef Sattar who was shot in the head while covering anti-government demonstrations in January 2020. ©Ayman HENNA / AFP

الشهيد السعيد
المصور يوسف ستار

Country of death

Afghanistan **7**

4 Syria **1**

4 Iran **3** Pakistan

Iraq

Bangladesh **1**

Philippines **4**

Mexico **11**

Guatemala **1** **3** Honduras

1 Barbados

2 Yemen

Colombia **2**

3 Nigeria

Somalia **1**
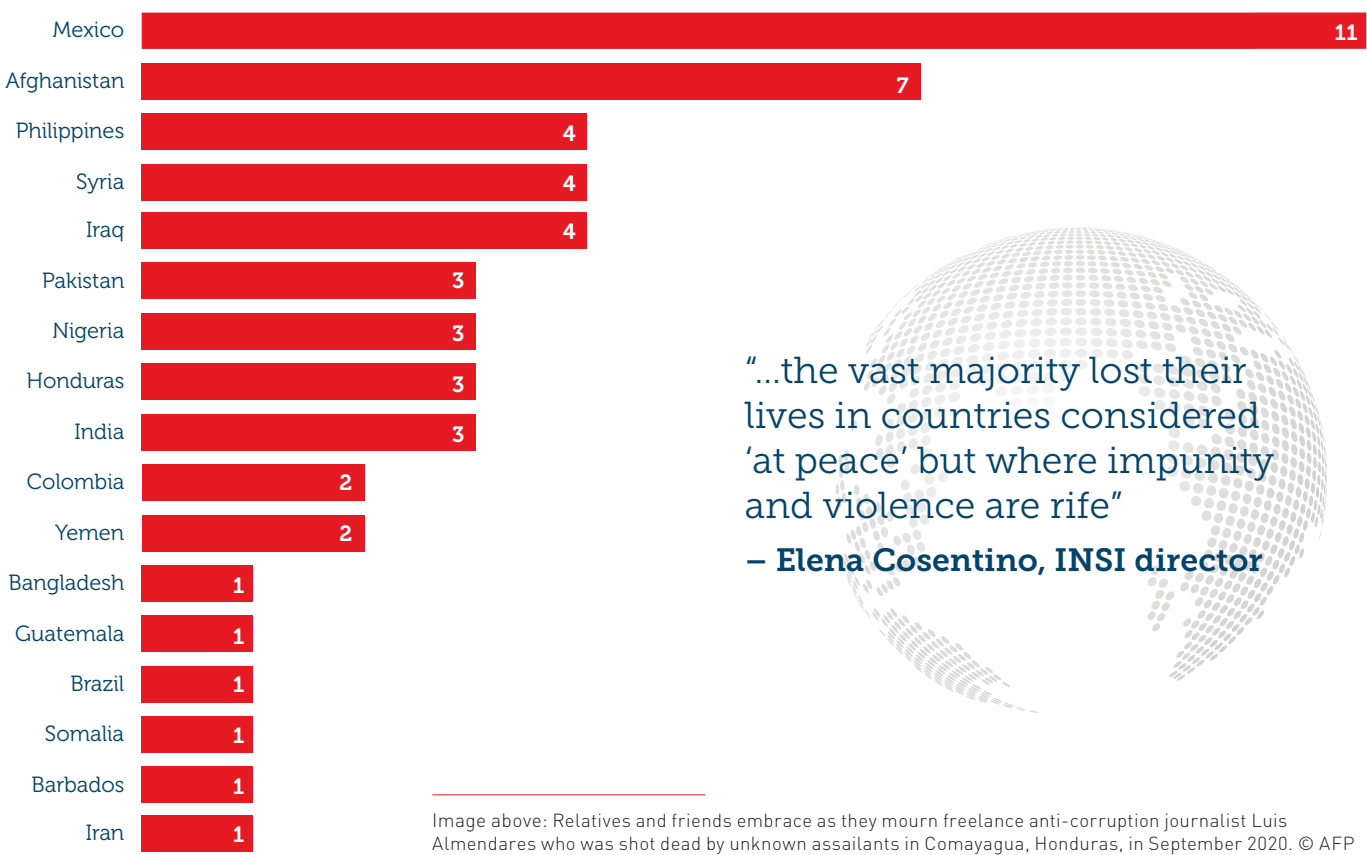
3 India

1 Paraguay

TOTAL KILLED
52

An aerial view of Syrians gathering for an anti-Assad demonstration by the ruins of a building in the town of Ariha, Idlib province on on August 28, 2020. © Omar HAJ KADOUR / AFP
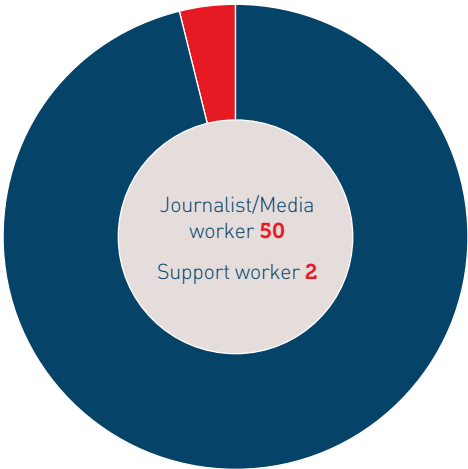
Country of origin

