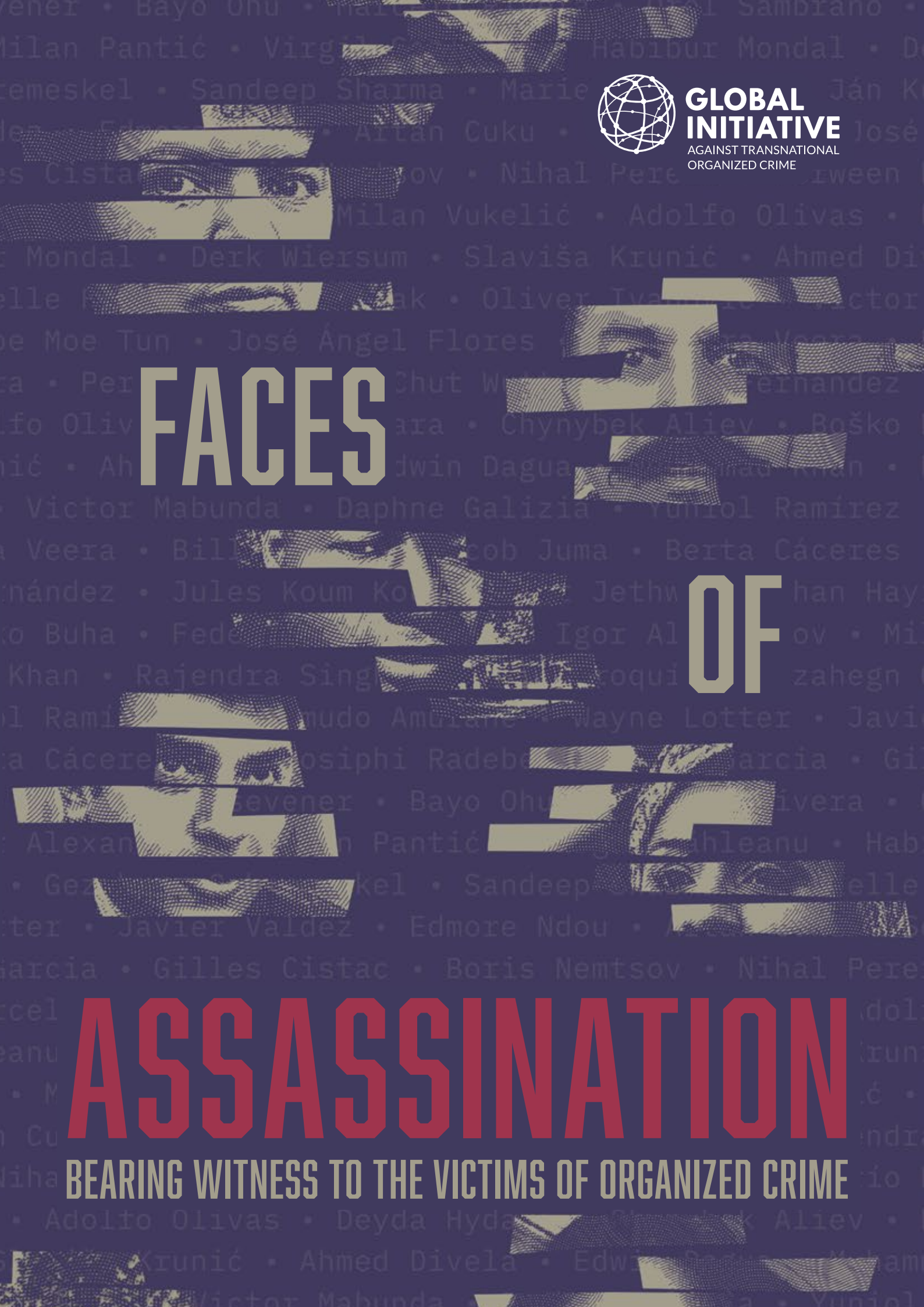

GLOBAL INITIATIVE
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

FACES OF ASSASSINATION

BEARING WITNESS TO THE VICTIMS OF ORGANIZED CRIME

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Please direct inquiries to:

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime
Avenue de France 23 Geneva, CH-1202
Switzerland

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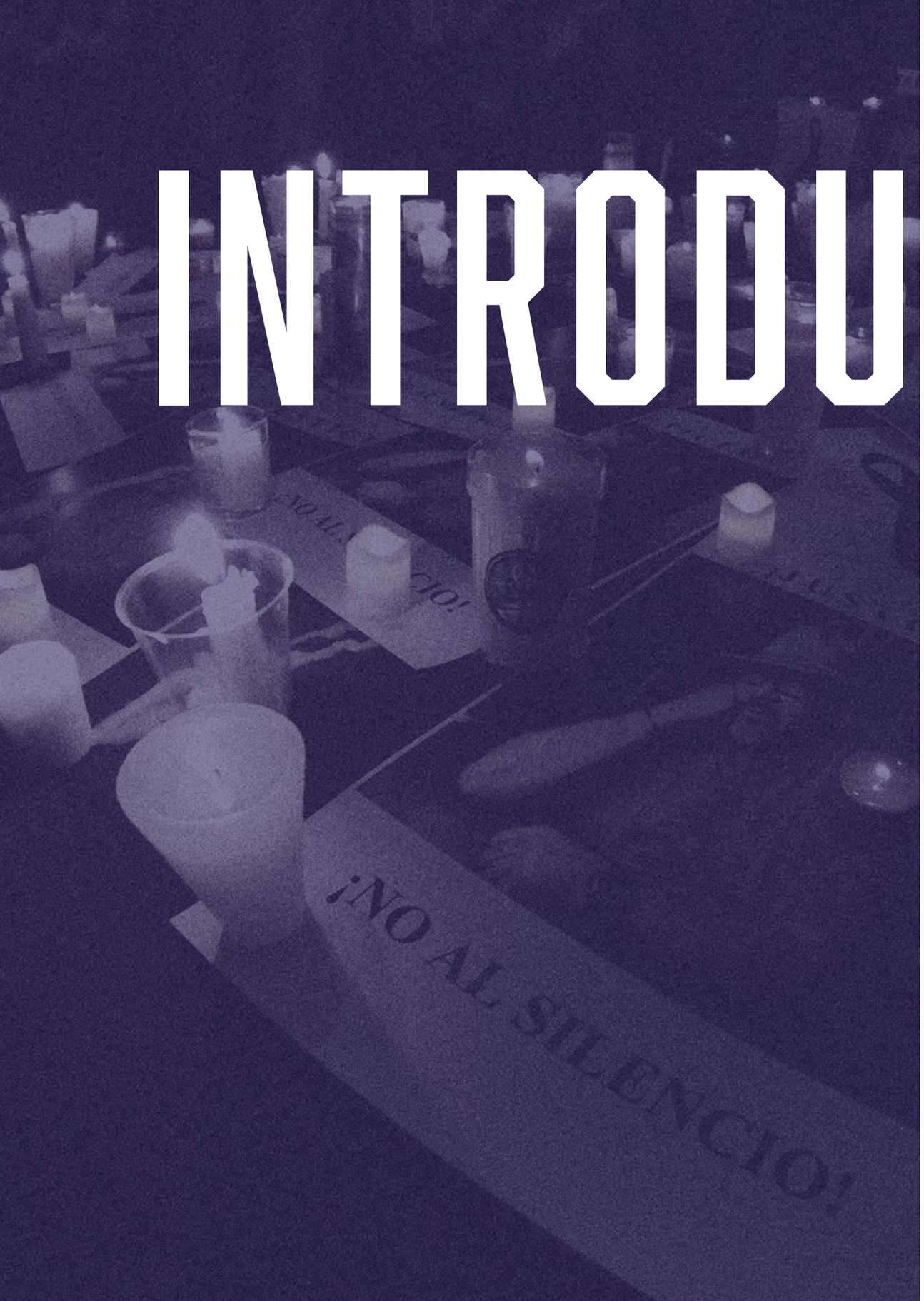


INTRODUCTION

WHO ARE THE 'FACES' TARGETED FOR ASSASSINATION?

Organized crime is indiscriminate in who it targets. Not only are conflicts between, and within, criminal groups often settled with violence, but such violence also regularly claims the lives of innocent people – those caught in the crossfire between rival criminal groups, or between criminals and the authorities.

There are also a very large number of those who are deliberately targeted for murder because they choose to take a stand against organized crime, or those whose job it is to investigate and end it.

In the years the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime has spent documenting and researching the criminal ecosystem, we have seen that, increasingly, criminal groups around the world are targeting those whom we can broadly categorize as civil society – people who choose to make social justice and the promotion of equality their life's work. Such individuals are being assassinated because theirs are goals and aspirations and missions that confront and challenge the power, authority and local legitimacy of criminal interests the world over.

These are people seeking to do good by pushing back against organized crime, and its connections to economic and political interests. These are the people who are the subject of this study.

The people profiled in this book, *Faces of Assassination*, came from all walks of life; many of the 'faces' were journalists, community activists, political leaders, police officers; others were lawyers, businesspeople, educators or judges. No segment or class of society has been spared the impact of this form of criminal violence. They, and others like them today, were and are inspiring men and women, committed in their roles as human-rights organizers, political dissidents, academics, or whistle-blowers; all, in their own different ways, were campaigners for social justice.

Organized crime, of which assassinations are but one manifestation, is a difficult phenomenon to understand, and hard to define and investigate. With this book, we ask the international community to understand organized crime as a force that opposes the integrity, tenacity and principles shown by those who have stood against injustice and corruption, and paid the ultimate price for it. By focusing on the voices and stories of these faces of assassination, we hope to offer a different way of understanding organized crime as a phenomenon – and the very real impact it has on countries, communities and families.

Some of those whose profiles you will read here achieved public prominence within their lifetimes. Honduran activist Berta Cáceres, for example, was awarded the 2015 Goldman Environmental Prize, which brought her international acclaim and an audience with Pope Francis. Jacob Juma, another of the 'faces', one of Kenya's wealthiest people, used his public platform to vehemently denounce and expose corruption in the Kenyan government.

But, although all are privately remembered, many are publicly forgotten. Some, after working tirelessly in the service of their local communities, became honoured posthumously because the way they were killed drew more widespread attention to their cause.

All are united in their quest for freeing their communities and societies from the corroding influence of organized-criminal actors.

In several of the profiles in this collection, the assassinated faces are remembered by friends, former colleagues and family members, and it is often repeated that the defining characteristics of these leaders was their strength of will and commitment to a sense of integrity and community spirit, even when threatened by reprisals from the underground forces opposing their objectives.

One may think of Slaviša Krunić, one of Bosnia's wealthiest entrepreneurs, who was known for defying organized-crime bosses and corrupt political figures before he was shot dead on 22 April 2019. His relatives described how his commitment to his principles ultimately cost him his life.

Or of Rajendra Singh, an activist from India, who was described by his son-in-law as having 'a madness in him for justice'.

Often, it seems, it was a personal driving sense of moral justice that brought such people into confrontation with those who would perpetuate injustice. Whether it was by writing an investigative report, refusing a bribe, exposing a corrupt individual or contract, all of those profiled here took a stand against organized crime in some way. By doing so, they paid with their lives because they refused to tolerate criminal governance or associated corruption.

Although the hallmarks of assassination are consistent across regions, there are some forms of assassination that are highly specific to particular social contexts, and are often shaped by long-standing criminal economies. Targeted religious killings in Nigeria, mayoral murders in Mexico and assassinations of journalists across Latin America have, for example, emerged as key regional trends in the course of our research.

There is one emerging theme that merits particular attention. Environmental defenders and activists are among those most frequently targeted for criminal assassination. Among those profiled here were organizers and activists opposing resource exploitation, such as leaders in the anti-poaching, illegal mining and 'sand mafia' community movements. These profiles are just a few examples of a vast problem of violence targeted at those who seek to protect our environment. According to one estimate, as many as 1 558 people in 50 countries were killed for protecting their environment and land between 2002 and 2017.[1] As this publication went to press, two activists in Mexico who campaigned to protect the monarch butterfly were killed within days of each other, reportedly by groups connected to illegal logging.[2]

While it is increasingly becoming understood that protecting the environment is the greatest challenge that humanity faces, it is simultaneously becoming clear that such an endeavour courts widespread violence meted out by criminal and corrupt interests.

THE RIPPLE EFFECT OF ASSASSINATION

Criminal groups weaponize violence to intimidate and silence those who would oppose their interests, to bury evidence that would expose them and bring them to justice, and to rapaciously obtain power and resources that are not rightfully theirs. Targeted killings are a criminal attempt to coerce and control, and ultimately a way in which to exercise criminal governance.

In this way, assassination is a mechanism utilized by criminal groups and corrupt actors to shape society and government in a way that better suits their own interests. As such, assassinations are a form of criminal control through which inequality is exacerbated, the rights of marginalized groups are quashed, and democratic institutions are hollowed out and made ineffectual – all intensifying a broader societal malaise.

Think, for example, of Derk Wiersum, a leading Dutch lawyer who was acting for a state witness in a case against a drug-trafficking network operating in the Netherlands when he was shot dead in Amsterdam. The immediate motivation behind his assassination was to derail this critical case, which could have brought down some powerful criminal figures. But, as some of Wiersum's fellow lawyers suggested, his murder is also likely to make lawyers in the Netherlands apprehensive of that country's key witness system, whereby suspects willing to give information on criminal operations are offered reduced sentences. Given the importance of this system in prosecuting complex organized-crime cases, shaking the confidence of those lawyers tasked with making the system work can only shift the balance in favour of organized crime.

Similarly, any institution suffers when one of their own is struck down: schools, businesses, places of worship, newspaper offices, police forces and the judiciary. Violence leaves an indelible and traumatic mark on countries, cities and communities worldwide. The consequences of an assassination can therefore be far-reaching – a ripple effect that has repercussions long after the shots are fired.

However, these consequences may be a force for positive change, as well as for negative. As in the case of Daphne Caruana Galizia, the ultimate impacts of an assassination may be difficult to predict, and may not become clear until years after the event itself. Her murder laid bare the full extent of the endemic criminality that she made the focus of her journalism. The revelations of the circumstances surrounding her death and the links to leading figures in government brought Maltese society to the streets in protest, mobilized the EU to call for prime minister Joseph Muscat's resignation, and eventually led to his departure from office in early 2020.

In April 2016, on the fourth anniversary of his murder, the Cambodian government banned a documentary about Chut Wutty, a military officer turned environmental activist. The tactic backfired and, instead, for three days, the report, *I am Chut Wutty*, was widely distributed and viewed online throughout Cambodia, both by individuals on mobile devices and in private screenings organized on social media.[3]

In April 2019, on the second anniversary of police chief Artan Cuku's assassination, the Albanian government ceremonially declared him a national martyr. Cuku's contract killer had been swiftly arrested two years earlier, but the Albanian authorities – motivated by the public pressure of the martyrdom – went one step further: the suspected mastermind was arrested in Greece in December 2018 after a warrant was issued by Albania, but he had not yet been extradited.[4]

Thus, as people react to a killing and rally round the victim's cause, assassinations may serve to galvanize communities, sustain resilience and fuel hope. Time and again, when a community bears witness to, memorializes, and remembers the sacrifice made and life lived, enduring change is more likely to result.

COMMEMORATING THE LIVES OF INDIVIDUALS WHO DIED FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

It is precisely to tap into this positive effect that the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime initiated the *Faces of Assassination* project.

This book, which marks the launch of the initiative, assembles 50 profiles of those who have been assassinated by criminal groups since the start of the millennium. It is a compilation of men and women who have been murdered because they – like the examples given above – confronted, weakened or threatened criminal groups. The publication is the outcome of years spent bearing witness to the great impact these assassinations have worldwide, in developed and developing countries alike.

The profiles in the book span 40 countries in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas. They were commissioned by the Global Initiative and brought together the work of journalists working around the world, who spoke directly with friends and families of the deceased to place their stories in a local context.

Although the profiles have been selected from all over the world, these assassinations highlight certain places where organized crime has permeated political, cultural and economic systems of society, and regions where assassinations have escalated.

Each profile gives a snapshot of the life of an assassination victim; each tells something of the values or causes she or he stood for and the work that person did in the community or institution she or he represented. The profiles all seek to unpack as far as possible the circumstances that led to their murders, but – as is often the nature of organized crime – many of the details may well remain shrouded for ever.

We at the Global Initiative have been documenting the impact of criminal assassinations for several years now. Our Assassinations Witness database, for example, has used open-source data to compile information on assassinations in South Africa since 2000, and we are in the process of using the same methodology to expand the database to other countries in southern Africa.

This project forms just one strand of our broader research, which aims to document more widely the political-economic environments that enable organized crime, the shifting dynamics of criminal markets, and the impact of criminality and corruption on democratic institutions. Yet it is a part of our work that has a unique and particular value. Our work on assassination shows, in a real and tangible way, the human cost of organized crime, and how the force for change that these targeted individuals brought to their communities and institutions was eliminated. Their lives may have been tragically lost, but through these 'faces', counter-corruption may see afresh the value of their aims.

The *Faces of Assassination* project is the latest iteration of our work in this area, and this time it has a global perspective. The book is a springboard for a project that will continue to increase public awareness of the assassination of civil-society figures worldwide and ensure the sacrifice made by those who are lost to targeted killings is never forgotten.

TAKING A STAND AGAINST TARGETED KILLINGS

The number of people who have been fatally targeted by criminal groups worldwide in the 21st century is difficult to ascertain with precision, but it is in the tens of thousands. Often, when researching one particular profile, anecdotal testimonies of dozens of people who had been killed in similar circumstances came to light, suggesting there are many others who have been either forgotten entirely or buried along with evidence that might have led to an arrest, prosecution or conviction of a corrupt officer, coercive businessperson or compliant bureaucrat.

Edwin Dagua is a case in point. A Colombian indigenous people's rights activist killed in 2018, reportedly by dissident members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), Dagua was the 25th indigenous leader to be killed in Colombia in that year alone, and one of 431 human-rights defenders to be killed in the country between 2016 and 2018.

The profiles documented here, therefore, are intended to be not only real personal accounts, but they are also emblematic, in that they provide a broader representation of the kinds of groups of people who are targeted for assassination. In this sense, the individual stories explore how criminal violence seeks to shape society. While each person's story is of course unique, they may also be understood as representative of the hundreds more whose stories are not told here. Although this is not a scientifically-based sample that can be analyzed and interrogated to show trends, by sharing these people's stories, and describing the challenges and threats that they faced in incredibly difficult contexts, we can at least begin to paint a broader picture of the phenomenon.

We have chosen to bring together these faces of assassination for several interconnected reasons. As mentioned, criminal assassinations can have a positive counter-effect by exposing the fault lines in societies, the fragility of national institutions and the extent of otherwise hidden corruption.

What became clear when researching this book, however, was that although many assassinations are reported, few, other than a handful of high-profile cases, receive global attention or galvanize action from around the world. We need to raise the profile of these cases, investigate and research the groups involved, monitor prosecutions, and place pressure on authorities to pursue investigations and strengthen weak or corrupted institutions that enable powerful criminal groups to operate with impunity. We need to urge the international community to not turn a blind eye to criminal violence, and to recognize that this form of violence is symptomatic of wider problems of weak governance and corrupted institutions – problems that reverberate beyond national borders.

Therefore, we hope that public campaigning – through this book and the ongoing *Faces of Assassination* project, and our other work on the issue – will raise awareness of the sheer number of assassinations globally and, just as the public mobilization following Daphne Caruana Galizia's murder did, help to expose the wider societal ills that bring about such weaponized violence in the first place.

The actions that the GI-TOC have committed to take are therefore fourfold.

First, and most importantly, we will continue to bear witness to the ultimate sacrifice that these people have made, and pay homage to their bravery and integrity in the face of violence. We will be continuing to commission profiles that tell the story of their lives and the causes for which they lost their lives, and we hope that these profiles will serve as an enduring public tribute for their families, friends and colleagues, many of whom continue to face the same dangers and confront the same criminal interests that took the lives of their lost ones.

Secondly, our global *Faces of Assassination* project will continue to keep the individual cases in the spotlight, and demand justice and due processes in each and every case. On every death anniversary, we will be actively following up on the cases of those assassinated and demanding that due process is served: that the cases are investigated and the perpetrators are brought to justice. We will be seeking justice for those who ordered the killing, not just those who pulled the trigger, regardless of how high up in society or the state they may go. We will highlight cases of inaction and of obfuscation, and we hope that by increasing the public and international prominence of these cases, it may put pressure on the authorities to investigate these cases and bring those responsible to justice. And we will try to support the creation of tools and processes in the hope that this will improve both global and national responses to assassinations, and contribute to the global effort to make the work of anti-corruption activists, lawyers, journalists and human-rights defenders around the world safer.

Thirdly, we will seek to join forces with other civil-society organizations who are also championing this cause and undertaking selfless advocacy work. The Committee to Protect Journalists, for example, maintains a database of journalists killed in the course of their work and that organization has done a great deal to bring the issue into the public eye by drawing attention to the grave threat to free speech that violence towards journalists represents. The cause of environmental defenders are championed by the NGO Global Witness and by *The Guardian*. But many of those activists killed do not have anyone to champion their cause, educate and build capacity for prevention, or support the families of victims. The GI-TOC, through its research, advocacy and the Resilience Fund, will fill that void and will try to catalyze the creation of a sustainable framework in collaboration.

Finally, we develop and maintain a global database of assassinations, to ensure that there is a reliable and regular means to monitor what is regrettably becoming a global phenomenon. This database, which will sit in the public domain, will allow estimates of the scale of the problem, and allow trends to be analyzed. The global monitor will create an irrefutable evidence basis upon which action can be demanded from states and multilateral bodies to respond.

Brought together, our aim with these four initiatives is to draw public attention to the fact that, across the world, those who stand up for transparency and seek to maintain public integrity are facing a grave threat of violence. It is essential that we work to support civil society, activists, journalists and others who may be at risk – whether this is by providing financial and legal support, or through advice, training and protection, or by building transnational networks through which these people can share knowledge and experience.

