

sun-sentinel.com/news/opinion/columnists/sfl-gmcol11nboct11,0,6919608.column

South Florida Sun-Sentinel.com

The press' freedom is waning

Guillermo I. Martinez

Columnist

October 11, 2007

When editors and publishers of leading media outlets in the hemisphere gather in Miami this week for the Inter American Press Association's 63rd annual conference, they will pay particular attention to the state of press freedom in the region. For seven decades that has been a key agenda subject.

Never, however, has press freedom been in such precarious health in our hemisphere. Declaring that Cuba allows no freedom of the press has been an annual ritual since the early 1960s. Now IAPA members face many new challenges; the gravest being Venezuela.

For decades IAPA has made it a point to hold either its annual conferences or mid-year meetings in countries fighting to maintain a free and uncensored media. It is one way to focus on countries that deny one of the basic freedoms to their people.

In its history, IAPA has declared many countries under authoritarian rule to be enemies of a free press. In my lifetime I have seen IAPA declare: Cuba's Fulgencio Batista; Dominican Republic's Rafael Leonidas Trujillo; Chile's Augusto Pinochet; Peru's Gen. Juan Velasco Alvarado, and many others as "enemies of freedom of the press."

Never has the organization delved into the politics of the country involved. It never made a difference whether the regime imposing controls on the media was on the left, on the right, or even if it was democratically elected. IAPA's focus has always been precise: Does the country in question permit freedom of the press?

Now Hugo Chávez in Venezuela has come up with a new way of opposing IAPA. Not only do its officials declare publicly that IAPA "is an instrument" of those opposed to the Chávez regime, but now they have made sure that the organization cannot even meet in Venezuela next year.

Miguel Otero, a member of IAPA's executive committee and editor of *El Nacional*, one of Venezuela's leading independent newspapers, told reporters in Caracas Monday that hotels in Venezuela had told representatives for the hemispheric association that they were "sold out" for March 2008. That is, they had no rooms for guests, or rooms for banquets and meetings during the days IAPA had scheduled its mid-year meeting.



Julio Muñoz, IAPA's executive director, elaborated on what Otero had disclosed. It turns out that IAPA had been seeking a site for the convention for the last 18 months. And it could find no hotel in Caracas, Maracaibo, or Margarita that had guest or meeting rooms available to the IAPA for the days in question. Muñoz added that IAPA's executive committee would discuss the site for meeting next March on Friday.

Otero went one step further. Upon hearing that the hotels were booked for the days in question, he had his newspaper call the same hotels and book the same number of rooms and facilities for a meeting of its own. The same hotels that had said they had no availability for the IAPA could meet *El Nacional's* needs.

In other words; this was just another way of telling the IAPA that it is not welcome in Venezuela; that the government has ways of pressuring even private hotel owners into making their facilities not available to the IAPA; that freedom of expression is dying a slow and painful death in Venezuela.

None of this comes as a surprise to IAPA. Venezuela has been high on the list of countries, which year by year, tightens the noose around the neck of independent news organizations.

It has already taken away the broadcast license of RCTV, the oldest television network in the country, and threatened Globovision, the leading cable news network in the country with similar measures.

William Lara, Venezuela's Minister of Information, said that the IAPA "was no more than an instrument . . . of U.S. Pres. George W. Bush and his lackeys' policies of aggression against" Chávez. His comments were in response to the likely IAPA condemnation of Venezuela for its constant attacks on press freedom in the country.

Otero said that during the IAPA meeting in Miami he will state that "a free and independent press will disappear in Venezuela." He said that a referendum to take place in December will give the government the right to take over all "private property." The amendments in question are carbon copies, he said, of those enacted in other countries where private property is not allowed.

IAPA's executive committee will discuss press freedom in all countries in the hemisphere. But nowhere else is it so close to becoming extinct as it is in Venezuela.

Guillermo I. Martínez is a journalist living in South Florida. He may be reached at guimar123@gmail.com.

Copyright © 2007, [South Florida Sun-Sentinel](#)