Mexico	11
Afghanistan	7
Philippines	4
Syria	4
Iraq	4
Pakistan	3
Nigeria	3
Honduras	3
India	3
Colombia	2
Yemen	2
Bangladesh	1
Guatemala	1
Brazil	1
Somalia	1
Barbados	1
Iran	1

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— Elena Cosentino, INSI director

Image above: Relatives and friends embrace as they mourn freelance anti-corruption journalist Luis Almendares who was shot dead by unknown assailants in Comayagua, Honduras, in September 2020. © AFP
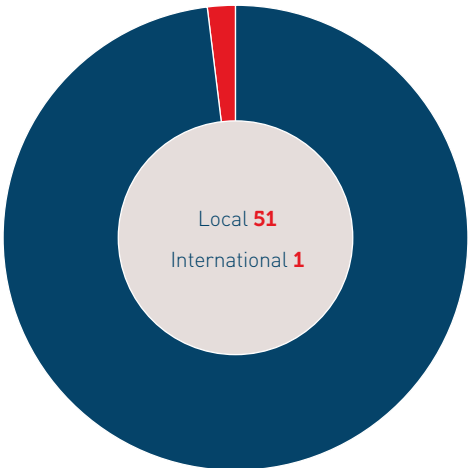
Journalists demonstrate against the murder of Maria Helena Ferral in Xalapa, Veracruz state, Mexico on April 1, 2020. © HECTOR QUINTANAR / AFP
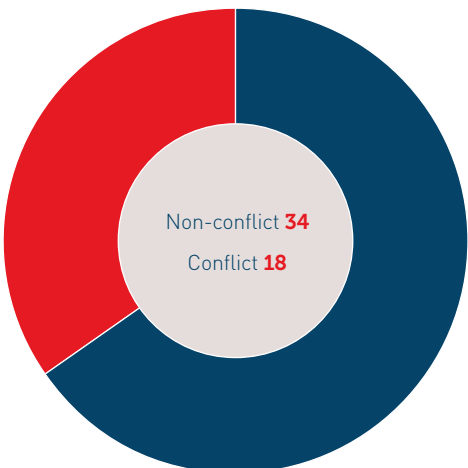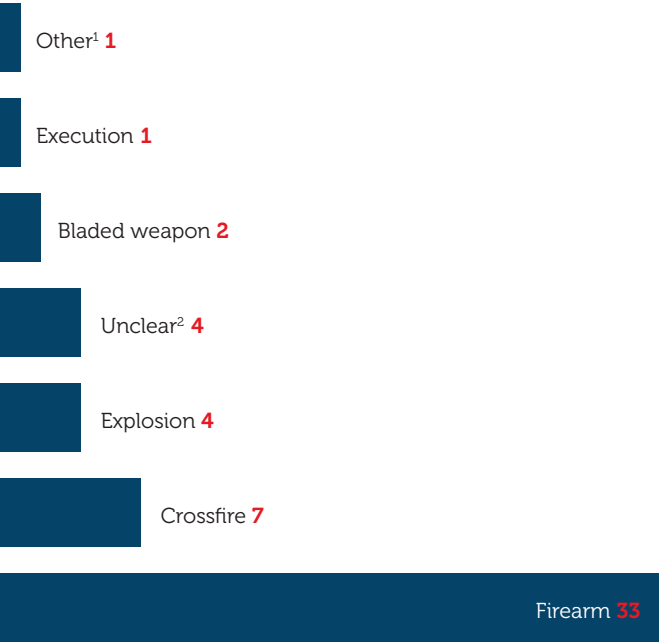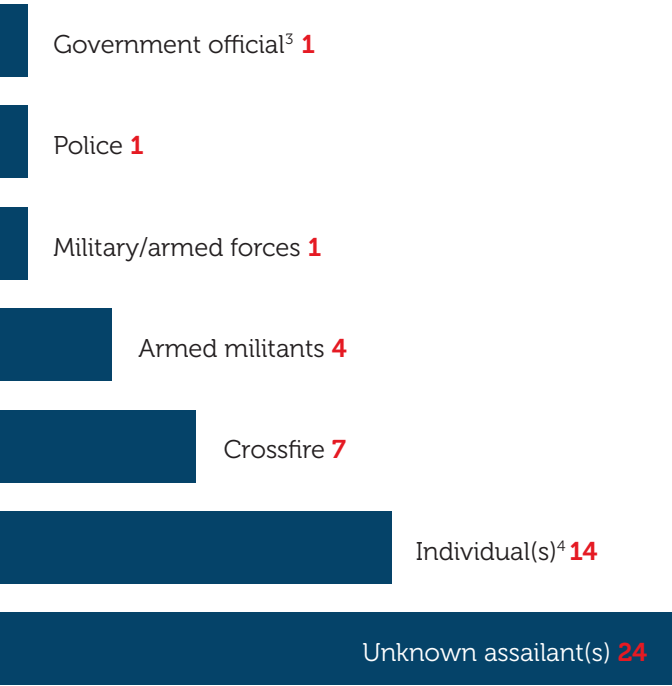
Professional position