At the Global Initiative, we have seen from our own experience that civil society – both at local and national level, and particularly where state governance is eroded, weak or compromised – is often the greatest driving force for positive change. Although this is what puts them at risk of being targeted by corrupt and criminal groups in the first place, it is also the very reason why it is essential to protect and support civil society in every way we can.

Mark Shaw
Director, Global Initiative
Against Transnational Organized Crime

Derk Wiersum
18 September 2019
Amsterdam, the Netherlands

DERK WIERSUM

EARLY ONE WEDNESDAY MORNING in the residential area of Buitenveldert, Amsterdam, as he had crossed the road to get into his car, lawyer Derk Wiersum was gunned down. A young man was seen fleeing the scene. Half an hour after the police arrived, they confirmed that Wiersum had died of his injuries. His wife, a judge, and one of his children were at home as Wiersum, splayed out on the street outside, was covered with a sheet while the police started their investigation.

A criminal-law practitioner, Wiersum was the lawyer acting for a state witness in a case against members of a drug gang operating in the Netherlands. Police chief Erik Akerboom said: 'With this brutal murder, a new limit has been crossed: now even people simply doing their work no longer seem safe.'

Well known in the Dutch criminal-law circuit as a kind, intelligent, erudite and honourable lawyer, 44-year-old Wiersum had built his career around fighting for the underdog. 'Whether the system is just or unjust: in both cases a lawyer is absolutely necessary,' Wiersum said in one of his very few publicized interviews.

Wiersum had been representing a gang member who had turned state witness for the prosecution, Nabil Bakkali, whose brother was shot dead in 2018. Bakkali was a key witness in the case against a group of men accused of five murders between 2015 and 2017, dubbed the Marengo trial.

Two of the accused in those killings, Moroccan nationals Ridouan Taghi and Said Razzouki, are believed to be part of a drug ring that controls about a third of Europe's cocaine trade. The EU police agency EUROPOL lists them among Europe's most wanted fugitives.

In March 2018, Bakkali's brother was assassinated as retribution for his cooperation with the state. If it is proven that Wiersum was assassinated because of his involvement in the case against some of the biggest names in the underground drug economy, it would be a first in the Netherlands.

The country erupted when news of the assassination broke. Members of government, the judicial branch and citizens were quick to condemn the murder as an attack on the rule of law. Courts, law firms, ministries and the Council for the Judiciary flew their flags at half-mast in Wiersum's honour, and the Dutch Bar Association observed a minute's silence. Wreaths of flowers were piled outside of Wiersum's home and law firm in Amsterdam.

During a memorial service organized by the Amsterdam Bar Association, Bart Stapert, Wiersum's closest colleague and mentor, said that even his murderer deserved legal representation. 'It would be the best way to remember Derk, because that is the type of rule of law that he stood for.'

'WITH THIS BRUTAL MURDER, A NEW LIMIT HAS BEEN CROSSED'

The public display of national mourning prompted a discussion about lawyers' safety and the future of the system of key witnesses. While the police said they would intensify protection measures around such cases, another lawyer in the Marengo case, Natacha Harlequin, questioned in a late-night talk show 'at what cost' the Netherlands would continue working with key witnesses.

Offering a reduced sentence to a suspect willing to give information on criminal operations, like Bakkali in the Marengo case, 'comes with a great deal of uncontrollable and unforeseeable risks', said another lawyer in the same broadcast. These risks are present partly because of the transparency of the Dutch court system, in which hearings and verdicts are open to the public and the media.

A professor in criminal law at the University of Amsterdam said that Wiersum's murder is likely to make lawyers even more apprehensive of the key witness system: 'They know now that even in the Netherlands it could cost you your life.'

Since the assassination of Bakkali's brother, an attack targeting Wiersum had not been unthinkable. But, according to a friend and colleague of Wiersum, lawyer Jillis Roelse, he felt he should 'just be able to do his job. Derk would cycle to work: "We live in the Netherlands, don't we?" is what he would say.'

'WIERSUM'S MURDER IS LIKELY TO MAKE LAWYERS EVEN MORE APPREHENSIVE OF THE KEY WITNESS SYSTEM'

The crime scene

Well-wishers gather outside Wiersum's home, near where he was gunned down

Wiersum was a distinguished member of the Dutch legal community. Besides running his own firm, he was on the board of the Foundation for Legal Aid for Death Row Convicts, worked as lawyer at Dutch&Detained, an organization offering help to Dutch detainees abroad, and taught criminal law. He specialized in matters of extradition and organized crime.

After Wiersum's death, crime reporter and author Jan Meeus said that the Netherlands is 'naive' when it comes to organized crime and the influence of the cocaine trade in the country. In an interview, Meeus said that the Netherlands could well be considered one of the major cocaine hubs in western Europe, as most of the cocaine arriving in Rotterdam and Antwerp is trafficked by drug rings working from the Netherlands. The country has been described as a narco-state.

According to Meeus, the sheer amount of money in the drugs economy should inform discussions on legalization of drugs to avoid illegal trafficking, and he questions whether it is right that tracking down organized-crime cartels, such as the one in the Marengo case, should be to the detriment of the rule of law and the safety of lawyers.

Following Wiersum's death, the Dutch Bar Association has set up a point of contact for lawyers and judges who fear for their safety. A special team from the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism is in charge of coordinating the safety measures for all those involved in the case.

Just a week after Wiersum's death, the case against Taghi and his criminal organization picked up again where it had left off. But this assassination had left its mark on the country. ●

‘KRUNIĆ WAS KNOWN FOR DEFYING LOCAL ORGANIZED-CRIME BOSSES AND THEIR POLITICAL BACKERS’

Slaviša Krunić
22 April 2019
Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina

SLAVIŠA KRUNIĆ

ON 22 APRIL 2019, the deafening sound of multiple gunshots broke the calm of a still spring night at the property of one of Bosnia’s wealthiest and most beloved entrepreneurs, Slaviša Krunić.

Krunić, an outspoken Bosnian Serb who was known for defying local organized-crime bosses and their political backers, died that night in hospital. One of his attackers, a well-known organized-crime figure named Željko Kovačević, who had previously served a sentence for robbery, died on the spot. Krunić’s bodyguard, Žarko Pavlović, was also killed, and his driver, Goran Ilić, was seriously wounded.

The armed ambush, believed by police at the time to have been planned by Kovačević and three underground figures, two of whom were later arrested, took place near Krunić’s home in a suburban area of Banja Luka, Bosnia’s second city and de facto capital of the country’s predominantly Bosnian Serb entity, Republika Srpska.

By the next morning, the news of the 48-year-old father of four’s passing had spread sadness and outrage, including among his employees. He managed five companies and employed more than 3 000 workers.

Born in 1971 in then-communist Yugoslavia and raised by a police-officer father, Krunić learnt right from wrong at an early age. ‘He was a soldier by nature, precise, on time,’ one of his relatives told the author.

This deeply instilled sense of discipline is likely to have influenced his career path. After visiting Germany in the years following the bloody 1992–1995 Bosnian War, Krunić had the idea of starting a private security and protection agency, one of the first in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The concept was so groundbreaking at the time that a new law on security companies was adopted three years after Krunić started Sector Security in 1999.

In addition to being principled, Krunić was widely regarded as hardworking and someone who always gave more to people and society than he got back. His dedication to Banja Luka is perhaps most evident in his acquisition in 2014 of Žitoprodukt, a milling and baking business in Banja Luka that was struggling after the conflict of the early 1990s.

Žitoprodukt was more than just an investment for Krunić. He felt nostalgic for the time when Banja Luka was a bustling and picturesque part of Yugoslav life, and wanted to restore vitality to the city. ‘No one would have bought Žitoprodukt just to revive it, not for that price,’ said one of Krunić’s friends. ‘He always went for the harder way. For him it was an issue of pride; he nurtured this company.’

Krunić rose to popularity in the country when he said that he would offer jobs to people who used to work at Žitoprodukt before the war, or to their children. By doing this, he was advocating for the return of the many Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) who had fled the city during the war, some of whom had a hard time finding work in a city where Serbs form the majority.

‘Who can say today that coexistence is impossible in this country, that progress is impossible and that it [the country] cannot exist as it is?’ Krunić said in a television interview in late 2015. ‘In our company, there are workers who were on different sides in the war. They all honoured their own ethnic group, fought for their ideals but they realized in the end they have been cheated.’

Krunić had developed a similar ethos in how he staffed his security company, where he employed people who had fought against each other in opposing armies less than three decades earlier. ‘He was a good speaker and he could put together what others thought was incompatible,’ one of his close co-workers observed.

Krunić’s bold moves and brave outlook on life may have been appreciated by many in Bosnia and Herzegovina, especially his own workers, but they raised eyebrows among the political elite, who were winning elections on the back of a nationalistic narrative that divided citizens into three distinct ethnic groups. ‘He had his principles and that cost him,’ said his relative. ‘They could not bend his spine, so they had to spill his brain,’ added his co-worker.

As Krunić’s portfolio and the number of people he employed had grown, so had the pressure on him from people connected to organized crime, as he had complained publicly on many occasions. Even before the acquisition of Žitoprodukt, in a 2008 United States diplomatic cable published by WikiLeaks, Krunić was cited as allegedly making a complaint to the US embassy in Sarajevo against Milorad Dodik, a leading Bosnian Serb nationalist politician.

According to Krunić, Dodik had ‘blacklisted’ Sector Security, preventing him from obtaining government contracts, a significant source of income for security companies in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Krunić also allegedly claimed that people close to Dodik were pressuring him to sell the company, as it was a direct rival to other private security companies believed to be connected to or owned by organized-crime figures or corrupt politicians.

‘HE HAD HIS PRINCIPLES AND THAT COST HIM’

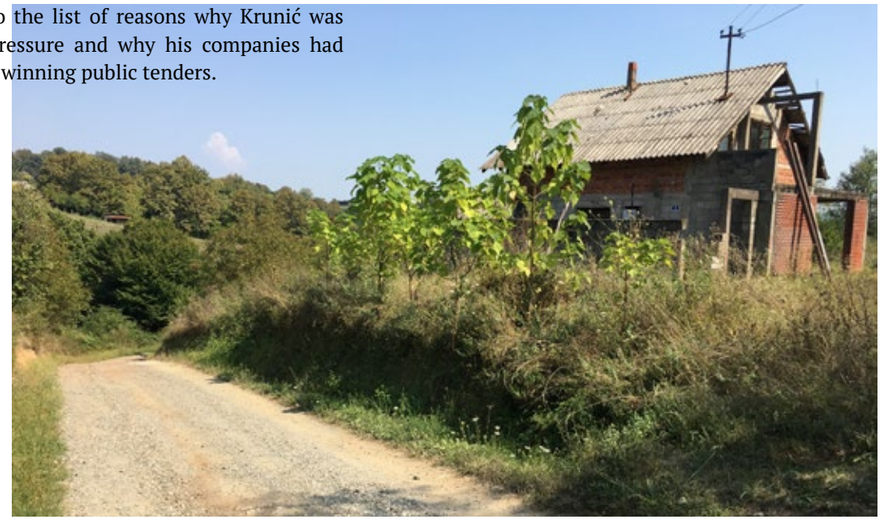
But Krunić’s defining characteristic was his strength of will. And this, coupled with a strong sense of justice and his social conscience led him to defy ruling politicians – especially those with a nationalistic bent. He disagreed with them on almost everything, and especially with Dodik on how Bosnian Serbs should behave in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Contrary to Dodik’s assertions that Bosnian Serbs in the semi-autonomous Republika Srpska owed their primary allegiance to neighbouring Serbia, a stance that prioritized their Serb connection, Krunić publicly promoted the idea that all people in Bosnia and Herzegovina are, first and foremost, Bosnians. ‘Bosnia and Herzegovina is our motherland and we have a duty to make it a better place to live. All of us,’ Krunić said in an interview.

Krunić also irritated political elites in more concrete ways, however. When a protest erupted in 2013, after a plan to build a skyscraper in a Banja Luka park was announced, Krunić sent his security workers to protect a family whose house was meant to be destroyed and who had been arrested and beaten. This added to the list of reasons why Krunić was under pressure and why his companies had stopped winning public tenders.

‘He felt abandoned by this [political] system,’ his relative said, a feeling Krunić himself described in an interview he gave in 2015. ‘I am Banja Luka born, but as such I became unfit,’ he said. ‘There were pressures to sell the company. I made a decision not to sell it to the people who are not part of the story, which is building this country, who do not mean well to the future of our children. And those are the ones we see in the political arena every day.’

As one in a series of unsolved, apparently politically motivated murders in Banja Luka, Krunić’s death has made his fellow citizens uncertain of their future. ‘With Slaviša’s death, the old Banja Luka is dying too,’ his friend said. ●



The road to Slavisa Krunić's property, where the murder occurred

Ahmed Hussein-Suale Divela
16 January 2019
Accra, Ghana

AHMED DIVELA

WITH THE EXCEPTION of the public execution of corrupt state administrators by the military government of Jerry Rawlings in 1979, no other killing in Ghana has had so deafening a ricochet as that of journalist Ahmed Hussein-Suale Divela. Grabbing media headlines and dominating public discourse in cities and far-flung villages alike, everyone is talking about the man who lived and worked in the shadows, but whom death transformed into a public hero.

On the night of 16 January 2019, two men on a motorbike trailed a blue BMW, zipping through the streets and roads of Madina, a suburb of the Ghanaian capital, Accra. As the motorbike levelled with the car, a gun was fired at the driver, forcing him to swerve and crash the car into a roadside store. One of the men then calmly walked up to the BMW and fired two more shots at the man behind the wheel. Then, turning to face the motley crowd watching from a distance, he smiled and raised a finger to his lips.

Because the gunmen did not appear to be in a hurry to make a getaway, many of the people in the crowd concluded that what they had just witnessed was the shooting of a midnight film scene by some quirky director from Ghana's movie industry. But there was no camera crew and no lighting technician directing his floodlight at the dimly lit scene. The gunmen disappeared, and the crowd inched closer to the car, with its shattered left window. The man behind the wheel was dead. This was no movie; the blood was real.

Jonas Nyabor, a journalist with Ghana's Citi FM, said that Divela's killers were without a doubt paid assassins. 'Obviously, they were trained marksmen who shot with military precision. They did not waste any bullets. All three shots hit their targets: one to the neck, the others to the chest. And they did not take any valuables from the victim to suggest robbery. They left no one in doubt about who they were, or what their mission was. Honestly, I cringe every time knowing that the victim was a journalist, like me. He did not deserve such a gruesome end,' Nyabor said.

Divela, 31 years old when he was killed, was a native of Wulensi, a Muslim-community village about 400 kilometres north of Accra. After graduating with a degree in political science from the University of Ghana in 2012, he chose the tough and dangerous turf of investigating organized-crime groups as a career path. This he pursued in the manner of a supercop. Divela's biggest influence was Anas Aremeyaw Anas, an internationally acclaimed Ghanaian undercover reporter whose work has been acknowledged by the likes of Barack Obama.

'NO OTHER KILLING IN GHANA HAS HAD SO DEAFENING A RICOCHET AS THAT OF JOURNALIST AHMED DIVELA'

Divela was a determined apprentice, quickly learning the ropes at Anas's undercover outfit, Tiger Eye, which had achieved renown for its exposure of human-trafficking syndicates, corruption and abuses in a state-owned psychiatric hospital. Divela was part of the team behind Tiger Eye's *Spirit Child*, an investigative documentary that exposed a ring of voodoo priests who made a living branding disabled children as evil spirits to be cast out of society.

Unfazed by high-risk conditions, Divela was known for never allowing anything to stand between him and a big story. In a pained remark following the killing, Anas acknowledged Divela's position as second-in-command of the team that pulled off two of Tiger Eye's most successful assignments – 'Ghana in the Eyes of God' and 'Number 12'.

'Ghana in the Eyes of God', a 2015 undercover investigation of the country's criminal-justice system, caught on camera 30 judges and dozens of judicial officials accepting bribes for helping to subvert the course of justice. Seven high-court judges were exposed and suspended as a result.

'Number 12' blew the whistle on corrupt football referees across Africa who had taken bribes to fix matches. A number of Ghanaian referees and Kwesi Nyantakyi, head of the Ghanaian Football Association, were caught accepting money from Tiger Eye journalists posing as intermediaries. In addition to Nyantakyi, who was banned from football for life, the sting implicated 77 referees and 14 officials. Buoyed by their success in Ghana, the undercover team took their cameras into several other African countries, including Kenya, the Gambia and Nigeria, where investigations revealed a similar situation of endemic bribery.

In the wake of Divela's assassination, fingers are being pointed by and at different enemy camps. Some people are willing to bet their last cedi that the assassination was arranged by the African football community, where organized-crime groups are fast taking over the sports-betting business. Match-fixing, the influencing of sponsorship deals and the bribing of officials are just some of the rackets accompanying an industry marred by fake football academies and fake agents, who steal fortunes from rich and poor families alike in exchange for the promise of getting their sons a place in the European League.

Journalists in Nigeria march for Ahmed Divela

Mourners share a minute's silence

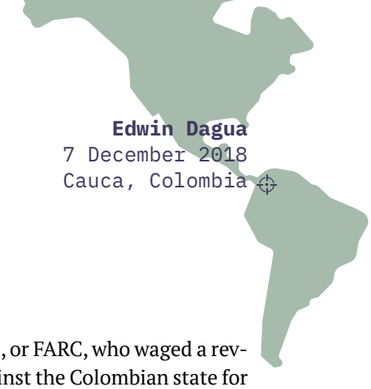
'DIVELA WAS KNOWN FOR NEVER ALLOWING ANYTHING TO STAND BETWEEN HIM AND A BIG STORY'

In September 2018, Divela had informed the Committee to Protect Journalists that his life was in danger. Kennedy Agyapong, a member of parliament for the country's ruling New Patriotic Party and owner of the Ghanaian television station Net 2 TV, had appeared on television calling on his supporters to attack Divela as punishment for his role in the football exposé, at the same time releasing a photograph of the undercover reporter and thus unveiling his identity. Four months earlier, Agyapong had made another angry television appearance, this time on Adom TV, where in the course of his outbursts, he drew his forefinger across his neck in a throat-slitting gesture.

It is clear that despite being neither a football referee nor a high-court judge, Agyapong harboured much anger towards Divela. And the police said that they have invited the MP for 'informal questioning', despite his having made public statements distancing himself from the murder. In response to an email enquiry about the state of the investigation into Divela's death, Samuel Appiah Darko, a lawyer representing Tiger Eye, said: 'Police investigations can best be described as slow. Nothing tangible has come up so far.'

At the time of writing, the Ghana Police Service was yet to find the smoking gun. In February 2019, Assistant Commissioner of Police David Eklu disclosed that six people had been arrested in connection with Divela's murder. According to police, the suspects, who remain unnamed, were interrogated and their statements taken before they were released on bail. Eklu said that in addition to the six suspects, the police had given statement forms to Agyapong, Nyantakyi and Anas, 'all suspects in the case'. No progress report on the investigation has been provided by the police since. ●

‘DAGUA WAS THE 25TH INDIGENOUS LEADER TO BE KILLED IN 2018’



Edwin Dagua
7 December 2018
Cauca, Colombia

EDWIN DAGUA

EDWIN GREGORIO DAGUA IPIA was just 28 when he was gunned down in the afternoon in the Huellas indigenous reserve, where he was a governor. Dagua was the 25th indigenous leader to be killed in 2018; his death sent shockwaves through the community in the Cauca region of south-west Colombia.

Dagua had known his life was at risk. He and his colleagues had received threats from a paramilitary group several months before he was killed and, just a month before his death, Colombia’s National Indigenous Council had warned of threats against leaders in the region made by former left-wing guerrilla fighters. So Dagua was under state protection, but his bodyguard was not with him at the time he was killed.

The UN Human Rights Office in Colombia – which has raised the alarm about the numbers of human-rights defenders and community leaders being killed in the country – confirmed Dagua’s death, saying that they condemned and lamented the assassination of this human-rights defender and leader of the Nasa Indians indigenous authority.

While many of the assassinations of human-rights defenders in Colombia go unsolved, Dagua’s attackers were quickly caught and sentenced to jail time by the indigenous courts.

According to the national prosecutors’ office (the Fiscalía General de la Nación), the attack was carried out by former guerrilla fighters from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, who waged a revolutionary war against the Colombian state for more than 50 years until signing a peace deal in 2016.

Most of the FARC’s fighters demobilized, but some fronts refused to and re-banded in certain areas. According to the Fiscalía, it was FARC dissidents from a cell called Dagoberto Ramos who were behind the attack on Dagua. Six members of the group have been sentenced to 40 years in jail for their role in the attack. The same group were behind the threats made a month before Dagua was killed.

There are varying accounts of why Dagua was targeted. Family members at his funeral noted that he had made a stand against drug trafficking and those trying to grow coca and marijuana in the Nasa territories, where he was a leader. The Fiscalía said that his murder was a retaliation for the fact that he had been opposed to the presence of illegal armed groups in the region.

Some of the areas once under the control of the FARC have seen a power vacuum in which various groups compete for control. In Cauca, the Regional Indigenous Council said that FARC dissidents, like those who killed Dagua, the ELN left-wing rebel group and paramilitaries are sowing fear in indigenous territories with the purpose of expanding the territory they can use for drug trafficking and illegal mining. Dagua’s murder, the indigenous authorities in the Huellas Reserve noted, had come after a meeting in which leaders had pledged to start reducing coca production.

The 2016 peace deal promised to bring Colombia’s coca problem under control, with an ambitious crop substitution programme and development initiatives in the areas where the crop has traditionally been grown. But people have come under attack for supporting the programme.

The Huellas Reserve, Cauca, Colombia

‘Substitutions and voluntary eradication are cutting into the profit margins of narco-traffickers. That’s bad for business,’ said Leonardo González, a director at the Bogotá-based think tank Indepaz, which monitors political violence. ‘Who is protecting the narcos? The paramilitaries and the FARC dissidents. Around 10 per cent of the FARC group that demobilized are working on security of narco-trafficking. They don’t want to leave behind the business.’ Those who want to implement the peace process, added González, are ‘enemies’.

Figures on the numbers of local leaders and human-rights defenders who have been killed paint a stark picture of which areas of the country are facing continued security challenges. Statistics from the Colombian People’s Ombudsman show that Cauca is among the most volatile regions for human-rights defenders since the peace deal with FARC was signed, alongside its neighbouring departments and those areas in the east along the Venezuelan border.

‘These are places that historically have seen a lot of fighting. They are regions where they are trying to implement the peace deal, zones where various armed actors are playing out their disputes, and where there are added poverty and extreme social exclusion issues,’ said Carlos Alfonso Negret Mosquera, of the office of the ombudsman.

Cauca, where Dagua was killed, is a region that has seen growing instability as drug-trafficking networks and illegal miners battle for control of a route that connects fertile coca-growing regions with the Pacific route headed north. Indepaz said there is a ‘security crisis’ in Cauca and neighbouring Narioño. The local indigenous authorities warn that many of their number are being wiped out.

‘We’ve had threats sent by pamphlets. We’ve had five killed, and these figures worry us,’ said Oscar E Escué, an authority with the Sa’thwe’sx indigenous community, in a video filmed after Dagua was killed. ‘These groups, these criminals, they use bullets to threaten a whole community.’

Nationwide, there is a crisis in confidence in the ability of the state to protect local indigenous leaders and human-rights defenders. Between 2016 and December 2018, the Ombudsman’s figures show 431 social leaders and human-rights defenders were killed, the majority of them local leaders and organizers, indigenous people, community workers, farmers and people of Afro-Colombian descent.

Scene from Edwin Dagua's funeral

‘BETWEEN 2016 AND DECEMBER 2018, 431 SOCIAL LEADERS AND HUMAN-RIGHTS DEFENDERS WERE KILLED’

‘On average, every 48 hours in 2018 someone working on human rights or a social leader was killed,’ the Ombudsman said in January 2019, after revealing that 172 people had been killed the previous year.

The UN’s Special Rapporteur, Michel Forst, said that human-rights defenders and social leaders ‘operate in a coercive and unsafe environment’ in many parts of the country. ‘In rural areas, where the state absence is coupled with a heavy presence of organized and illegal armed groups, defenders are an easy target for those who see them and their human-rights agenda as an obstacle to their interests,’ he warned four days before Dagua was killed.

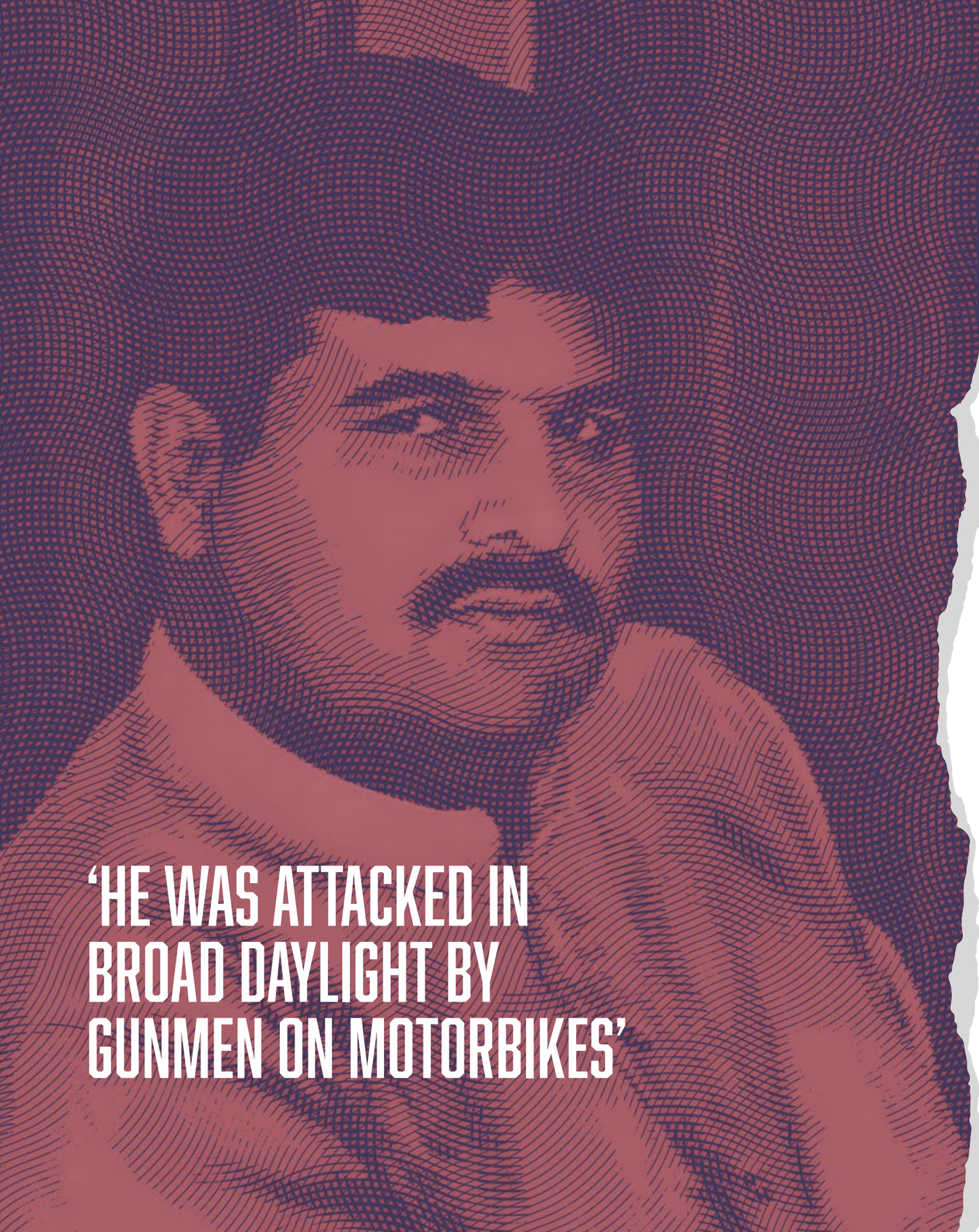
The Indigenous Association in North Cauca, ACIN, said indigenous communities are disproportionately at risk, noting that, in the two years since the peace deal, 400 indigenous leaders have had to take protection measures; there have been 224 threats, and 5 730 indigenous peoples displaced by violence or the threat of violence.

Eduin Mauricio Capaz, the ACIN spokesperson, described Dagua’s murder as a ‘hit’ that was felt regionally and collectively.

Dagua had been identified early as a leader. He had risen up through the community to become one of six running the Huellas Caloto indigenous reserve in Cauca.

‘He recognized what have been the big problems of the communities – how to get out of these areas, how to leave illicit crops,’ said Capaz. ‘In that part of Cauca, there are some monsters: illicit economies that are very dangerous and people who have a lot to gain, who have defended their interests with threats and killings.’

Unfortunately, like for many others, the consequences of being opposed to illicit crop cultivation and drug trafficking ended up causing Edwin Dagua’s death. ●



‘HE WAS ATTACKED IN BROAD DAYLIGHT BY GUNMEN ON MOTORBIKES’

Muhammad Sohail Khan
16 October 2018
Haripur, Pakistan

MUHAMMAD KHAN

ON THE AFTERNOON OF 16 OCTOBER 2018, a body was discovered in the Hattar industrial area in the Haripur district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, northern Pakistan. Police identified the deceased as 30-year-old Muhammad Sohail Khan, a journalist with the local Urdu newspaper *Kay-2*.

Khan had been travelling home from the police station, where he had just registered a complaint about threats he had been receiving from local drug dealers, and asked for protection, when he was attacked in broad daylight by two unidentified gunmen on motorbikes. According to the results of the police investigation, Khan was shot nine times – in the head, chest and shoulder – with a 9 mm pistol; he died on the spot.

Ali Jadoon, a police officer who accompanied Khan home from the police station that day, had waited at a local hostel while the journalist made a detour to drop off some school kids he had given a lift to. Jadoon recalled, ‘When [Khan] was coming back to me, I heard nine shots. He was gunned down some 500 metres away from me.’

Khan had been campaigning against Haripur’s dangerous drug mafia for five years before he was killed. He had been relentless in exposing the syndicate and their activities in his reporting on the local illicit-narcotics trade, despite immense pressure on him to stop.

At the time of his murder, the region’s illicit-drugs trade was flourishing, and its commodities were becoming as easily available as any legal goods. The Haripur police department had recently made some progress in combating the trade, with the arrest of Mussarat Iqbal, a formidable drug lord whose domain and exploits had been the subject of Khan’s fearless media campaign. Interestingly, the two were related: Iqbal was Khan’s uncle.

Iqbal’s two sons – Khan’s cousins – Hamayun Iqbal and Ali Sher, were revealed to have orchestrated the murder. To avenge their father’s arrest, which they blamed on Khan’s reporting, the two had organized for the courageous and motivated journalist to be assassinated the following day.

On 17 October, the day after the murder, police issued arrest warrants for the two men, themselves notorious drug dealers. Hamayun Iqbal and Ali Sher, who had gone on the run, were charged with murder by the Haripur police, and tracked down and arrested within a week of Khan’s death. Hamayun Iqbal was arrested on 24 October in Chaman; Ali Sher was apprehended in Karachi two days later.

An event organized in Khan's memory by the Haripur press club

They are currently awaiting trial. However, being relatives of Khan's, they are negotiating an agreement that would involve the payment of blood money to the murder victim's family in exchange for their pardon. This provision in the law is prevalent in Pakistan, where local village councils frequently settle disputes through consensus from all the parties involved.

A week before Khan was murdered, Mussarat Iqbal had threatened him directly, warning him to stop reporting about the drugs trade and the family's illicit activities or face the direst of consequences. According to Khan's brother, Farrukh Shahzad, the mafia had tried to buy the journalist's silence, offering him US$1 000 a month in exchange for keeping quiet about the particular issue of drugs being sold to the area's youth. 'Hashish and heroin were common drugs among the youth and were sold very cheap, at around 20 cents per cigarette. They were easily available,' Shahzad revealed.

Said Shahzad: 'People in our area used to warn me of their fears, that Sohail Khan was fighting a loner's fight against a very powerful and entrenched drug mafia, and that my brother, with all his will and desire, was no match, and actually they would advise me to ask him to give up his fearless reporting against the drug mafia.'

Khan's wife, Asma Bibi, had also on several occasions pleaded with him to stop reporting on these brutal drug lords with their extensive network. But the two were often at loggerheads over the issue.'He fought the tough battle all alone, against the strong mafia. I told him to think of our two young kids: "Why are you bringing risk and peril to your own and your family's lives?" But he never listened to me,' said Bibi. She is now living with her parents and fears for the safety of their school-going son and daughter.

'HE FOUGHT THE TOUGH BATTLE ALL ALONE, AGAINST THE STRONG MAFIA'

Hattar is an industrial area where many businesspeople from Punjab province and certain tribal areas have become patrons of the illicit-narcotics business. These men are largely responsible for Hattar's pervasive drugs problem, and the social and health costs it has for the community. Khan's fearless and persistent attempts to take it on, through his reporting, and his efforts to educate the public and enlighten the local administration about how to respond to the mafia, has had a notable impact posthumously: the community believes Khan's fight through his pen has created awareness and a desire to tackle the problem in Haripur.

The news of Khan's murder, and the reasons behind it, sparked outrage across Pakistan and led to the staging of nationwide protests and rallies calling for justice for the slain journalist. Participation was widespread and included members of journalist unions and international press-freedom bodies, as well as civil-society activists and ordinary citizens.

Khan's contributions are today appreciated and praised by people from every walk of life: notables, commoners, journalists, teachers and social activists. Among them is Waqas Ali, a university student, who, nearly a year after Khan's death, still becomes emotional when speaking about the man he never met: 'He was a great man who fought for a cause, who saved lives of many young people from the deadly drugs they were addicted to.'

Zakir Tanoli, president of the Haripur press club and a colleague of Khan's, recalled that despite having received many grave and serious threats, Khan had not held back on reporting on the activities of the local drug mafia and had essentially sacrificed his life to protect society from their menace.

Fellow journalists protest and pray for Khan

Rajendra Singh
19 June 2018
Motihari, Bihar, India

RAJENDRA SINGH

‘THERE WAS A MADNESS IN HIM FOR JUSTICE’

RAJENDRA PRASAD SINGH, a right-to-information (RTI) activist from the East Champaran district in the Indian state of Bihar, had exposed several cases of fraud and corruption in government welfare schemes at the village council level. On 19 June 2018, Singh was shot dead by sharpshooters close to the Piprakothi police station in Motihari. He was cycling home following a court hearing. Locals found him lying in a pool of blood on the road and rushed him to hospital, where he was declared dead.

This was not the first attack on the 60-year-old activist, but the one that would silence him forever.

A couple of days earlier, Singh’s daughter Mamata Ranjan had received an unusual call from him. Mamata and her husband, Rajesh, had been quarrelling, and Singh had come to know about the disagreement. He didn’t mince his words. ‘What’s wrong with you? Why are you fighting with your husband? There’s no guarantee as to how long I will live. Who will look after you when I am dead? I might not be around for long to take care of you,’ Singh told his daughter.

Ranjan listened silently. She said her goodbyes and ended the call. Two days later, as she was cooking lunch, the phone rang. A relative took the call. ‘I had a sudden pang in my heart. I don’t know why, so I tried to listen in,’ Ranjan explained. ‘I heard the words “shot dead”, and I knew they were talking about my father.’

Singh’s RTI work began in 2011. In 2013, he had exposed a village head in the area for illegally appointing his brother and his brother’s wife as teachers in a government school. As part of the process, they had falsified their degrees. Singh’s investigation led to the teachers’ resignation and a case was brought against the

The location where Rajendra Singh was attacked by gunmen

village head. It was the hearing of this case – and another that involved the husband of a different village head, who had allegedly siphoned off money meant for a welfare scheme – that Singh had attended the day he was killed.

'He had a fire in him. He couldn't stand corruption. And he wouldn't stop after exposing it. There was a madness in him for justice,' said his son-in-law, Rajesh Ranjan.

This quest for justice meant that Singh was fast gaining enemies. The fraud case involved Nagmani Singh, the husband of Sashikala, the village head of Bariaria-Rajpur panchayat, or village council. Nagmani had allegedly used his wife's influential position to misappropriate money that was intended to fund projects under India's $31 billion Clean India Mission. Fearing that his wife would be sentenced to prison for fraud, Nagmani began to plan to get rid of Singh. He rallied the support of several other community members whom Singh had exposed for property crime and corruption in the distribution of subsidized rations.

'All the people he had exposed formed a syndicate to kill him, because that was the only way to stop him,' Rajesh Ranjan said.

A series of attacks on Singh's life followed. In 2016, someone tried to run him over with a jeep. Later, he was attacked with a machete but survived, with deep wounds to the head. A few days before his murder, Singh had contacted an old friend and co-activist, Shiv Prakash Rai, telling his friend that he was concerned about his safety. 'I took him to the police. They made sympathetic noises but did not provide him with any security. He was killed just a few days later,' said Rai, who had known Singh since 2008 and had been closely associated with his work. 'He was a brave heart. He was not scared of anything, which was odd, because it was not as if he had no family. He had a wife and four daughters. But it was not enough to deter him from his path,' he added. Singh would tell his concerned family that service to others should always come ahead of self-interest. 'He used to say the government has turned a blind eye to corruption, and the poor are paying for it. Someone has to fight their fight,' his youngest daughter, Lovely Kumari, remembered.

Just before he was murdered, around 50 files on various cases were stolen from Singh's house. He then knew his days were numbered, and warned all who were close to him. 'I can't give you a lift. You might end up losing your life unnecessarily,' he would tell anyone who asked him for a ride.

The memorial to Singh in his village

He took care not to stay out late or travel alone at night. 'According to the confession of one of the shooters, the plan was to kill him on 8 June,' Ranjan said. 'My father-in-law had gone to attend a family function, and he decided to stay over, as he avoided travelling alone at night. The next morning, he went straight to court for a hearing. He was shot on his way home.'

In September 2018, the police arrested and charged at least one person connected to the case. However, they are still hunting for three other suspects, including the ringleader, Nagmani Singh, who had allegedly planned the murder and observed the killing from a car nearby. The suspects fled their villages immediately after the murder and went underground, and the police are still searching for them. 'I don't think we will ever get justice,' said Ranjan.

India's RTI Act came into effect in 2005. The law allows citizens to request information from a public body, which is obligated to reply within 30 days. Frustrated with rampant corruption, many in India, like Singh, welcomed having recourse to the legislation. Up until 2014, more than 4 million applications had been filed under the act. However, a worrying trend has seen RTI activists being targeted by the criminal syndicates they have exposed. Since 2005, 432 attacks on RTI activists have been recorded across the country, resulting in 82 deaths. Rai said that in Bihar alone, 16 RTI activists were killed between 2008 and 2019.

'What is the point of a law if activists can be framed, jailed, killed for it?' he asked. In 2015, Human Rights Watch said the police often fail to investigate such attacks owing to 'pressure from politicians and contractors with vested interests in keeping the information from becoming public'.

'The Indian government needs to fully enforce the Right to Information Act if it has any hope of curtailing the theft of public funds and ensuring accountability for abuses,' said Meenakshi Ganguly, South Asia director of Human Rights Watch. 'Seeking information from the government shouldn't be a death sentence.'

Singh's family built a memorial park for him in his village to mark the first anniversary of his murder. 'He was a rare man – in his self-respect, in his search for truth and justice, in his persistence to his cause. He has to be celebrated, remembered,' said Ranjan. ●

‘A FEW MOMENTS AFTER HE ENTERED THE STORE, TWO MEN SHOT HIM NINE TIMES’

Luis Arturo Marroquín
9 May 2018
San Luis Jilotepeque, Jalapa, Guatemala

LUIS MARROQUÍN

ON THE MORNING OF 9 MAY 2018, in the marigold-yellow central plaza of San Luis Jilotepeque, human-rights defender and community organizer Luis Arturo Marroquín stepped off a bus and entered a small store. He was scheduled to facilitate a workshop on civic responsibility that morning but, first, he needed to make some photocopies.

A few moments after he entered the store, two men emerged from a black Toyota Hilux and shot him nine times. It was approximately 9 a.m.

Marroquín was an indigenous Maya Q’eqchi activist on the national board of the Campesino Development Committee (CODECA in Spanish), a grassroots organization that fights for indigenous rights in education, health, energy and land. Marroquín had worked with CODECA for half a decade. As the coordinator for eastern Guatemala, he played a pivotal role in growing the organization’s regional presence.

On the same day, some 85 miles away – in the capital, Guatemala City – the organization was formally filing paperwork to launch its own political party, the Movement for People’s Freedom (MLP in Spanish). The new party aimed to move from protesting policy to shaping it in elected office. The party’s ultimate goal is to call a constitutional assembly and re-found Guatemala as a truly plurinational country.

It was too early for Marroquín to announce his own intentions for the 2019 elections but, according to his family, he had planned to run for office. And it would not have been the first time: he had run for mayor of his local village, San Pedro Pinula, in 2015. Marroquín didn’t win the election but served two terms on the village council.

Marroquín’s murder marked the start of a gruesome month for Guatemalan rights defenders. Seven indigenous activists were killed within days of one another. They were all affiliated with CODECA or a similar organization, the Campesino Committee of the Highlands (CCDA in Spanish). The first set of killings, starting with Marroquín, saw three activists shot dead around the country. Three weeks later, four more were killed by machete or knife attacks.

CODECA and the CCDA have both been outspoken defenders of indigenous and land rights. They educate members on legal rights, oppose harmful extractive industries and multinationals, and demand the resignation of corrupt officials – including, successfully, that of former president Otto Pérez Molina in 2015.

In recent years, both groups have shifted their tactics in a bid to transform the political system from within. The CCDA backed candidates in the 2015 election, and CODECA registered for the 2019 cycle. This presented a new threat to the establishment.

A week before Marroquín's assassination, President Jimmy Morales – who is also being investigated for corruption – publicly lashed out against CODECA. After Marroquín's death, the organization said in a press statement that it 'publicly holds President Jimmy Morales responsible'.

Guatemala has long been a dangerous place for human-rights defenders. The Guatemalan Human Rights Defenders Protection Unit (UDEFEGUA in Spanish) has been tracking violence in the country. According to the unit, a defender has been killed about once a month since 2000 – and that number has been increasing. In 2015, 11 human-rights defenders were killed; 10 in 2016; 52 in 2017; and, in 2018, seven in one month

CODECA has been particularly hard hit. Neftalí López Miranda, one of the organization's national leaders and the MLP's candidate for vice president, said they have lost 38 members since the movement was founded. CODECA started on a sugar plantation in 1992, when 17 labourers banded together to protest against low pay, explained López. The group organized a strike and succeeded in having their salaries increased from 1.5 quetzals to 3 quetzals a month. They began to expand, mobilizing for land and water rights. In 2003 and 2004, they fought exploitative electricity prices. Today, the organization has a presence in 180 mostly rural communities around Guatemala.

Marroquín's widow holds up a poster of her ex-husband, a 'defender of human rights'

In the area of Jalapa, Marroquín's main focus was electricity. In an interview with the local magazine, *EntreMundos*, Marroquín explained: 'There are a lot of rural people who have two, three lightbulbs. They don't have a fridge or sound system or TV, and yet they're paying Q200-250 per month. These are people who live on their crops. They don't make any money.' Many residents began refusing to pay for subscriptions, and instead began to connect directly – and illegally – to the electricity grid.

Marroquín's family one year after his murder

Young men supporting CODECA, the NGO Marroquín worked for

Nearly a year after Marroquín and his six fellow activists were assassinated, the killers remain at large. They have been described as 'unknown assailants'. According to NACLA magazine, this suggests that the crimes were contract killings conducted by professional hitmen. These so-called *sicarios* (hired assassins) are believed to be connected to state forces and therefore act with impunity. In 2017, Iván Velásquez, head of the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala, found that 97 per cent of crimes in the country go unsolved.

Though no one has been arrested or charged for the murder, Marroquín's family and former colleagues believe they know who might have been behind his death. His youngest son, Hector David, describes how his father had become a thorn in the side of local politicians – and especially the sitting mayor, José Manuel Méndez Alonzo – as well as the power distributor, Energuate.