Journalist/Media worker **50**
Support worker **2**

Status in country of death
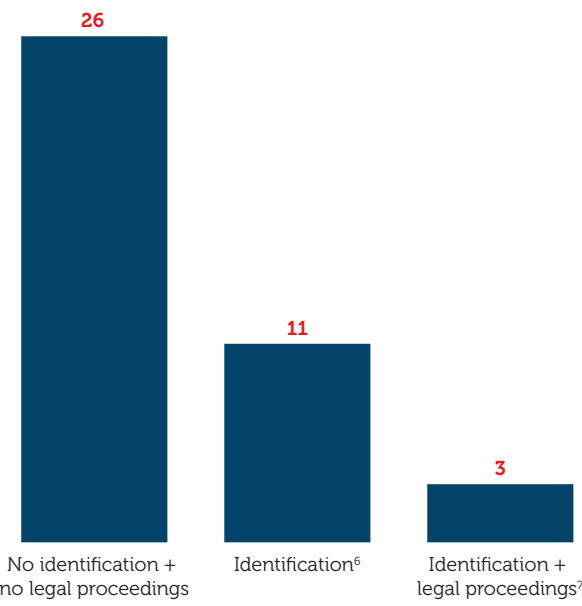
Local **51**
International **1**

Context of death

Non-conflict **34**
Conflict **18**

Cause of death

Other[1] **1**

Execution **1**

Bladed weapon **2**

Unclear[2] **4**

Explosion **4**

Crossfire **7**

Firearm **33**

Legal outcome[5]

26

11

3

No identification +
no legal proceedings

Identification[6]

Identification +
legal proceedings[7]

Perpetrator

Government official[3] **1**

Police **1**

Military/armed forces **1**

Armed militants **4**

Crossfire **7**

Individual(s)[4] **14**

Unknown assailant(s) **24**

"The cruelty and barbarism of some of the killings evoke the growing aggression being directed at our profession everywhere."

– Elena Cosentino, INSI director

[1] Killed in a deliberate house fire.
[2] Bodies found; no clear details of the cause of death.
[3] Execution by hanging.
[4] Suspects identified and/or arrests made.
[5] This does not include indiscriminate bombings or crossfire.
[6] Suspects have been identified or arrests made.
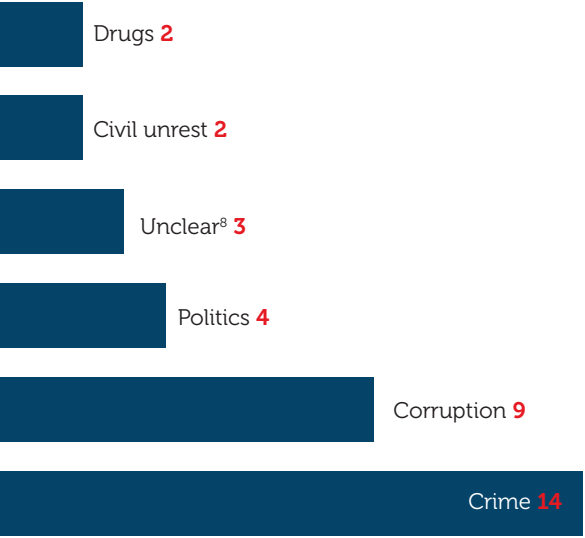[7] Suspects arrested and charged.

The wake of Mexican journalist Julio Valdivia, who covered crime in his area and was found decapitated in Tezonapa, Veracruz, Mexico, in September 2020. © AFP
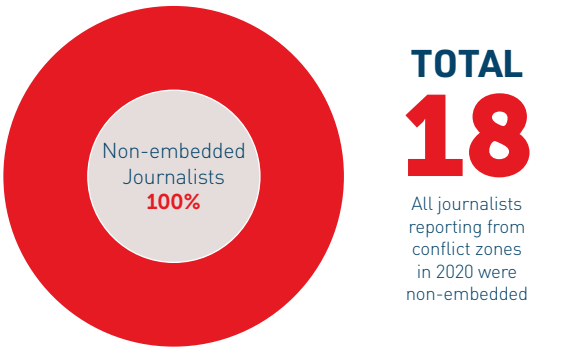
Mourners at the funeral of 34-year-old Yemeni photo-journalist and AFP contributor Nabil Hasan al-Quaety, who was shot outside his house in Aden by unknown assailants in June 2020 © AFP

Deaths unrelated to war reporting

Drugs **2**

Civil unrest **2**

Unclear[8] **3**

Politics **4**

Corruption **9**

Crime **14**

War/conflict zone reporting

Non-embedded Journalists **100%**

TOTAL
18
All journalists reporting from conflict zones in 2020 were non-embedded

[8] No clear link to specific story type or area of operations.

Afghan journalist Malala Maiwand was shot dead on her way to work in December 2020.

Mourners carry Malala Maiwand's coffin through Jalalabad
on December 10, 2020. © NOORULLAH SHIRZADA / AFP