Nery Rolando Agustín López, who worked closely with Marroquín since CODECA first established a presence in Jalapa nine years ago, now single-handedly takes on the duties that the two men had previously shared. An empty house in San Pedro Pinula serves as the headquarters both for CODECA and, now, the MLP. From here, Agustín López recalls how much has changed since he and 'comrade Luis' first began their work. 'Everyone now has a voice and a vote. They have reclaimed their rights.' From virtually zero, they built up a membership base of 6 000 members. That number is still growing.

Marroquín's killers may still be at large, protected by a system that has always been stacked against the most vulnerable. But, for CODECA, that inequality only fuels their cause and commitment. ●

Gezahegn Gebremeskel
21 April 2018
Johannesburg, South Africa

GEZAHEGN GEBREMESKEL

THE LOCALS CALLED HIM GEORGE. Even some members of the small gangs of downtown Johannesburg would say 'howzit, George' when they saw him sitting on his regular bench on the corner of Kerk and Polly streets, chatting to people. Street kids would come up to him and say: 'We don't have money to buy food', and he'd hand them something to eat. And if you had been robbed, and you lived or worked in the area, then you'd be sure to tell George. He was known for being able to locate and return your belongings within 24 hours.

On 21 April 2018, at about 5 p.m., Gezahegn Gebremeskel (aka George) was killed by a single bullet, which left him slumped on his bench outside Yamampela Fast Foods with blood pouring from his neck. He was just 48 years old. Although he was carrying R15 000 (roughly US$1 000) in cash, this was left untouched by the gunman, whom witnesses described as a 'young boy' and 'slim'. Gebremeskel's body was quickly surrounded by a crowd of people, who waited for 40 minutes for the police to arrive; it was another two hours before the body was finally moved.

Gebremeskel was an Ethiopian activist and a leader for the Ethiopian diaspora community in South Africa. As an army sergeant during the Ethiopian civil war, 21-year-old Gebremeskel had found himself in danger when, in 1991, the military was dismantled and the country's new transitional government began to target and assassinate former soldiers. He responded by rallying against the post-war government, but this only escalated the threats to his life. He fled first to Kenya but there the authorities were killing activists in that country, so in 1997 he moved to South Africa.

Gebremeskel was a man plagued by past regimes: he didn't flee Ethiopia on account of his political views, he fled on account of his past. At the time of his assassination, Ethiopia's ruling party, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, which he had fought for most of his life, had changed radically. The prime minister, Abiy Ahmed, had instituted national reforms and freed captured journalists. Interestingly, those suspected of ordering the assassination of Gebremeskel were no longer in power; Gebremeskel wasn't killed during the heat of the regime he hated but rather scalded by its embers. And herein lies the conundrum of the case.

The author met with Fana Derge, spokesperson for the Ethiopian Community Association in South Africa, in Rosebank, Johannesburg. Since Gebremeskel's assassination, Derge hasn't felt comfortable visiting the city; he now lives in

Pretoria. Asked why Gebremeskel was killed *after* the previous administration had ceased, Derge said: 'It is because of the information that he had. They knew that one day Gebremeskel would expose the things that he had been told. They believed he would do it when the time was right, when it could make a difference.' The right time would certainly have been after Ethiopia's transition to the new regime. If Gebremeskel had released any explosive information earlier, it would have simply bounced off the old regime. 'You have to wait for the change,' Derge said. 'And now the change has come.' The irony isn't lost on either of us.

According to Derge, the previous Ethiopian government was involved in money laundering and smuggling; they had wanted to bring some of that money into South Africa. Evidence of this began to reach Gebremeskel, and his informants hoped that he would be able to use his influence to bring about change. Gebremeskel had let people know that he had received some top-secret information but had refused to disclose his sources or give away any detail that would endanger the recipients of the information. It was this consideration for the safety of others that saw him recognized as trustworthy among South Africa's Ethiopian community.

Relaying the fear that has gripped the community since Gebremeskel's murder, Tamiru Abebe, head of the Ethiopian community association in South Africa and a close friend of Gebremeskel's, told South Africa's *Mail & Guardian*'s Simon Allison in 2018: 'This is no ordinary killing. This is absolutely an assassination. More than 100% the Ethiopian government is to blame.' The Ethiopian embassy has, however, strongly denied these allegations.

Despite the suspicion surrounding Gebremeskel's death, police officers from Johannesburg central police station assigned to the case uncovered nothing. Although it is standard practice to look to security-camera footage, particularly in the absence of clear witness testimony, journalist Heidi Swart told the author she was sure the cameras were not working. She had reported at the time for the *Mail & Guardian* that there was no footage available. 'I've done some more research into the functionality of the Johannesburg camera system, and as far as I can see, it's a mess,' she said. 'So, I don't think it's a case of the metro police not wanting to release the footage of the shooting. I think it probably doesn't exist.'

Taking action in the absence of police success, Derge's organization paid R200 000 to private investigators over the course of six months in an attempt to solve the death of their friend and comrade. But the investigators also turned up nothing. 'This is my opinion: the reason they weren't able to uncover a clue is because this information is protected by influential entities,' said Derge. It is believed that whoever hired Gebremeskel's assassin was

Flowers left by the community near where Gebremeskel died

'GEBREMESKEL HAD RECEIVED SOME TOP-SECRET INFORMATION'

someone from Ethiopian's old regime, someone who was scared of what Gebremeskel knew and anticipated it being released.

'Just before the day he was killed, there was a meeting between South Korean investors and South Africa-based Ethiopian businessmen at the Hellenic Cyprus club in Bedfordview,' said Derge. 'Gebremeskel, who didn't like the idea of Ethiopia doing trade with Korea, allegedly caused a disturbance and was ejected from the club.' While Derge believes that this had nothing directly to do with the assassination, it may highlight how an activist can be considered a problem because of the information he possesses.

When asked if anyone has replaced Gebremeskel as a central figure of activism in the Ethiopian community, Derge said no. 'The political situation of our country is changing, so there isn't much activism needed.' But a sad pause accompanied the response. Derge, who was 22 when he left Ethiopia, has also given his life to politics and has spent much of that life fleeing the previous government. 'I just ran away because it is better to be alive,' he said.

The Ethiopian diaspora of downtown Johannesburg has, in Gebremeskel, lost its protector from the local gangs, the one person able to accommodate and link the two frequently antagonistic groups. 'Where we work, we were never harassed and that has changed since he died,' said Derge. Gebremeskel's two surviving children now receive funds from the diaspora and will be able to visit Ethiopia safely one day should they wish to do so. Gebremeskel never once returned to Ethiopia in the 21 years that he lived in South Africa, but, as Derge revealed, finally doing so had been on the horizon: 'Just before he died, he told me he had been in exile a long while and now was the time to go back home and live.' ●

Sandeep Sharma
24 March 2018
Bhind, Madhya Pradesh, India

SANDEEP SHARMA

ON 24 MARCH 2018 at 8.55 a.m., security cameras picked up a chilling, almost Bollywoodesque scene playing out on the near-empty streets of Bhind, a small town in Madhya Pradesh, central India. In the blue-tinged footage, a huge dump truck can be seen taking a wide turn on an empty street, swerving suddenly, and mowing down a passing motorcyclist. The victim – Sandeep Sharma, a local investigative TV journalist – was dead on the spot. Although Sharma was run over just a few metres away from the Kotwali police station, it took the police almost 15 minutes to reach him.

That morning, Sandeep had a conference to attend and was in a hurry, but he stayed long enough to enjoy a cup of tea and some savouries with his mother and his wife. It was to be his last meal at home.

'I will be back soon,' he had promised them.

'The atmosphere was not good,' said Sharma's sister, Kalpana. 'Sandeep had been planning to move to Indore [the commercial capital of Madhya Pradesh] for many months. He wanted to move out in search of a better future for his children.' Although Kalpana refused to talk about the events surrounding Sharma's death, the bits of information she offered tell of the immense heartache experienced by Sharma's family.

But Sharma's decision to move was not just in search of a better life, it was also to escape the nightmare that his world had become after he had secretly filmed a senior police officer named Indra Veer Singh Bhadouria accepting bribes from the 'sand mafia', a violent organized-crime group that operates all over the state, exploiting the highly lucrative commodity that sand has become as a result of the boom in India's construction industry. Bhadouria had taken money in exchange for helping the mafia to bypass security checkpoints.

Sharma received calls from members of the mafia, warning him against airing the video on the news channel where he worked as a stringer. Fellow journalist Vikas Purohit, who had helped him with the exposé, had left Bhind a few months after the incident, fearing for his safety. 'I told Sandeep to leave Bhind after the exposé, but he refused,' revealed Purohit. 'He said it might be true that he cannot change the system, but he will still try his best to counter the system.'

Soon after the sting, Sharma and Purohit had written to the police saying that they feared for their safety and that of their families.

In the letter, they claimed that Bhadouria had 'links with local criminals and strongmen and could implicate us in false cases or even have us murdered and make it appear like an accident'.

But, according to Purohit, when they went to file the complaint, a senior officer had warned them: 'If this is not true you will pay dearly for framing a police officer and there can be cases against you.'

'I TOLD SANDEEP TO LEAVE BHIND AFTER THE EXPOSÉ'

The warning was not an empty threat. Shortly afterwards, Sharma had been out covering a rally when he was attacked by a group of people. When he went to lodge a complaint, he found that the police had already lodged a complaint against him, accusing him of attacking a police officer.

'It was a false case,' said Purohit. 'He was there doing his job. He didn't go anywhere near the police officers.'

Following this incident, local journalists rallied behind Sharma, appealing to the superintendent of the police to take Sharma's complaint seriously and warning the police against trying to frame him with fabricated cases. Sharma, an idealistic young man, who had left a safe career as a medical representative to become an investigative journalist, was not to be deterred, however. Not even when rumours circulated that the police were planning an encounter against him and Purohit. And while he stayed in the line of fire, he insisted that Purohit move out of Bhind.

'We had decided to split up, so that they could not take down both of us together and there would always be one of us to tell the story,' said Purohit.

Sharma was not just a courageous reporter, but also believed in fighting from the front, and questions of personal safety did not bother him. The youngest of four, he had grown up in a family where patriotism and a desire to sacrifice part of oneself for the country ran high. The death of one of his brothers, a soldier killed in clashes with militants in Indian Kashmir in 2004, had left a deep wound in Sharma's heart and a desire to match his brother's sacrifice. The sacrifice he was prepared to make came with his wish to expose corruption, a social ill that has been eating away at India's social fabric for decades.

Sand mining in India is a lucrative industry that has become exploited by organized crime

Sharma was always perturbed by corruption in the police force, and he discussed this often with Purohit, who lived next door. The two had grown up together.

'We would see police officers standing on street corners accepting bribes as low as 20 rupees,' said Purohit, 'and Sandeep would say: "Look at them selling their uniform!" We wanted to expose this corruption.'

Illegal sand mining, widespread in Bhind, was the obvious choice for the exposé. According to Purohit, roughly 30% to 40% of the region's population is involved in the trade. 'We heard [the sand mafia] boast of how they worked in tandem with the police. We wanted to expose that nexus,' he said.

'No mafia can be born or flourish without the help of the authorities and the proof was right in front of us.'

Sandeep Sharma (left) and fellow journalist Vikas Purohit

Sharma had planned to secretly film Bhadouria to prove how the police were helping the mafia to steal thousands of tonnes of sand from the National Chambal Sanctuary, a protected wildlife area straddling the states of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. The sand mafia has been a dreaded presence in the sanctuary since 2012, after mowing down police officer Narendra Singh in broad daylight when he tried to stop a truck of illegally mined stones. It was around this time that additional forces were deployed around the sanctuary, but the measure proved ineffective. In September 2018, a few months after the murder of Sharma, a forest ranger was killed by the sand mafia in similar circumstances.

The sand mafia is the most terrifying criminal network in India at the moment – and for good reason. Sand is vital for India's rapidly growing construction industry, predicted to become the third largest in the world by 2025. The sector employs over 35 million people and is valued at well over US$126 billion per annum. Those who get in the way are intimidated through violence and threats, and murdered if they dare to persist. In 2018, 11 murders, 18 attacks and 22 threats were recorded against activists, journalists, citizens and government officials who opposed illegal sand mining.

However, the sand mafia has a great deal of influence on police and government officials, who receive huge kickbacks for turning a blind eye to its activities. Sharma's murder was perhaps the only one that grabbed national headlines because it came at a time when India was already witnessing a crackdown on free speech and a rise in assaults on journalists.

Recognizing this disturbing trend, Amnesty International's Asmita Basu called for an independent and impartial probe to investigate Sharma's murder: 'The killing of Sandeep Sharma, who had earlier sought police protection after doing two "sting" operations, illustrates the risks that human rights defenders in India face.'

Despite his immense courage, Sharma had finally decided to leave Bhind, discouraged by the oppressive atmosphere of fear and intimidation.

'When we were working together, we were filled with the emotion of working for the people, exposing injustices and corruption,' Purohit lamented. 'I don't have that in me any more after Sandeep's death. Fearless journalism in India means suicide.'

Marielle Franco
14 March 2018
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

MARIELLE FRANCO

WHEN MARIELLE FRANCO told her partner, Mônica Benício, that she was toying with the idea of running for Rio de Janeiro City Council, Benício's gut reaction was 'bad idea'. As a bisexual Afro-Brazilian woman raised in a slum, Franco incarnated several of Brazil's most vulnerable and marginalized demographics, and speaking out in favour of these long-oppressed groups was sure to make her some powerful enemies.

'I knew that if she won a seat it would be a really hard position,' recalled Benício at a hole-in-the-wall café in the northern Rio neighbourhood of Tijuca. 'But it never occurred to me that it could cost Marielle her life.'

Brazil is a notoriously dangerous place for environmentalists and members of the country's landless peasants' movement, who often pay with their lives for daring to defy potent interests in the largely lawless Amazon region. But Rio de Janeiro, Benício reasoned, was another story. Although crime in the so-called Marvellous City is rampant and often deadly, Rio hadn't seen a high-profile political assassination in many years.

And so Benício was disappointed, but not unduly worried, when Franco, her on-and-off partner for some 14 years, decided to run for city council in 2016. Franco went on to make an impressive showing, securing the fifth-highest vote tally among the city's 51 council members.

She had been serving for a little over a year when, on 14 March 2018, still-unidentified assailants opened fire on the car she was travelling in, killing her and her driver, Anderson Gomes. She was 38 years old.

Franco was born in 1979 in the Maré, Rio de Janeiro's largest slum, a dense warren of buildings perched on the edge of Guanabara Bay. The state is conspicuously absent from the Maré, as it is from the majority of the city's other thousand-plus *favelas* or slums. Young men with AK-47s slung over their shoulders – so-called *soldados*, or soldiers, in the employ of the drug-trafficking gangs that have long been the Maré's de facto strongmen – ostentatiously ply their trade on the sidewalks.

Like so many other families who have settled in the city's slums, Franco's family has its origins in Brazil's hardscrabble north-east. Her mother, Marinete da Silva, moved to Rio from the north-eastern state of Paraíba; her father António's family also hails from the region.

A devout Catholic who bucked the odds stacked against her by attending law school, Da Silva kept her daughters on what she described as a 'short leash'. Franco was often left in charge of her younger sister, Anielle, and began contributing to the household at the tender age of 11.

A promising student, Franco signed up for an intense, year-long preparatory course for Brazil's college entrance exam, run by the NGO Redes da Maré.

'Marielle was a good student – focused and interested and curious,' the director of Redes da Maré, Eliana Sousa Silva, told the author. 'It was very clear she had goals for her life.'

But it also proved a tumultuous time for

‘FRANCO INCARNATED BRAZIL'S MOST MARGINALIZED DEMOGRAPHICS’

Franco. ‘She started waking up to what it meant to be black, what it meant to be a woman, what it meant to come from the slums,’ said Eliana.

Halfway through the course, Franco got pregnant and dropped out, giving birth at age 19 to her only child, Luyara. She re-enrolled the following year, passed the college entrance exam and was given a scholarship to study Social Sciences at Rio’s Pontific Catholic University. She’d go on to pursue a master’s in public administration, writing a dissertation about security in Rio’s slums.

In 2007, she went to work as a parliamentary assistant to Marcelo Freixo, a state representative from the left-leaning Socialism and Liberty Party (PSOL), whose investigation into Rio’s brutal paramilitary gangs resulted in repeated death threats and a 24/7 security detail. During the nearly 10 years Franco spent with Freixo, she worked on the Legislative Assembly’s Commission for Human Rights, an experience that gave her a broad understanding of the scope and tenor of human-rights abuses in the state. It was here that Franco heard firsthand the harrowing tales of abuse against those who belonged to the demographic groups that she would come to regard as defining her – women, Afro-Brazilians and homosexuals.

‘When you’re LGBT, when you’re black, when you’re from the *favelas*, like both of us are, and you have the capacity to run for office, you realize you have a responsibility to,’ said David Miranda, Franco’s fellow PSOL member and Rio City councilman. ‘You see, you have to do it to open up opportunities for people like us.’

A protest following the killing of Marielle Franco

But Franco’s nuclear family didn’t support the idea of a run for office any more than her partner, Mônica, whom she met on a vacation back in 2004. They moved into an apartment together in 2016. The two were engaged to be married in 2019.

Franco regarded the 2016 City Council race as a practice run, and few were more surprised than she when she scored nearly 47 000 votes, making her the fifth most popular candidate for the office that election cycle. But the transition from parliamentary aide to councilwoman proved rocky, according to Miranda, who shared a desk with Franco.

‘It’s a place that’s dominated by straight white men, and they really do everything they can to make you feel like you don’t belong,’ he said, recalling the racist, classist and homophobic insults lobbed at her by conservative colleagues.

But although her legislative initiatives met with limited success in the little over 15 months that she served, Franco did succeed in bringing visibility to the causes she championed. The week before she was killed, she delivered a blistering speech on one of her most enduring topics – rampant police violence in *favelas*.

‘Marielle was the kind of person who was extremely confrontational with the powerful but really respectful with people in weaker positions, like, for example, the cleaning people or service people,’ said Glenn Greenwald, a Pulitzer prize-winning journalist and Miranda’s husband. ‘She was such a force of nature that when I first met her, I came away a bit shaken, a bit intimidated – and I’m not someone who’s easily intimidated.’

Greenwald said he often thinks about how Franco’s powerful presence may have got under the skin of her conservative colleagues, ‘who are not used to be challenged – particularly by a black, LGBTQ woman from the *favela*.’

On 14 March 2018, at roughly 9:30 pm, the car in which Franco was returning home from a public event in northern Rio was peppered with bullets. She was hit four times in the face and died instantly. The slaying of Franco and her driver unleashed a massive outpouring of grief that reached around the globe, triggering protests across Brazil and abroad. But despite the unprecedented international response, police investigators made little progress towards solving the case, which observers say has all the signs of a carefully orchestrated hired assassination. ‘It is incontestable that Marielle Franco was summarily executed for her political activity in the defence of the causes she defended,’ prosecutors said in a statement cited by *The Guardian*.

In March 2019, police arrested two suspects in connection with Franco's murder – the first sign of progress in the investigation.

‘It’s obvious there are very important figures behind her murder who are sure they can order something this barbaric with impunity,’ said Benício, who has dropped her work as an architect to devote herself to pursuing justice for Franco and Gomes.

But whoever ordered the killing, and whatever their motive may have been, Benício says it’s clear that it has backfired. ‘Before Marielle was killed, not a lot of people knew of her,’ she said, glancing down at the portrait of Franco tattooed on her forearm. ‘But now the whole world knows about her, and the truth is that, in death, Marielle was able to touch so many more people than she was when she was alive.’ ●

Ján Kuciak
21 February 2018
Veľká Mača, Slovakia

JÁN KUCIAK

THEIR MURDERS ARE among the most tragic and controversial events to have taken place in Europe in recent decades. Before investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée, Martina Kušnírová, (both 27) were killed, there'd been no immediate sign that someone was targeting them. Slovak police records, however, show that the assassins had been preparing the hit for at least two weeks.

The perpetrators were named as Zoltán Andruskó, a local pizzeria operator; Tomáš Szabó, a local policeman; and Miroslav Marček, a former soldier. Andruskó told the police that he had been approached by Alena Zsuzsová, an Italian translator, who had offered him €70 000 (€50 000 in cash and €20 000 in debt forgiveness) in exchange for killing Kuciak. Zsuzsová had, in turn, been hired by Marian Kočner, an influential Slovak businessman with alleged ties to organized crime.

Andruskó informed the police that he had then expanded the team to include Szabó and Marček because he didn't know how to kill a person himself. Although the direct order was to murder Kuciak, the assassins did not spare his fiancée as the two were spending the evening together at the house they had recently bought. The murders were carried out so quickly and quietly that nobody in the tiny municipality of Veľká Mača, 60 kilometres from Bratislava, in south-west Slovakia, noticed the gruesome crime being committed in their neighbourhood.

The bodies of Kuciak and Kušnírová were discovered four days later, after Kušnírová's mother, Zlata, worried because her daughter wasn't answering her phone calls, contacted Kuciak's parents and alerted the police. An hour after receiving Zlata's call, the police went to the house. By the time Zlata had reached Veľká Mača, the Kuciak family was already there; they were crying, barely able to utter a word. 'Then a police officer … said, "Oh, there she is, the woman from the east, the mother of the murdered girl." That's how I learned Martina was murdered,' Zlata told the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP). 'I was out of my mind.'

Although it was the first targeted killing of a journalist in Slovakia, the incident happened just four months after the murder of Maltese journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia. This fact escalated the level of shock felt in Slovakia, and beyond, as here was another case confirming that the security of journalists was seriously deteriorating in EU countries.

The murders also sparked major protests. On 2 March, thousands of people took to the streets in Bratislava. A week later, the protests spread to 48 cities in Slovakia and 17 cities worldwide; 60 000 people protested in Bratislava alone, making it the biggest demonstration since the Velvet Revolution, which marked the fall of communism in Slovakia in 1989. The murders dominated the news for weeks, and the rage of citizens, together with a growing political crisis, led to some government

'IT WAS THE FIRST TARGETED KILLING OF A JOURNALIST IN SLOVAKIA'

The house that Kuciak and Kušnírová shared in Vel'ká Mača. The grafitti on the gate proclaims: 'Love is stronger than evil'

officials – including Prime Minister Robert Fico, several ministers and high-level police officers – resigning.

According to Marek Vagovič, Kuciak's fellow journalist and editor, these deaths dramatically changed public opinion in Slovakia and have politically awakened Slovaks. People are particularly disgusted by the cruelty directed at such a young, loving couple. 'I am convinced that most people no longer want to live in a country that is ruled by corrupt politicians, oligarchs and mafias. I believe that this will also be reflected in the upcoming presidential elections and in the parliamentary elections in 2020,' Vagovič told the author.

But Kuciak wasn't a revolutionary type of person. He had a mild and peaceful personality, and his biography would have looked like that of many other Slovakians. As Vagovič said, despite his mellow nature, Kuciak had stood out as a rare investigative talent from the start. 'I met Ján Kuciak at the training for junior investigative journalists,' he said. 'Very quickly it became clear to me that he has an extraordinary talent; such journalists in Slovakia get born once in 20 years.'

Vagovič and Kuciak began to collaborate, and in 2015, together with two of their colleagues, they launched a portal for investigative journalism at Aktuality.sk.

'Ján was very precise when it came to fact checking,' Vagovič said, describing Kuciak as a reliable, patient, focused and courageous journalist. 'Privately, he was a very pleasant, modest and humble person, who dreamt about a time when all criminals would pay for their deeds.'

Before Kuciak was killed, he was investigating the influence of the Italian mafia in Slovakia, working in collaboration with Czech and Italian investigative reporters under the mentorship of the OCCRP. He was particularly interested in the 'Ndrangheta, a notorious Calabria-based organized-crime group that dominates the European cocaine market. Kuciak was investigating links between the 'Ndrangheta and Fico and his secretary, former beauty-contest winner Mária Trošková. According to OCCRP findings, Trošková was a business partner of a Slovakia-based Italian with direct links to the 'Ndrangheta. Many suspected that Kuciak was murdered because he had discovered some important details about the 'Ndrangheta in Slovakia. Nobody was paying attention to the fact that Kuciak had also written dozens of articles on financial crime, including VAT fraud, for which one of the main suspects was Kočner.

Although, at first, the majority of people blamed the Italian mafia for the murders, the prosecutor charged Kočner with ordering it. Allegedly, Kočner was friendly with both Fico and the head of the National Criminal Agency's anti-corruption unit, Róbert Krajmer. There is material proof that Kočner was in touch with a Slovakia-based member of the Italian mafia, Antonino Vadala, who is currently serving a jail sentence for drug smuggling. Vadala was also a business partner of Trošková.

A couple of months before Kuciak was murdered, he was tipped off that Kočner was angered by some of the articles he had written. He had a threatening phone conversation with Kočner, which he relayed on Facebook in October 2017 and then reported to the police, but no steps were taken against Kočner in this regard.

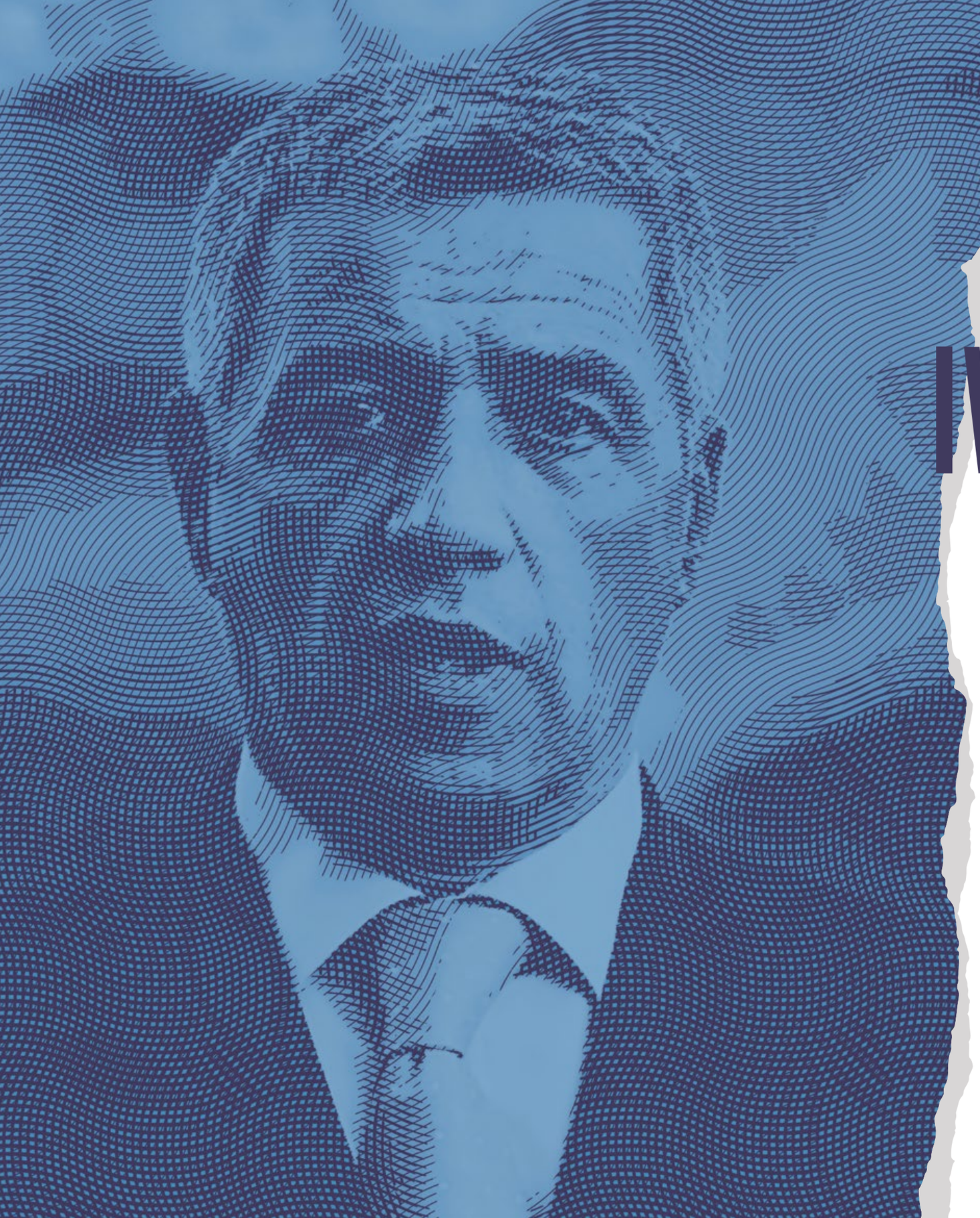
Having worked closely with Kuciak and therefore being familiar with Kočner's profile, Vagovič said that he'd never thought Kočner would be capable of ordering a hit, and was shocked when the prosecutor informed him that Kočner has been charged with ordering the murder. 'I'd always considered him as a poser who is only pretending to be a tough guy so that others would be afraid and get out of his way,' said Vagovič. Kočner at this time was already in custody after being charged with having committed financial crimes.

All revelations concerning the case were made two days before voting in the Slovakian presidential election took place on 8 March 2019. It was difficult to predict if the news would influence the polls, but the results revealed a decline in support for the government-backed candidate. It is also clear that, since the murders, support for Fico's party, Direction – Social Democracy (Smer-SD), has fallen dramatically. Vagovič said that politicians from the Smer-SD persist in attacking the media and accusing them of organizing support for a coup.

A memorial point for Kuciak and Kušnírová in Bratislava

But the police and the prosecutor have proven professional and responsible in their conduct. 'In September 2018, charges were brought against the assassins; and in March 2019, Kočner was charged with ordering the murder,' Vagovič said. 'I strongly believe that [those responsible] will be brought to justice and be sentenced with high penalties.'

In the meantime, the families of Kuciak and Kušnírová are struggling to cope with the loss. Jozef Kuciak, Ján's brother, told the OCCRP that he can barely recall the events of the past year, that it all feels like a bad dream. And one year after the tragedy, Zlata Kušnírová continues to visit the house in Veľká Mača. 'Even the last time, when I visited Veľká Mača, I took one of Martina's dirty socks from the laundry,' she told the OCCRP. 'I wanted to hold it tight, close to me, to have a piece of Martina with me for at least a little moment.' ●



Oliver Ivanović
16 January 2018
Mitrovica North, Kosovo

OLIVER IVANOVIĆ

‘HE WAS ADMITTED WITH FIVE BULLETS IN HIS CHEST’

FOR OLIVER IVANOVIĆ, 16 January 2018 was supposed to be an ordinary day in the office. But it turned out to be his last. As he was entering the offices of his political party in the Kosovan town of Mitrovica North, he was shot in a drive-by attack.

At just after 8 a.m., he was admitted to hospital with five bullets in his chest; after unsuccessful interventions, he was pronounced dead at 9.15 a.m.

As the doctors battled to save Ivanović’s life, and politicians prepared their statements, someone was working to destroy the traces of the crime. Police found a burned-out car three kilometres away from the crime scene, believed to have been the vehicle used by the assailants.

Many killings that have shaken post-war Kosovo have remained unresolved, but the murder of Ivanović seems to be the most difficult for the country’s fragile and fragmented justice system to fathom.

Mitrovica North and three other Serb majority municipalities in northern Kosovo have been a no-man’s-land since Serb forces fled Kosovo in June 1999 following a protracted air campaign by NATO in an attempt to end violations of human rights and stop ethnic cleansing by former Yugoslav strongman Slobodan Milošević’s forces against Albanians, who form the majority in the country.

Despite its independence in February 2008, Kosovo has never managed to exercise its full authority or control in the northern part of Serb-dominated Mitrovica (and other areas), and Serbia has used this vacuum to extend its institutional tentacles into the territory, even though it has no legal power over Kosovo. For 20 years, Kosovan authorities have failed to stabilize the north of the country, where Ivanović’s home town, Mitrovica, is located, creating conditions under which gangs could gain control and crime flourished.

In 1999, Ivanović, an unknown at the time, had put himself forward as a prominent political leader of the Serb community in Kosovo when his town was divided along ethnic lines, with Serbs located to the north and Albanians to the south of the Ibar River, which divides it.

‘HE BECAME THE DARLING OF THE DIPLOMATIC SERBIAN COMMUNITY’

In the first of Kosovo’s general elections, in 2001, Ivanović won a seat in parliament and served as head of a parliamentary group representing Serbs in Kosovo. He became the darling of the diplomatic Serbian community in Kosovo. He was a moderate and cooperated in their attempts to extinguish ethnic animosities between the two main Kosovo communities.

But he faced a political obstacle that was lurking in the background. Ivanović voiced his concerns over how control of his homeland had fallen into dubious hands. In the last interview he gave before his death, he pointed the finger at Milan Radoičić, a political and controversial business figure, as a ‘dark ruler’ in northern Kosovo.

Radoičić, a man with a troubled past and perceived as facilitator of criminal activities in northern Kosovo, is officially sought by the Kosovo police as the man behind Ivanović’s assassination. In June 2018, he became the vice president of Srpska Lista (Serbian List), a party of Serbs in Kosovo that is supported by the Serbian president, Aleksandar Vučić. In the interview, Ivanović said: ‘It worries me horribly that [Vučić] takes [Radoičić] as an example of a person who is fighting for the protection of Serbs in Kosovo.' He added that 'the centre of power is not within the municipality building – because the municipality building belongs to this other, informal centre of power’.

Oliver Invanović at the trial where he was accused of war crimes. He was exonerated just less than a year before his assassination.

A memorial plaque has been erected at the site where Ivanović was shot

In November 2018, the Kosovo police issued a warrant against Radoičić.

Ivanović and Radoičić have a long history of animosity, and Ivanović, it seems, wanted to challenge Radoičić’s hold over this contested territory. But when he stood for mayor of Mitrovica North in the 2017 local elections, Ivanović was carrying with him some serious baggage from his own past. He was awaiting the verdict of the court of appeal on accusations of having committed crimes against Albanians in the aftermath of the war in 1999 to 2000.

In 2014, a prosecutor of the European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo had filed an indictment against Ivanović for his alleged roles in the killing of Albanian civilians during and after the war. Two years later, he was found guilty and sentenced by a local court to nine years’ imprisonment but was released pending the verdict of the appeal. Ivanović had denied the charges. The case was closed after his murder.

In November 2018, Kosovo police special units undertook a wide operation in Mitrovica North to find Ivanović’s killers and arrested three suspects. But they missed the main target. Syle Hoxha, the special prosecutor who is dealing with the case, said that the person behind the murder is still unaccounted-for.

‘What is known from solid evidence is that Milan Radoičić, one of the most powerful people among Serbs in the north, and who exerts an influence in legal and illegal structures there, including the police, ordered Ivanović’s murder,’ Hoxha told the author.

Before he was murdered, prosecutors said that IIvanović had reported to the police that he had received ‘serious threats’.

‘This was a well-planned and well-organized murder, and we suspect that even his party members may have cooperated in the operation. Security cameras in his party’s HQ did not work on the day Ivanović was killed,’ Hoxha said.

He confirmed that Ivanović had been under constant threat because of his political activities in Mitrovica North ‘until he was forced to withdraw his candidacy’ for the mayoral position.

He added that investigators need a testimony from Oliver Ivanović’s widow, who now lives in Belgrade and obtained a position within the Serbian government immediately after her husband’s murder. ●

Victor Mabunda
10 January 2018
Johannesburg, South Africa

VICTOR MABUNDA

‘CRIMINALS ARE WORKING TO CRIPPLE SOUTH AFRICA’S JUSTICE SERVICE BY MURDERING OFFICERS OF THE COURT’

OF THE SIX Mabunda children who grew up in Zava, a village in South Africa’s Limpopo province, it was Victor, the second born, who was his father’s favourite. ‘Victor was book-smart; he made our dad proud,’ Chris Mabunda recalls of his older brother.

Although Victor was 10 years older than him, Chris remembers when, back in the late 1980s, Victor made the decision to leave Zava to pursue a law degree at the University of Zululand. It was a bittersweet occasion for their father, who beamed for a son who was set to be a lawyer but was saddened by the fact that the young man would now be a 10-hour drive away from home.

Victor Mabunda certainly did not disappoint his father. After getting his degree, he joined the South African Department of Justice and Constitutional Development in 2000, working first in Pretoria before being promoted to the position of magistrate in Cullinan, a small town some 50 kilometres from the capital. Mabunda worked for the department for 18 years and was admitted as an advocate in 2016.

But on a hot summer’s day in January 2018, devastating news reached the village of Zava. And it was Chris, who lives in Johannesburg, who had to break the news to his father, mother and extended family. His beloved older brother had been killed in the driveway of his home in Bronkhorstspruit. Mabunda’s car had not quite made it back to the lock-up garage at the back of the property when he was shot four times in broad daylight. It was the bullet that went through his chest that killed him. The assailants took nothing, and by the time a neighbour had rushed out to find out what was happening, they had fled. The car had drifted into a gutter downpipe; Mabunda was slumped in the driver’s seat. He had turned 50 three days earlier.

In the days after the shooting, what had at first seemed like a violent robbery or carjacking began to look like something different. Police detectives disclosed that they were investigating Mabunda's killing as a deliberate hit. He had been assassinated, they said.

Addressing the crowd gathered at Mabunda's memorial service, Advocate Matric Luphondo, the North Gauteng Chief Prosecutor, spoke frankly about how criminals are working to cripple South Africa's justice service by murdering officers of the court. 'Criminals are now transformed,' he said. 'They are intimidating all of us in the country, if not the world; they intimidate by silencing us and killing us magistrates.'

According to the *Sowetan* newspaper, police believe that Mabunda had found himself in the crosshairs of a criminal syndicate involving corrupt correctional services officials who smuggled drugs to prisoners at the Baviaanspoort Correctional Services, a medium-security prison on the outskirts of Pretoria.

Implicated in Mabunda's shooting were two of the prison's wardens, Thomo Ngoato and Paulos Fourie, as well as Thato Maringa, a former inmate at Baviaanspoort who was out on parole at the time of the shooting.

Mabunda had been presiding over a case brought against Ngoato for contravening the Drugs and Drug Trafficking Act. Ngoato had been charged following a search of his car in January 2017, which turned up nearly 200 grams of marijuana. He was subsequently suspended from duty. The date on which Mabunda was to rule on Ngoato's case had just been set.

Chris heard from his brother's colleagues that on the day of his murder, Mabunda had reportedly told colleagues that he had been approached and offered a bribe. And, later, Luphondo revealed that some of Mabunda's colleagues associated with the case had received death threats in the days after the shooting. Today, Chris still believes his brother became a target because he refused to take a bribe – the kind of corruption Mabunda couldn't tolerate.

'CHRIS STILL BELIEVES HIS BROTHER BECAME A TARGET BECAUSE HE REFUSED TO TAKE A BRIBE'

Police were able to connect all three men – Fourie, Maringa and Ngoato – to the crime. The trial had been expected to get under way at the North Gauteng High Court on 25 March 2019 but was postponed until 7 August. Police have also confirmed that they are looking for a fourth suspect in connection with the killing.

The trial delay has been agonizing for Chris and the Mabunda family. Waiting for the full details to emerge and for the fourth suspect to be arrested has brought further confusion and pain to the family, not least Mabunda's four children. And the uncertainty surrounding his death has left a sense of disquiet. 'I will always have doubt in my heart as to what exactly happened,' said Chris.

One of the family members most affected by the death of Victor was his father, with whom he had a relationship of mutual affection and respect: 'One month after Victor was killed, our father died. The old man couldn't take it,' said Chris. 'The thing is, Victor was in line to be the headman of the village one day because our eldest brother died over 20 years ago. It was expected that Victor would take over after my father.'

Chris said that the heartache of his brother's death has been felt by more than just his family, friends and colleagues – it has left a gaping hole in Zava. The grief, uncertainty and social rupture are profound. Chris admitted that sometimes he dreads speaking to his mother or going home to visit her because he doesn't always know what to say or do, especially as his brother had been responsible for so much of the family's affairs over the last few years.

Chris said that Victor's commitment to serve – his family, his village and his country – meant that he could be stubborn, but that this stubbornness was effectively channelled into keen leadership abilities. 'He came from a family that was about leadership, about making tough decisions and knowing how to handle people – that was how he was in court and in his everyday life.'

Victor Mabunda was known to be a no-nonsense magistrate who did not tolerate bribery and corruption. Chris remembers how, during his long chats with Victor – which he misses with all his heart – his brother expressed a commitment to battling corruption through legal channels. 'He wasn't a politician, but he understood what corruption was doing to the country. He also always wanted to rectify a situation through the law. That's why he was known to give harsh sentences.' ●

Victor Mabunda's home in Bronkhorstspruit, South Africa, where he was murdered

Daphne Caruana Galizia
16 October 2017
Bidnija, Malta

DAPHNE CARUANA GALIZIA

‘HER MOST SENSATIONAL CASE FORCED A SNAP ELECTION’

ON 16 OCTOBER 2017, Daphne Caruana Galizia was killed by a powerful car bomb minutes after leaving her home. Caruana Galizia was Malta’s best-known and most widely read journalist – and also its most divisive. Her investigations routinely set the national agenda. Her most sensational case – alleging links between the prime minister’s wife, a Panama shell company and suspicious transactions from the Azerbaijani regime – forced a snap election four months before her assassination.

To her critics, Caruana Galizia was a ‘hate blogger’ and a ‘poison-pen writer’ – the ‘witch of Bidnija’. The vitriol was, in part, the result of ferocious tribalism within Malta’s bipartisan political system. The journalist starkly opposed the Labour Party, which had swept into government in 2013. The other part had to do with her style, which juxtaposed investigative reporting with fiercely opinionated commentary, salacious titbits and intensely personal attacks on her political opponents. Once, her house was set on fire while her family was asleep inside, and Caruana Galizia faced constant threats. At the time of her death, she was the subject of 43 libel cases – many brought by government officials.

So, even as the country was reeling from the news of her murder, some openly welcomed it. In the aftermath of her death, Caruana Galizia’s opponents directed their anger at her family for linking the murder to a weakening in Malta’s rule of law. One theory even held that the family had orchestrated her killing – ostensibly, according to some, to destabilize the government.

‘We were given no time to grieve,’ said Matthew Caruana Galizia, the eldest of her three sons and part of the Pulitzer Prize-winning team of journalists behind the Panama Papers investigation. He is now also a leading figure in an intensified rule-of-law campaign. ‘There was one day, for literally 12 hours, when we just sat at home talking to each other. That was 17 October. And during that time, the government was going on the offensive against us and against my mother. That’s when we realized we couldn’t let things be, or there would definitely be no justice.’

Justice has become a watchword since then. Three men have been arrested and charged with executing the murder. They’re pleading innocent and have yet to face trial. Meanwhile, the suspected masterminds remain at large.

A Council of Europe report raises ‘serious concerns’ over the investigation and the rule of law in Malta. Caruana Galizia’s family and civil-society groups have called for an independent inquiry, but the government has resisted, insisting it would affect ongoing investigations. Vigils are held on the 16th of every month in the capital city, Valetta, but the authorities routinely remove the flowers and candles left at a makeshift memorial.

A vigil for Daphne Caruana Galizia, September 2018

Justice, so far, remains elusive. Matthew says two types of justice are needed: 'Justice for my mother's murder – and justice for her investigations. We can't have one without the other.'

Malta has witnessed a recent surge in gang-type violence, and Caruana Galizia's murder was one in a string of car bombings since 2016. Most of those attacks targeted organized-crime figures, and were associated with drug trafficking and the lucrative, large-scale smuggling of diesel from Libya to Malta and Italy. This trade emerged after the Libyan revolution of 2011.

Caruana Galizia had written about this underworld, sometimes naming traffickers and highlighting the links that made up their networks. However, it was never the main focus of her investigations, and her family dismisses suggestions that she had been working on such a probe before her murder.

Her interest was far broader. As she saw it, Malta had been captured by criminal interests and was morphing into a mafia state where organized crime was allowed to take root with impunity and the complicity of the highest level of government. Matthew explains: 'Whereas in Sicily organized crime is a phenomenon that exists in opposition to the state, in Malta it is part of the state itself. It is horizontally and vertically integrated across the state and business.'

The nexus between politics, business and crime had long been a significant focus for Caruana Galizia, but the release of the Panama Papers investigation in 2016 increased the stakes. Cabinet minister Konrad Mizzi, then responsible for energy, was named in the investigation – as was Keith Schembri, the prime minister's chief of staff. True to style, Caruana Galizia drip-fed the findings in provocative posts ahead of the full release.

The story she was investigating is complex and still unfolding. What is now known is that companies owned by Mizzi and Schembri in Panama planned to receive payments of $2 million from a company in Dubai. This company, 17 Black, is owned by the Maltese director of a new €450 million gas power station, which was a key pledge in the government's 2013 electoral campaign. 17 Black had received payments from the local agent for the liquefied natural gas (LNG) tanker fuelling the power station, as well as an Azerbaijani security guard. Socar, the Azerbaijani state-owned energy company, supplies the power station. All the parties involved deny any wrongdoing.

Meanwhile, a separate money-laundering inquiry is investigating payments which, according to Malta's financial intelligence unit, may have been kickbacks from the country's citizenship-by-investment, or 'golden passport' scheme.

'What we're really speaking about is an organized-criminal group. These are not people acting independently or randomly,' says Matthew. 'The government is an entity embedded within that group.'

In the months before her assassination, Caruana Galizia published a further, incendiary series of reports. She claimed that the prime minister's wife, Michelle Muscat, owned a Panama company and had received a €1 million payment from the daughter of Azerbaijan's president. Prime Minister Joseph Muscat called it the biggest lie in Malta's political history. To stave off a political crisis, he called an election and an inquiry, and pledged to resign if a shred of truth was found. The election returned him to power and the inquiry, concluded after Caruana Galizia's death, failed to find evidence to support the allegation.

Caruana Galizia's murder has deepened the polarization in Maltese society, and framed the political debate more sharply around the rule of law. This has given rise to new civil-society groups, with names such as Occupy Justice and Republikka (Republic). Through public pressure and court action, these groups seek justice for her murder, and scrutiny of Malta's institutional failings.

A Council of Europe report published in May 2019 concludes that 'Malta's rule of law was severely undermined by a weak system of checks and balances'. It highlights concerns over the murder investigation, noting that key players 'seem to enjoy impunity, under the personal protection of Prime Minister Muscat'. It describes the anti-corruption body as 'utterly ineffective' and notes that the police force is not perceived to be 'politically neutral in the service of the state'.

The remnants of Daphne Caruana Galizia's vehicle after the car bomb that killed her

'AS SHE SAW IT, MALTA HAD BEEN CAPTURED BY CRIMINAL INTERESTS'

It is not yet known who killed Caruana Galizia, and how the murder may be linked to her reporting. To her family and campaigners, there is no question that whether or not the government had any connection to the murder, it facilitated an environment that made the murder possible.

'In protecting people we know to be criminals, the prime minister created an atmosphere where serious organized crime is permissible,' Matthew says. 'Because he prevented any judicial action against these people, the only stone in their shoe was my mother.'

Since this piece was written, one of Malta's leading businessmen, Yorgen Fenech, 39, was arrested in dramatic fashion on 20 November 2019, intercepted by the country's Armed Forces at sea as he allegedly attempted to flee the country on board his private luxury yacht. Fenech, and an offshore company he owns, 17 Black, were key targets of Caruana Galizia's investigation. She alleged the company was connected to Maltese politicians at the highest level. In the wake of Fenech's arrest, the then Chief of Staff of the Maltese Prime Minister Keith Schembri was alleged to have intervened to pass on messages to Fenech coaching him on what to tell investigators. Fenech later himself alleged that Schembri had provided him with insider information during the investigation. The prime minister, Joseph Muscat, came under intense political pressure for his handling of the case in the wake of the arrest. Despite knowing of Schembri's intimate friendship with Fenech, Muscat allowed Schembri to be present during sensitive briefings by the police and the Malta Security Services even after Fenech became the suspected mastermind. Muscat stepped down as prime minister on 12 January 2019. At the time of publication, Schembri had not been charged with any crime, months after being arrested and questioned over his suspected obstruction of justice.

Yuniol Ramírez
13 October 2017
Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic

YUNIOL RAMÍREZ

LATE ON A BALMY CARIBBEAN afternoon, in the Manoguayabo neighbourhood of Santo Domingo Oeste, police retrieved the submerged corpse of attorney and professor Yuniol Ramírez. Earlier the same day, 13 October 2017, the outspoken anti-corruption advocate had been kidnapped outside his office, driven to an unknown location and shot once in the face. His corpse was thrown into a tributary of the Río Haina, chained to a pair of cement blocks.

A visible social activist and president of the Dominican Republic lawyers' association, Ramírez, 45, was killed for investigating corruption in the national bus company, the Oficina Metropolitana de Servicios de Autobuses, or OMSA. Before his murder, fares on OMSA buses had been increasing by over two and a half times the standard rate.

Three days after the killing, the police had issued 24 arrest warrants. Several OMSA leaders were then arrested and charged with extortion, embezzlement and conspiracy to commit murder.

The death of Ramírez reverberated across Santo Domingo and the entire country, sparking an outcry from lawyers, professors, and citizens. Overseas, the European Council of Bars and Law Societies, which represents more than a million European attorneys, wrote to Dominican Republic president, Danilo Medina, to demand 'a full and impartial investigation'. At a press conference a few days after Ramírez's death, prosecutor Olga Diná told reporters that OMSA assistant director Argenis Contreras and employee José Antonio Mercado had murdered Ramírez because the attorney had refused a RD$4 million (about US$76 000) bribe from OMSA director Manuel Antonio Rivas to end an inquiry into corruption practices in the transport company.

According to Diná, Rivas had told businessman Eddy Rafael Santana to pay Ramírez RD$1 million in exchange for not revealing evidence of corruption at OMSA. The payment would have been an advance on the full bribe intended to be paid to Ramírez.

On 17 October, authorities placed Rivas, OMSA financial director Faustino Rosario (who was also a senior officer in the country's national police service) and Santana in pre-trial detention. Days later, Mercado, who, together with Contreras, had kidnapped Ramírez, was also arrested.

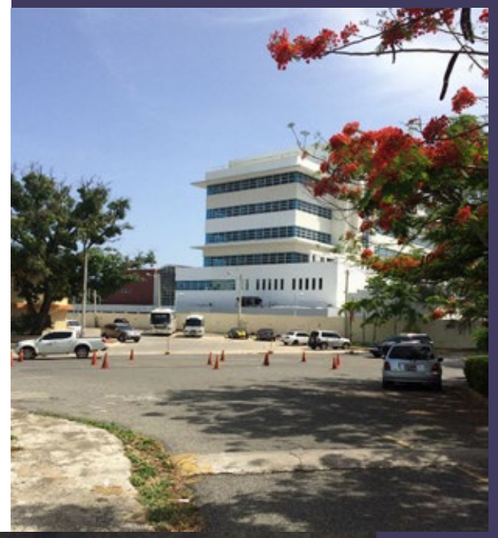
Many of Santo Domingo's residents have their own Yuniol Ramírez stories. Three blocks from the city's colonial zone, Raul, 27, described the attorney's 5 a.m. jogs near the Playa Montesinos waterfront, which served an investigative rather than athletic purpose: 'In the early mornings, child molesters used to go down to the beach,' Raul said. 'They would prey on the kids without families there or look for homeless children sleeping.' According to Raul, Ramírez was doing surveillance while jogging – efforts that would later result in the arrest and conviction of several paedophiles.

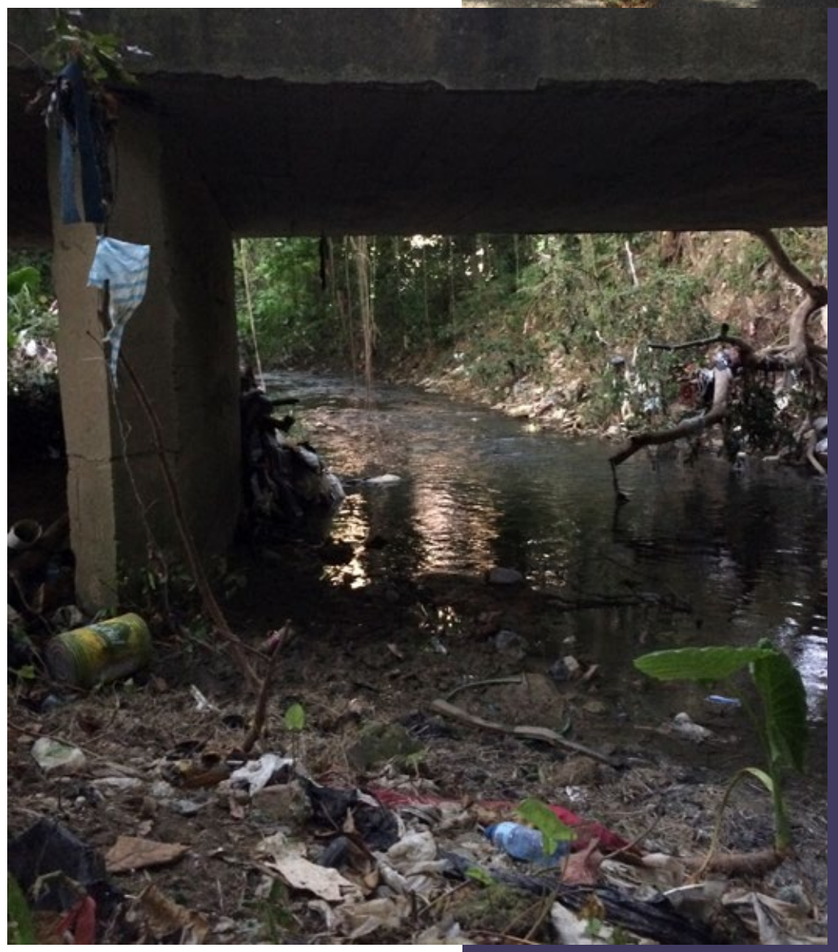
Although many Dominicans emigrated to the United States, the country has become a migrant destination of its own. Since 2016, more than 30 000 Venezuelans have fled to the Dominican Republic following their country's economic collapse. Before his death, Ramírez was part of a movement to protect the legal status of Venezuelan migrants by ensuring they could register for and receive residential documents upon arrival.

Ranzo Saavadra, 23, never met Ramírez but was just as affected by his reputation and life as those who had. Born in Acarigua, Venezuela, Ranzo moved to the Dominican Republic in 2016 as part of a recent wave of Venezuelan emigration. Although he once hoped to study criminal justice, Ranzo works at a Santo Domingo hotel. Each month, he coordinates with his brother, who migrated to Colombia, to send money back to their mother in Venezuela.

When asked about Ramírez, Ranzo's face lit up with recognition and respect for a man whose legend was robust in life but has only grown in death. For Ranzo, the myth of Ramírez was not for his titles – influential lawyer; college professor; community leader – but because of what his sacrifices said about who he cared for. 'Rich people don't take the bus,' Ranzo said, highlighting the reverence he felt for an influential man who died confronting a public transportation racket that preyed upon the poor.

That reverence was also apparent in a law student who was with Ramírez the day he died. 'We were meeting in his office when he received a call. He walked down to the parking lot. Several people I did not know were there,' said the student, who prefers to remain anonymous because investigators have interviewed her multiple times and she fears her safety would be threatened if her identity were to be made public. The student was aware of OMSA's attempts to bribe Ramírez, and assumed the conversation was related to the issue. 'They spoke to him and then he got into a blue van.' No shots were heard and, according to the student, Ramírez did not struggle.





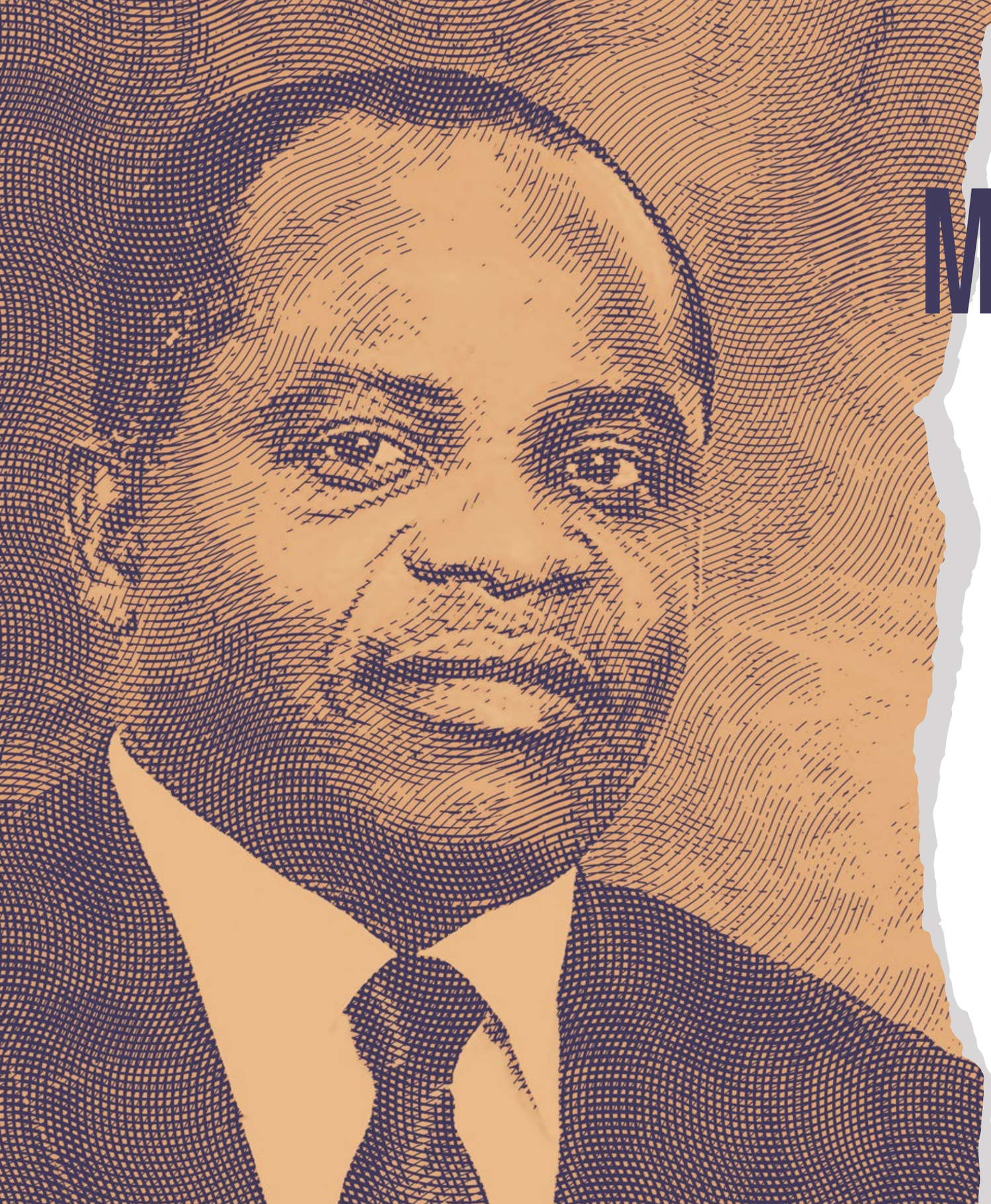
The river where Ramírez's corpse was found
Above, the parking lot where he had been kidnapped

'RAMÍREZ HAD SOUGHT TO BREAK A CORRUPT SYSTEM'

In April 2018, six months after the murder, Contreras, who, prosecutors say, planned the assassination and shot Ramírez in the vehicle, was arrested in New Jersey by United States authorities, where he was in hiding with associates from the Dominican community. The same day, the assassin's wife, Heidi Peña, was arrested in Santo Domingo as a co-conspirator. Contreras, whose asylum petition filed with American authorities was rejected in October 2018, has appealed the ruling, and remains incarcerated in the United States. If his appeal fails, Contreras will be extradited to the Dominican Republic and charged with murder.

'The omission of truth legitimizes the lie,' Yuniol Ramírez had proclaimed in his single-sentence Twitter biography. At the Autonomous University of Santo Domingo, where Ramírez was a professor, his likeness remains a fixture at informational booths for FAPROUASD, the university's association of professors, with whom he lobbied for increased teacher pay. The FAPROUASD community, which declared three days of mourning after the murder, upholds Ramírez as a martyr for the university and the association's ideals. In June 2018, to honour Ramírez's memory – and possibly to thwart any lingering questions about his own associations with the bus corruption – President Medina awarded the union's teachers a five per cent pay increase.

Ramírez died because he had led an investigation that threatened the underpinnings of a criminal network that used political power to exploit millions of the Dominican Republic's citizens and residents each day. After the arrest of the OMSA directors, bus fares returned to the ordinary price. Although Ramírez had sought to break a corrupt system through the rule of law, it took his murder for him to succeed in doing so. The OMSA conspirators responsible for the extortion scheme are jailed indefinitely. And, for the foreseeable future, the country's bus fares are likely to remain unchanged. ●



Mahamudo Amurane
4 October 2017
Nampula, Mozambique

MAHAMUDO AMURANE

MAHAMUDO AMURANE WAS ELECTED as mayor of Nampula Municipal Council in 2013, standing for one of several opposition parties, the Democratic Movement of Mozambique (MDM). Nampula is the largest urban centre in the north of Mozambique, with just over a million inhabitants.

Amurane was murdered in the evening of 4 October 2017 at his home in Namutequeliua, a suburb a few kilometres from the city centre. He died from gunshot wounds inflicted by assailants who remain unidentified.

Born in 1973, Amurane was a graduate of the Catholic University of Minas Gerais in Brazil. During his career, he had worked as an independent consultant in public-sector management. He also taught in universities in Mozambique.

A few months before his death, after an apparent dispute with senior party members, he had announced his intention to step down from the MDM and that he would stand for a second term in the municipal elections the following year, but as the head of a new political formation. Amurane had had a 'public row' with the MDM president, Daviz Simango – a dispute that led to suspicions that the MDM was involved in the murder. However, at the time of writing there was no firm evidence that this was the case.

During the period that he led the municipal council, Amurane was well known for his intolerance of corruption. When he took over as mayor, the municipality was heavily in debt to suppliers of services and goods, and conflict over land was simmering. As a member of one of Mozambique's main opposition parties, Amurane was forced to take hard measures to gain taxpayers' and residents' trust, so his administration set up a high-level management system, a consequence of which was that certain municipal officials were tried and convicted for their involvement in municipal corruption.

Furthermore, Amurane refused to divert resources from the city council to the MDM, for which it is probable that he faced threats and intimidation. Amurane found himself being hounded by reputed mafia bosses, who were no longer able to influence, and thereby gain from, public tenders in the municipal council. It is also public knowledge that, before his death, he had received threats from members of the MDM in the Nampula Municipal Assembly.

Amurane greeting colleagues as mayor

Entrepreneurs who had established a clientelist network in the council began to target Mayor Amurane, allegedly paying journalists to write reports to tarnish his image.

Amurane had a vision for a better city. He planned for improved infrastructure and services, and was credited for making the city of Nampula the cleanest in the country through a system for the treatment of solid waste. He developed new municipal infrastructure projects, including the construction and repair of roads, bridges and flyovers, and sustainable water programmes. He planned the construction of a circular road connecting the city centre with the suburbs. Another project that the mayor had for Nampula was the introduction of a municipal public-transport system.

He also introduced a participative budget, a planning tool that directly involves citizens in setting priorities for their residential areas. Moreover, Amurane empowered disadvantaged women by supporting them in creating entities that provided services to the municipality.

Faizal Ibramugy, head of the office of the Nampula mayor, told the author that Amurane was a person who defended integrity and honesty in everything that the council did, and he knew, he said, that Amurane had provoked certain well-connected elites within the public administration. Ibramugy confirmed that many entrepreneurs had tried to influence Amurane with money in a bid to approve projects linked to lucrative land access in the city.

‘AMURANE SENSED SOMETHING WAS GOING TO HAPPEN’

Days before he was murdered, Amurane had told his family that he sensed something was going to happen.

A year after Amurane’s murder, Mozambique’s National Criminal Investigation Service (SERNIC) said in a Maputo press conference that members of the MDM, including unnamed senior figures, were allegedly involved in the assassination, pointing to, but not confirming with hard evidence, a hand of the regime in the matter. The head of SERNIC’s public-relations department, Leonardo Simbine, said their investigations had led to the identification of 10 suspects, whom he did not name.

‘We found information that indicates the involvement of party members, including MDM senior party officials, among the accused,’ Simbine said. ‘Although this is preliminary, in that the investigations are not yet finished, and despite the presumption of innocence, we would like to share with you that we have ascertained [details] that indicate the involvement of members, including senior figures, of the MDM, and there are now 10 suspects,’ he said.

The case was referred to the provincial attorney of Nampula in October 2018, days before the municipal elections that Amurane would have contested.

Amurane left behind two children.

Amurane accepting a civic award for community service

NYC ShutItDown People’s Monday march for Berta Cáceres

Wayne Lotter
16 August 2017
Dar es Salaam, Tanzania

WAYNE LOTTER

THOUSANDS OF ELEPHANTS are killed in Africa each year by poachers. The thin red line between these animals and extinction is the scores of brave men and women who risk their lives to protect them.

Whether it involves monitoring national parks or exposing and combating wrongdoing, working in the area of wildlife conservation is risky for all involved. Testament to this is the murder of 51-year-old conservationist Wayne Lotter in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, in 2017. He was shot by gunmen while travelling in a taxi to the airport.

In February 2018, eight were charged with murder or conspiracy to murder, and although the case is still before the courts in Tanzania, Lotter's comrades in the field of wildlife protection believe he was assassinated because of his anti-poaching activism.

Lotter was a co-founder of the PAMS Foundation, a not-for-profit conservation organization established in 2009. PAMS operates on all levels to empower people to protect wildlife in Tanzania, from working with and investing in community members to educating and training rangers, and working with local authorities.

Over the past decade, PAMS has helped to protect some 42 000 elephants and 7 000 giraffes; confiscated 1 153 firearms; and educated 4 200 children on environmental issues, according to its website.

In its early days, PAMS relied on donated equipment to support village game scouts undertaking foot patrols to detect illegal activity.

Lotter was especially passionate about community involvement in wildlife protection.

His friends and associates said he was well loved by those he worked with, and adored for his passion, sense of justice and quirky humour. He was also serious and determined, and would always stand up for what he believed in. A dedication to Lotter on the PAMS website describes him as 'a conservation warrior, a strategist, a trailblazer with resolute determination and courage'.

News of Lotter's conservation efforts had reached none other than famed primatologist Jane Goodall, who lauded his 'courageous fight against poaching of wildlife'. In a posthumous tribute to him, Goodall described Lotter as 'a hero of mine, a hero to many, someone who devoted his life to protecting Africa's wildlife.'

His work, Goodall added, had made a huge difference in the fight to save Tanzania's elephants from the illegal ivory trade. And his dedication to his work, even in the face of plenty of opposition, inspired many.

'LOTTER'S COMRADES BELIEVE HE WAS ASSASSINATED BECAUSE OF HIS ANTI-POACHING ACTIVISM'

Echoing Goodall's sentiments, Sean Willmore, president of the International Ranger Federation and managing director of the Thin Green Line Foundation, both of which Lotter was highly involved in, called Lotter 'a true champion of this planet'. In a statement issued soon after Lotter's death, Willmore wrote:

'His devotion to the cause, in the face of huge obstacles and dangers, has enabled the education and training of hundreds of village game scouts, which has provided them a livelihood and most likely saved many of their lives. Countless elephants and animals also still roam this earth because of him.'

According to a statement issued by the Elephant Crisis Fund in August 2017, Lotter's work had helped to achieve 'real success' against organized-crime networks, with PAMS having aided the 'first significant win' against the wave of poaching that had slashed Tanzania's elephant population by 60% between 2007 and 2016. However, with each such success came an increase in the danger to Lotter's life. Many of those who work in the conservation sector have linked his murder to organized-crime networks operating in Africa, driven by the demand for ivory in Asia.

As Prince William, who has himself campaigned to end the illegal wildlife trade, said at the time, Lotter's 'violent and apparently targeted murder shows just how dangerous the situation has become in relation to the big money that is associated with the illegal ivory and rhino horn trades'. He credited Lotter and the rangers and conservationists like him across the globe for their selfless dedication to stopping those who wish to destroy Africa's natural resources.

Surveying for signs of poaching

Those in the field have frequently spoken about the threats faced by anti-poaching workers from those who have a vested interest in the trade.

In a 2016 article in *The New York Times* about anti-poaching efforts in Tanzania, Lotter highlighted some of the dangers of the work, referring in particular to the murder of British helicopter pilot Roger Gower early that year. Gower had been killed by poachers while flying over a wildlife reserve near the Serengeti National Park in Tanzania looking for signs of poaching. As Lotter reflected: 'The more you go after them, the more situations where confrontation between poachers and rangers will take place. There are going to be risks.'

A report released in 2013 found that the growth of the illegal trade in ivory had placed African elephants under severe threat. The report, produced by the UN Environment Programme, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, the International Union for Conservation of Nature, and wildlife trade monitoring network TRAFFIC, concluded that the systematic monitoring of large-scale seizures of ivory destined for Asia indicated the involvement of criminal networks, which were increasingly active and entrenched in the trafficking of ivory between Africa and Asia.

Wayne Lotter's foundation worked with local communities in Tanzania

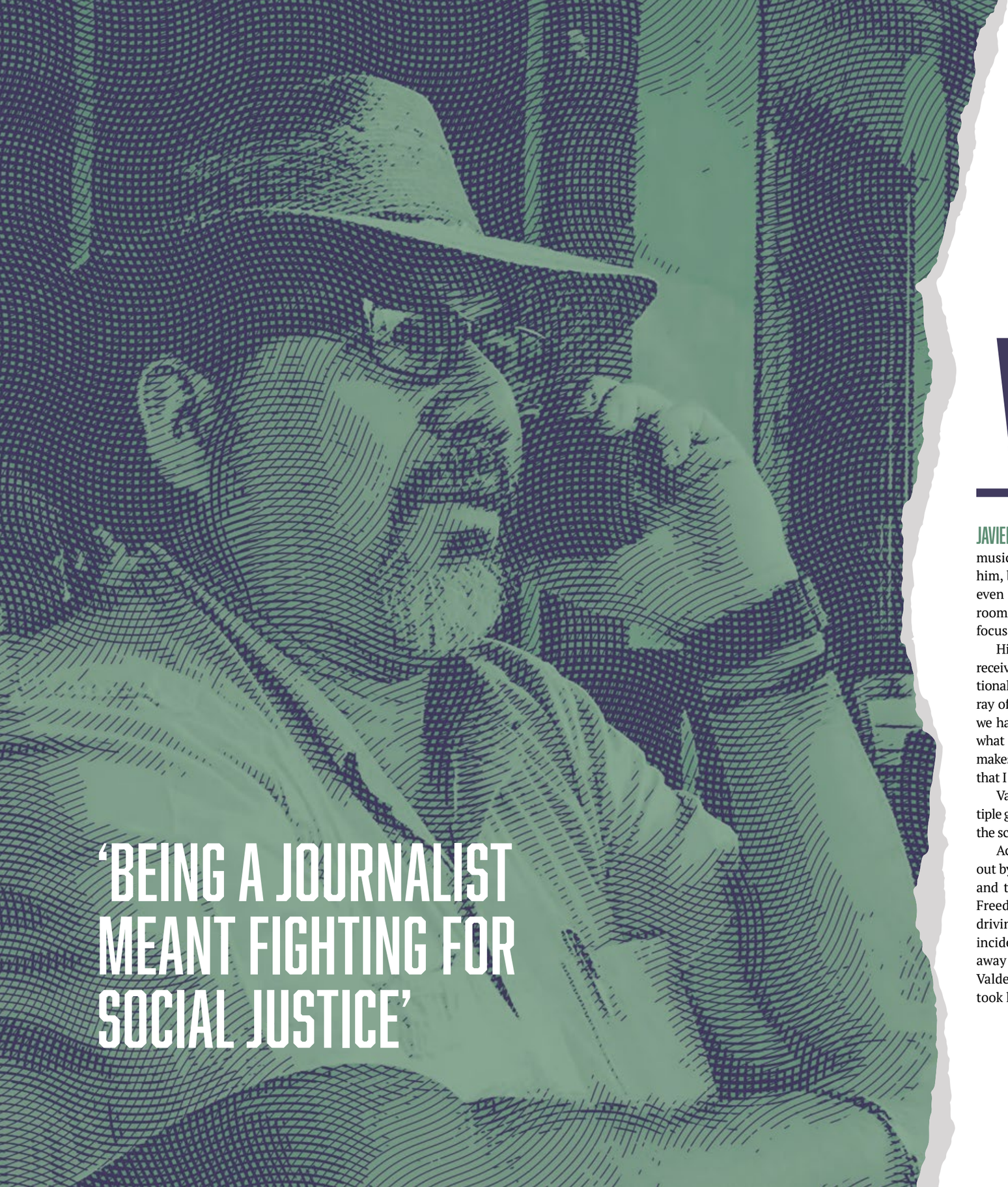
The report called for improved law enforcement across the entire illegal ivory supply chain, as well as strengthened national legislative frameworks, and emphasized the need to fight collusive corruption, identify syndicates and reduce demand. Said TRAFFIC's ivory-trade expert, Tom Milliken, 'Organized criminal networks are cashing in on the elephant poaching crisis, trafficking ivory in unprecedented volumes and operating with relative impunity and with little fear of prosecution.'

In 2016, *The Guardian* uncovered the ringleaders of one major wildlife-crime network, linking key traffickers to corrupt officials at the highest levels in Asia. While a poacher in Africa could sell ivory for up to US$150 a kilogram, in China it sells for much higher – sometimes as much as US$2 025 a kilogram. As *The Guardian* report states, this is a 'profit-hungry global crime conducted by some of the same ruthless and violent groups that traffic drugs and guns'.

In recent years, however, Tanzania has seen some hopeful progress. In early 2019, notorious Chinese businesswoman Yang Fenglan – nicknamed the Ivory Queen – was sentenced to 15 years in prison after being convicted of smuggling about 800 pieces of ivory from Tanzania to the Far East between 2000 and 2014. She is also accused of operating one of Africa's biggest ivory-smuggling rings, responsible for the smuggling of US$2.5 million worth of tusks from some 400 elephants.

Experts in the field have said that this sentence should be a good deterrent against this devastating form of transnational crime. In an article in *The Telegraph*, Milliken referred to Yang's conviction as 'hugely significant'.

'As her jail sentence pulses through the Chinese community,' he said, 'the prospect of spending that long in an African jail is certainly going to be a deterrent for certain individuals.' ●



Javier Valdez Cárdenas
15 May 2017
Culiacán, Mexico

JAVIER VALDEZ

JAVIER VALDEZ WAS A SOCIOLOGIST and writer who loved music, literature, politics, social struggle and poetry. For him, being a journalist meant fighting for social justice, even if it was a solitary struggle. He led a small newsroom that published a weekly newspaper, *Ríodoce*, which focused on drug-trafficking news and analysis.

His values shone through in the speech he gave on receiving the Committee to Protect Journalists' international press freedom award in 2011: 'This award is like a ray of light from the other side of the storm … At *Ríodoce* we have experienced a macabre solitude because none of what we publish has an echo or is followed up, and that makes us feel more vulnerable … This award makes me feel that I have a safe haven, a place where I can feel less lonely.'

Valdez was murdered on 15 May 2017. He died from multiple gunshot wounds. His body lay on the hot asphalt, under the scorching sun, his hat beside him. He was 50 years old.

According to the crime scene reconstruction carried out by forensic experts from the attorney general's office and the Special Prosecutor's Office for Crimes against Freedom of Expression (FEADLE in Spanish), Valdez was driving his car when his killers cut in front of him. The incident happened in the city centre a short distance away from the *Ríodoce* office. Two of the killers ordered Valdez out of his car and shot him. One of them then took his car; the other two fled in their own vehicle.

A few months before his murder, the city of Culiacán faced a grim scenario. The Sinaloa Cartel, one of the most powerful transnational drug networks in the world, was being ripped apart by an internal power struggle. Culiacán, capital of the state of Sinaloa, in north-west Mexico, was the cartel's centre of operations, and the city where its turf wars took place. The conflict was between two factions of the cartel – one led by Iván Archivaldo and Alfredo Guzmán Salazar, both sons of notorious drug lord Joaquín Guzmán Loera, known by his street name, El Chapo, who, some two years later, in February 2019, was found guilty in a US court of operating a violent transnational drug network and sentenced to life imprisonment. The other cartel faction was led by Dámaso López Núñez, a former police officer, and his son Dámaso López Serrano.

Javier Valdez and *Ríodoce*'s newsroom decided to cover the conflict. 'We thought we were immune to the violence,' said *Ríodoce*'s director, Ismael Bojórquez. Somehow, they had always managed to report on drug-related conflict without losing lives. After Valdez's death, Bojórquez took part in public forums and demonstrations. He said he felt it was necessary to speak out to demand justice in a country where 99.6 per cent of attacks on journalists go unpunished.

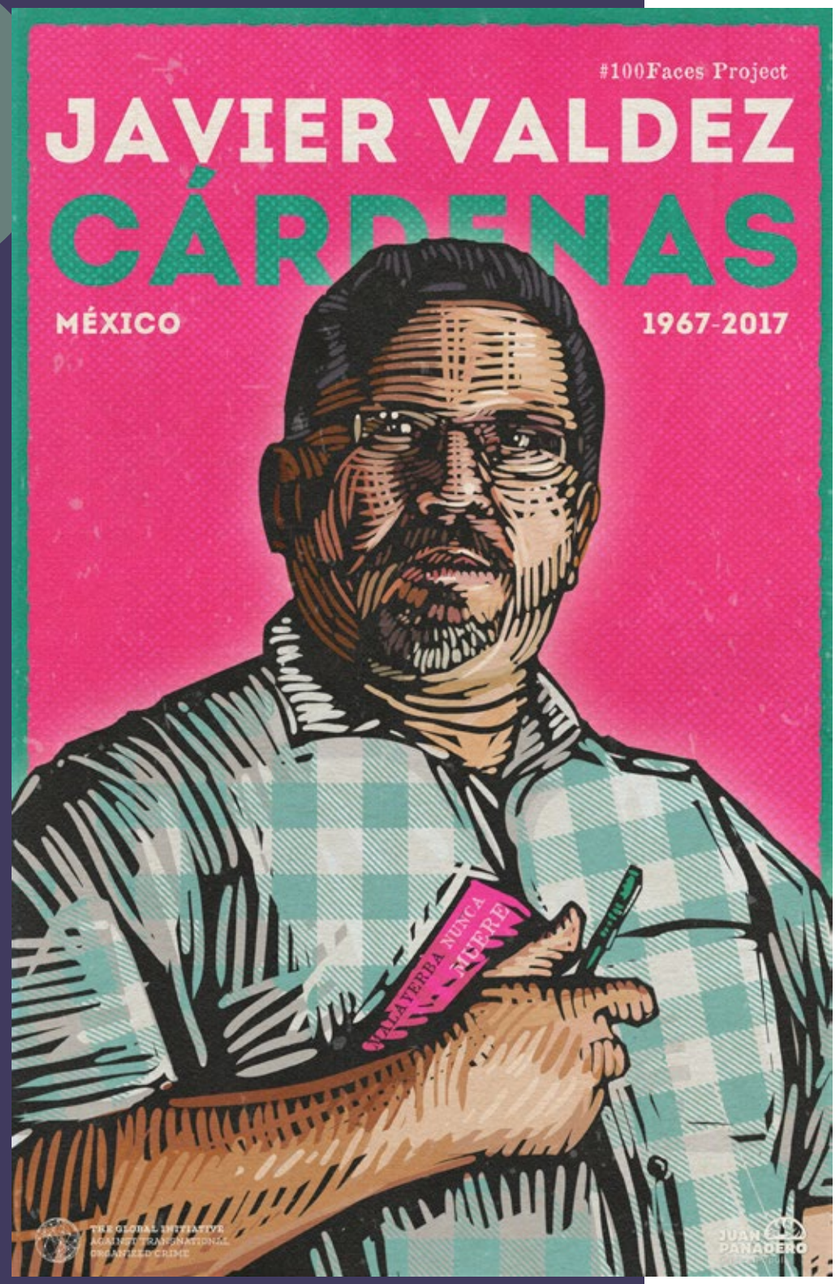
'BEING A JOURNALIST MEANT FIGHTING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE'

‘IN CULIACÁN, LIVING IS DANGEROUS’

Valdez’s death elicited an unprecedented reaction from the journalistic community and others. There wasn’t a single media outlet that didn’t talk about his case or uphold it as an example of Mexico’s law-enforcement and security crisis. Before his death, and more so afterwards, Valdez was well known. He had helped journalists and academics better understand the origins of drug trafficking, reporting from Sinaloa, the province dubbed the birthplace of Mexican drug cartels. He was known for his sensitive journalistic reporting and his books, for giving the victims of violence a voice, for his resilience and for his tenacity as a journalist in the midst of a drugs war.

Once asked what it was like to cover security issues in Sinaloa, he said that he reported ‘with his hands on his ass’, meaning he clearly feared for his life. ‘In Culiacán, living is dangerous,’ he said, ‘and working as a journalist means treading an invisible line drawn by the bad guys from both the drug cartels and the government – a sharp floor covered with explosives.’

The investigation indicates that Valdez was murdered because of his work as a journalist, and points the finger of blame at the cell led by Dámaso López Núñez. Before he was extradited, Dámaso admitted that the cell that killed Valdez worked for him but claimed he was in prison at the time and that he had not ordered the murder.



After the assassination, a group of local artists used walls in central Culiacán to honour the journalist

Illustration by El Dante

Bojórquez explained how Valdez had written a series of articles before he was murdered: ‘Javier interviewed Dámaso in February, and that caused friction with rival groups and a tense atmosphere in the newsroom.’ *La Jornada* journalist Miroslava Breach was killed in March, and it appears, said Bojórquez, that ‘someone within Dámaso’s organization ordered Javier’s murder as a result of the information published by *Ríodoce*, and possibly *La Jornada*, too’.

On 1 May 2017, *Ríodoce* had published a story based on articles written by Javier Valdez, which could have angered Dámaso senior and junior, according to Bojórquez. In one piece, published about a year earlier, Valdez made acid remarks about Dámaso Junior’s behaviour: ‘Dámaso López Serrano has been described as a smooth talker but a poor businessman. He only enjoys the spoils of the business run by his father, or the business his father used to run. [He] is a drug trafficker who pays musicians to compose *corridos* [ballads] for him and who struts around with his firearms during weekends …’

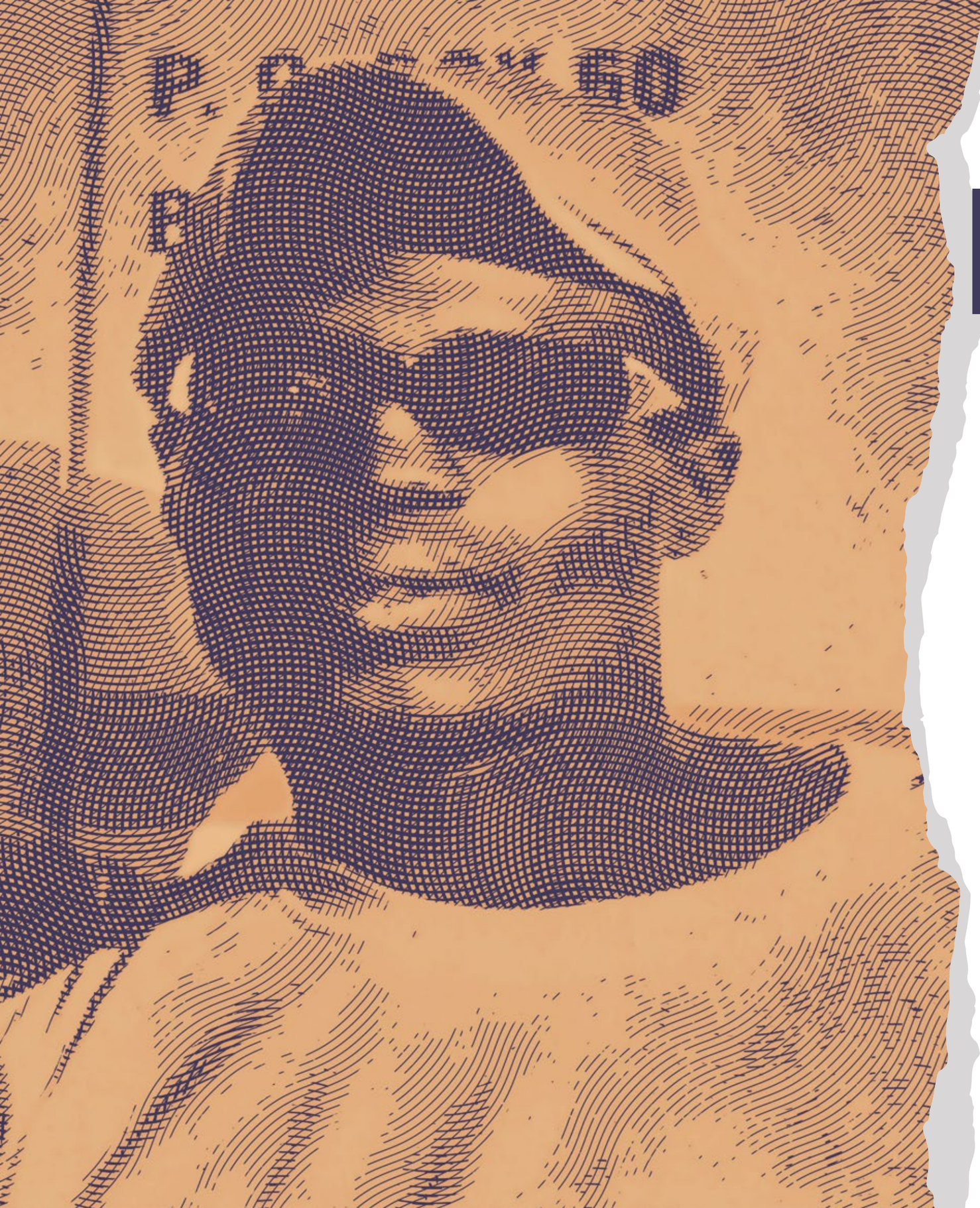
After the murder, the authorities identified three killers: Heriberto Barraza Picos, known as El Koala, Juan Francisco Picos Barrueto (street name El Quillo) and Luis Idelfonso Sánchez Romero (El Diablo). The first two were arrested; the third was killed in September 2017.

‘The problem is not the focus of the investigation. The question is whether the FEADLE will be able to prove to a judge, beyond reasonable doubt, that El Koala and El Quillo ordered Javier’s murder,’ said Bojórquez. ‘I’m sure they did it, but the judge needs to be sure too.’

On 26 July 2017, Dámaso López Serrano turned himself in to the police at the Calexico border crossing in California, where a warrant for his arrest had been issued. The authorities have yet to release official information about the individuals behind Valdez’s murder. The case is still under investigation.

Valdez’s widow, Griselda Triana, whose relationship with her late husband went back to the days before he became a best-selling author, and before he founded *Ríodoce*, said, ‘We lose precious people who use their words to lay bare the truth about a rotten society – with useless institutions that treat the victims with contempt … he was snatched away from us,’ she said.

Triana believes that the arrested men carried out the hit on Valdez, but fears those who ordered the assassination are still at large. ●



Edmore Ndou
22 April 2017
Beitbridge District, Zimbabwe

EDMORE NDOU

IN THE VAST SAVANNA bushlands spanning Zimbabwe and South Africa's border region, Edmore Ndou, 28, was shot one afternoon in April 2017 after pursuing two men who were supposed to be working as his colleagues. He was killed as he tried to stop the poachers from laying snares to trap wild animals on Nengasha Safaris' hunting concession in Zimbabwe's southern borderlands.

A local wildlife ranger, Ndou had trained at the Mushandike College of Wildlife Management. In 2013, he joined Nottingham Estate, a private fruit and ecotourism estate, as a ranger and worked for the company's subsidiary, Nengasha Safaris.

On the day Ndou was killed, the poacher patrol unit had been tracking a pair of poachers for more than 12 hours. Ndou and two other rangers had discovered that two guards, Petros Sifelani, 35, and Bino Ndou, 42 – employed as seasonal workers to protect the solar pumps of a dam – were in fact laying snares to trap impalas for sale as bushmeat.

A pack of seven rangers had set out to find the pair but, as the hours wore on and day turned to night, three scouts were left. Armed with batons and a shotgun, Ndou and his two remaining partners were ambushed by the poachers. Sifelani and Bino Ndou were waiting at the top of the hill for the rangers, then charged down towards the trio as soon as they were spotted. The game scouts ordered the pair to surrender, but an argument ensued and Ndou was shot in the thigh by Bino Ndou's Remington shotgun, and fell to the ground. The poachers fled the scene as Ndou lay bleeding profusely.

His colleagues immediately sent an SOS to Ishmael Tshabalala, the head of security at Nottingham Estate. 'I received a text message saying someone had been shot. I didn't even think to ask who. I just drove straight to the station,' he recalled. Although he followed company safety procedures, looking back, Tshabalala said he wished he could have done more. 'I regret not going there sooner. Maybe I could've been able to save Eddie's life. By the time [I arrived] it was too late – he'd lost too much blood – he'd lost too much blood. We tried to rush him to our [Nottingham Estate] clinic. That's where he died, 20 minutes later,' said Tshabalala.

Tshabalala said he was aware that the two guards were involved in poaching.

John Ndlovu stands by the solar pump that Edmore Ndou's killer was hired to guard

Seasonal workers regularly move across the border between South Africa and Zimbabwe, resulting in the frequent passage of poached wildlife and smuggled goods. Locally, poachers sell game meat to restaurants in Beitbridge, but their networks also extend to South Africa.

According to Phil Palmer, owner of Nengasha Safaris, Ndou is one of dozens of rangers shot every year by poachers belonging to Zimbabwe's poaching networks in the country's south; meanwhile, in northern Zimbabwe, poaching operations have transnational networks that reach as far as China. Palmer said that in recent months Beitbridge's poachers had become more sophisticated in their approach to stealing wild game and firewood. 'These are well-organized poachers. It's a strong concern that they move around with large packs of dogs and getaway vehicles. In one night, we can lose up to 10 impala or a kudu bull, which is worth quite a lot of money,' he said. Since 2018, Nengasha's rangers have retrieved more than 500 snares.

As a local whose family had lived on the land for generations, Bino Ndou felt he was entitled to hunt game and sell it as a livelihood. 'It's my right,' he reportedly said to Tshabalala a few days after Ndou's murder. According to Tshabalala, people in the surrounding villages, such as Makhakhule, or Nzambe, where Bino came from, claim they have a perpetual right to the wildlife that thrives on their traditional land. As Palmer points out, Nottingham Estates' hunting concession entitles the local communities to only a portion of the profits made by wildlife activities, such as hunting paid for by tourists, or to buy hunted carcasses at a subsidized rate.

John Ndlovu holds a wire snare of the sort often found on the land, used to trap small game, such as impala

Elsewhere in Zimbabwe, under the Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources, known as Campfire, local communities receive full or partial benefits from hunting licences that are sold to trophy and sport hunters.

According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature, one of the biggest threats to wildlife in east and southern Africa is the bushmeat trade. The rampant nature of poaching has a severe impact on tourism revenue, and researchers estimate that, in Zimbabwe, the financial impact of illegal hunting is at least US$1.1 million annually.

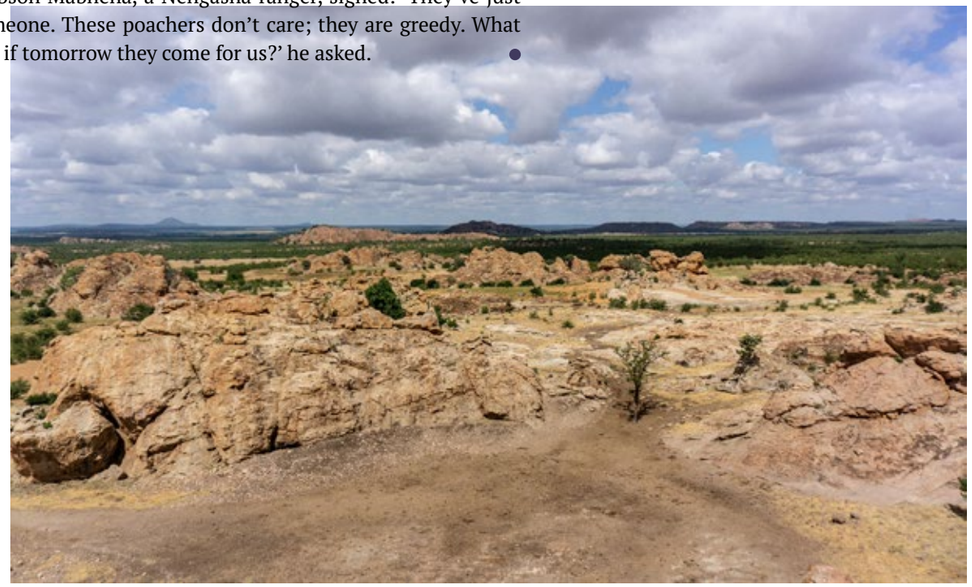
Poaching thrives in Zimbabwe's communal areas because of weak penal systems, enabling the illicit practice to continue, with some of the produce being taken across the border to South Africa. According to Palmer, bushmeat is also sold to artisanal miners in West Nicholson, a rural town some 150 kilometres north of Beitbridge, who smuggle gold to South Africa.

Poverty, unemployment and poor border controls are some of the underlying reasons that young men are lured into joining poaching rings, some of which have affiliates among the politically connected in Beitbridge or wealthy kingpins south of the Limpopo River. In the past, criminal networks, such as the notorious Musina Mafia, a gang of rich South Africans, have supplied Zimbabwean poachers with rifles to kill rhino for their horns and zebra for their skins.

Bino Ndou admitted he had committed the crime, but did not say who he was working for. He was sentenced to 15 years in jail; Sifelani, his accomplice, was given a fine.

Two years after Ndou's death, his workmates are still bitter about the incident. They are also afraid that the poaching gangs may one day come after them. Upon discovering a fresh set of footprints, just a few hours old, near the place where Ndou had been shot, Rabson Mabhena, a Nengasha ranger, sighed: 'They've just shot someone. These poachers don't care; they are greedy. What happens if tomorrow they come for us?' he asked.

'THESE POACHERS DON'T CARE; THEY ARE GREEDY'



The unremitting landscape of Nottingham Estate. In the distance lies South Africa, where local syndicates smuggle illegal goods for sale or on behalf of wealthy merchants

Artan Cuku
8 April 2017
Tirana, Albania

ARTAN CUKU

ON THE EVENING OF 8 APRIL 2017, Albanian police were alerted to an incident in Albania's capital, Tirana. There had been a murder. The victim, it turned out, was the ex-Albanian police chief, Commissar Artan Cuku. He was found dead by his wife, Marjola, just after 8 p.m. at the entrance to their apartment block.

'I had just arrived home with the two kids when I heard some voices, then two shots were fired,' she said. 'I tried to phone Artan to tell him something was going on, but he did not answer. I then went straight to the entrance, where I saw him stretched out on the ground. When I tried to lift his head, I saw that there was no sign of life. I do not know how long I stayed there weeping.'

Commissar Cuku was a prominent public figure in the fight against organized crime in Albania. During his 20-year career in the police service, he had arrested about 1000 people connected to known criminal groups. Tonin Vocj, Director of the Criminal Police Department at the General Directorate of State Police, told the author: 'Artan Cuku showed tremendous determination to fight criminality in general and organized crime in particular. He directly investigated more than 45 criminal organizations. He was the protagonist behind investigations into many serious criminal incidents across the country. In Vlora alone, where Cuku had served as director of police, 21 organized-crime groups were bust and brought to justice, and 47 police operations were successfully completed.'

'HE HAD ARRESTED ABOUT 1 000 PEOPLE CONNECTED TO KNOWN CRIMINAL GROUPS'

Enrik Mehmeti, a television journalist based in Vlora who reported on many of the Cuku's criminal investigations, said: 'During his operations, Artan Cuku was emotionally and physically charged, leading by example and encouraging other police officers in the fight against the known criminal underworld, for whom the fear of being apprehended by law-enforcement agents was great. The faith he created and courage he showed turned him into a hero of the city of Vlora. He enjoyed good relations with everyone but was aggressive when it came to dealing with criminals.'

The prosecution services and the police, under pressure from the media and the general public, acted quickly. Their investigations found that the shooter was one Mikel Shalari, a 24-year-old resident of Tirana with a criminal past. Two months after the incident, police arrested Shalari, who confessed to prosecutors of how he had been offered a fee of €25 000 by Bledar Jambelli for the killing, €3 000 of which had been paid up front, with the balance to follow after the job had been completed.

Mikel Shalari, Artan Cuku's hired assassin

Jambelli – aka Rikardo Muho – from Fier, Albania, was a prominent criminal who was well known to the Albanian police because of his involvement in illicit activities in Spain and other European countries. According to the police, Jambelli masterminded Cuku's murder, and, following Shalari's testimony, he was arrested by INTERPOL in Greece on 31 December 2018, and charged for Cuku's assassination. The court found him guilty and he was imprisoned.

'I'M NOT AFRAID OF DEATH AS LONG AS I AM IN GOD'S LAW'

Cuku's killing can most likely be linked to when he was director of Vlora city police department and was in charge of the investigation leading to Jambelli's arrest in 2012 for a murder committed in 2006. A few months later, however, senior police officers took Cuku off the case and the courts released Jambelli due to lack of evidence.

Ironically, when he was murdered, Cuku was no longer serving in the police – he had been replaced in June 2014 following a shift in Albanian politics. Former General Police Director Ahmet Prençi said: 'Imagine a police officer who had been working on the front line of the fight against crime and suddenly is out of work and thrown onto the street. It was a shameful, absurd and unjustified departure.' In all probability, assassinating Cuku was therefore designed to send out a threatening message to those who might have wanted to reopen investigations into Jambelli's criminal activities in the future. According to Prençi, 'opening an old file in Albania would have been very damaging to him'.

In a conversation with his wife, Cuku had once said, 'I'm not afraid of death as long as I am in God's law. I am more afraid to live as a coward than to die as a man.' It seems that Artan Cuku's words were prophetic; not long after expressing this sentiment, he was found dead.

On 2 April 2019, Artan Cuku was awarded the title of Martyr of the Nation by the Albanian government for having sacrificed his life because of his duty. ●

Artan Cuku, in his office

Soe Moe Tun
13 December 2016
Monywa, Myanmar

SOE MOE TUN

IN THE EARLY HOURS of the morning of 13 December 2016, Ko Thet was returning home from a night out with friends in Monywa, a town in central Myanmar, when he received a series of phone calls from friends. 'They all told me to come to a nearby area. They'd found a body,' said Ko Thet, editor of the weekly *Monywa Gazette*.

The body, which had been discovered close to the Monywa golf course, was that of Ko Thet's friend and fellow journalist Soe Moe Tun, a 35-year-old reporter for the national newspaper *The Daily Eleven*. He was found covered in bruises and with injuries to his face and head. At home waiting for him were his 39-year-old wife, Khin Cho Latt, and their eight-year-old son; they were not informed about his death until early the next morning.

Police opened an investigation immediately, but two and a half years later little progress had been made. Although arrests have been made related to the case, at the time of writing there had still been no public trial or sentencing. Soe Moe Tun's friends and colleagues believe that his death is linked to the work he did as a reporter, in particular his investigation into illegal logging in the area.

Illegal logging is a major issue in Myanmar and is closely linked to corruption among the authorities. According to a report published by the UK's Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) in February 2019, the country lost 4.3 million hectares of forest in the 1990s, and a further two million hectares between 2002 and 2014. The report links the deforestation to timber extraction, which it describes as 'the main driver of forest degradation inside the country's forest reserve areas'. It also makes reference to a resources assessment carried out by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization in 2015 and 2016, in which Myanmar reported losing 546 000 hectares of forest between 2010 and 2015, and roughly 20 per cent of its forests since 1990.

Soe Moe Tun with his wife and young son, who was eight years old at the time of the killing

The report points to corruption as 'the key component enabling many of the crimes underpinning the illicit trade of timber within and from the country', and highlights in particular the activities of the late Cheng Pui Chee, a Hong Kong man whom the EIA accused of having conducted nefarious activities alongside officials from Myanmar's military junta.

Myanmar's most coveted wood is its teak, which is considered some of the best quality in the world. The remote and heavily forested Sagaing region, in which Monywa is situated, is home to some of the country's most substantial reserves of teak, and the area is therefore heavily scarred by illegal logging. Many of these logs pass through Monywa, which acts as a crucial commercial hub between the Sagaing forests and Mandalay, the economic hub of northern Myanmar, from where a significant quantity of merchandise – legal or otherwise – is transported to China.

In recent years, the government has introduced some measures to try to combat logging activity, and in April 2014 it enacted a ban on log exports. Additionally, the current administration banned the logging of natural forests for one year, between 2016 and 2017. But such measures have had only a limited impact, and still the practice of illegal logging continues. Between April and November 2017, Myanmar forestry authorities seized 6 637 tonnes of illegally acquired timber.

Soe Moe Tun during a reporting trip

According to Thet Swe, a friend and fellow journalist of Soe Moe Tun's in Monywa, he was 'very strong-willed and opinionated, and very determined to show the truth about what was happening with illegal activities in our town'. In addition to writing investigative articles on illegal logging, Soe Moe Tun would regularly post updates about illegal-logging cases to his Facebook page. A week before he was killed, he posted the names and phone numbers of people who had been arrested for illegal-logging activities in Monywa. The post also contained the phone numbers and names of police officers alleged to be aiding timber traffickers in the country.

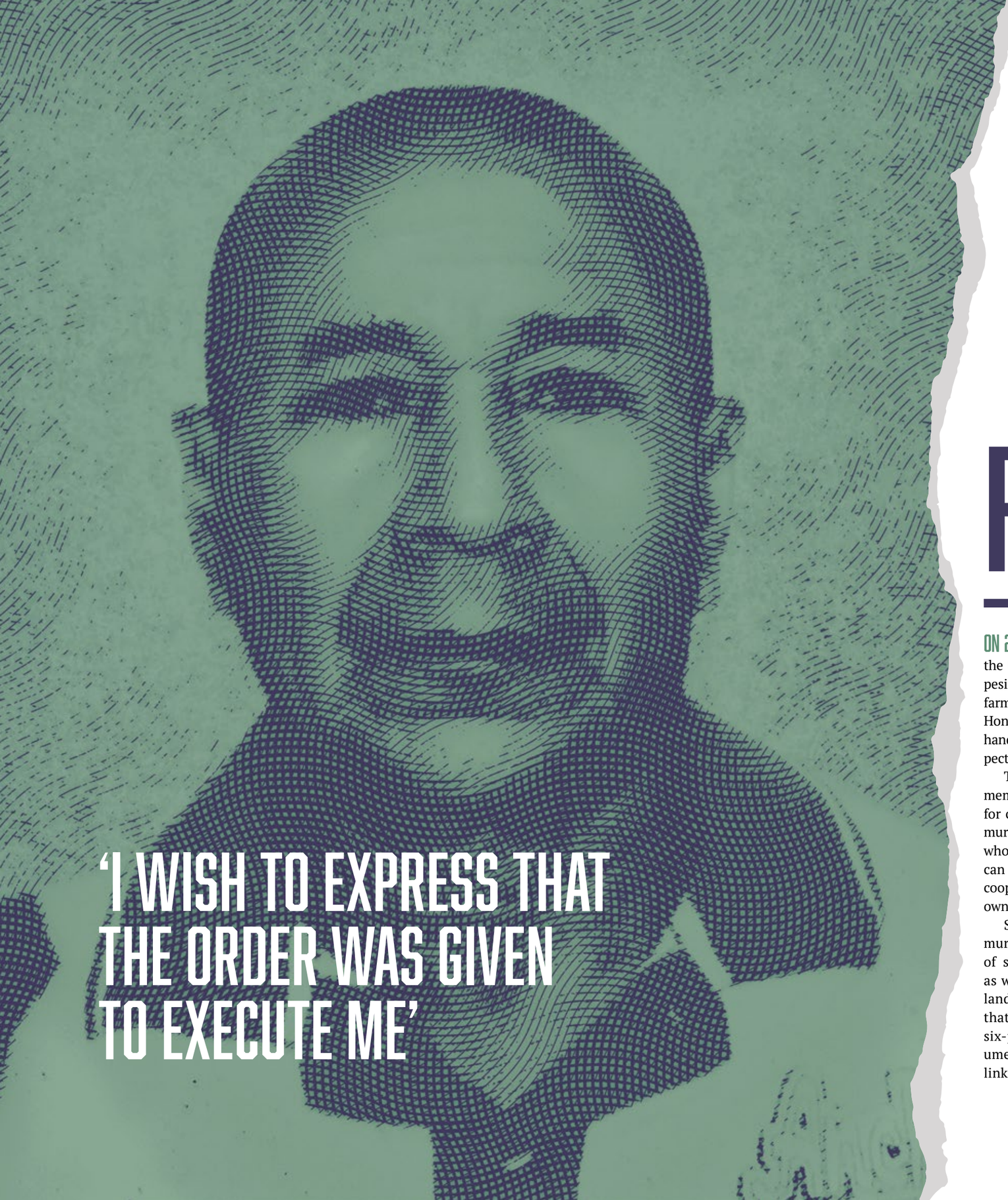
'HE WAS DETERMINED TO SHOW THE TRUTH ABOUT ILLEGAL ACTIVITIES IN OUR TOWN'

Khin Cho Latt said that the day before Soe Moe Tun's body was found, he had gone on a reporting trip and returned to Monywa that evening. The last message he sent her was to ask if she had picked up their son from school. 'After his death, I checked his Facebook page and saw a recent post,' she revealed. 'It mentioned [police and government officials] who were involved in illegal logging. Those leads could be the cause of his death.'

Despite these clear leads, and a call from Reporters Without Borders to step up their investigations, police have made little progress. Both Ko Thet and Thet Swe said that the officer in charge of the case had been changed three times since Soe Moe Tun's murder, and, according to Khin Cho Latt, investigations have now been transferred to the specialist Criminal Investigation Department, located in the country's capital, Nay Pyi Taw.

With police losing interest in the case, U Myint Kyaw of the Myanmar Journalist Network fears that Soe Moe Tun's killers will go unpunished, and that his death will end up like other high-profile cases in which justice is yet to be done. At least four journalists have been killed in Myanmar since 1999 and many others threatened or harassed. ●

A memorial ceremony held for Soe Moe Tun in Monywa on the first anniversary of his death



‘I WISH TO EXPRESS THAT THE ORDER WAS GIVEN TO EXECUTE ME’

José Ángel Flores Menjivar
18 October 2016
Tocoa, Honduras

JOSÉ ÁNGEL FLORES

ON 20 DECEMBER 2013, José Ángel Flores Menjivar wrote the list. The 63-year-old president of the Unified Campesino Movement of the Aguán (MUCA in Spanish), a farmworkers’ cooperative in the Bajo Aguán region of Honduras, put 29 names down on a sheet of paper and handed it to his son Lenin. It was a daring act naming suspected hitmen whom the state had refused to investigate.

The list identified those who, Flores alleged, were members of a nascent paramilitary force responsible for committing acts of violent crime, such as rape and murder. The victims were Flores’s fellow farmworkers, who had been struggling to reclaim plantations of African palm from three wealthy businessmen, who, until cooperatives such as MUCA contested the situation, had owned most of Bajo Aguán.

Since 2010, more than 140 farmworkers have been murdered in the region, seemingly by a combination of shadowy actors (such as this paramilitary force, as well as the Honduran police and military) and the landowners’ private security guards. But Flores hoped that his list would spur action. With it, he included a six-page testimony in his scrawling cursive that documented all the crimes that his research had so far linked to the paramilitary.

A month later, Flores added a two-page addendum, in which he revealed his suspicion that Celio Rodríguez – the alleged leader of the paramilitary, a former special-forces sergeant and the son-in-law of a powerful congressman – had ordered his assassination. ‘I wish to express that between the end of 2013 and beginning of 2014 the order was given to execute me. It was ordered by Celio Rodríguez,’ wrote Flores. ‘If I die, I request that a human rights organization investigate.’ He then asked Lenin to publicize the list and its accompanying documents if anything happened to him.

A sign marked 'cerrado,' or closed, hangs on the door of the organization in the La Confianza cooperative, where José Ángel Flores was a leader

‘PARAMILITARIES DON'T KILL FOR SPORT, THEY SERVE A MASTER’

On 18 October 2016, Flores was shot dead by four masked men. It was the afternoon and he was in his community at La Confianza, talking with other farmworkers after adjourning a MUCA meeting. When the shots rang out, the dozens of people milling about outside ran for cover.

After the murder, Lenin appeared on radio and television news to read, over and over again, his father’s list. He also paid regular visits to government agencies, which led the public prosecutor’s office to investigate Flores’s death and eventually produce a flowchart of nine hitmen, at the top of which was Rodríguez, the former military-intelligence official Flores had warned about. (Although arrest warrants were issued and at least three members of the group captured, Rodríguez remains free.)

The murder has significantly disrupted the lives of Flores’s family members, who, together with some of his colleagues and many of the witnesses to the murder, have had to flee Bajo Aguán. Some are living undocumented in the United States; others remain in hiding in various parts of Central America. His widow, children and grandchildren today live in an urban neighbourhood that, like many in the Northern Triangle (consisting of Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala), is a tense place to be. The gangs and organized-crime groups that rule the neighbourhood make daily movements – to work or to school – especially difficult for the young men in the family.

Flores’s two eldest sons, Lenin and Fernando, have become the public faces of their father’s case while the rest of the family keep a low profile. The murder has changed everything about their lives and daily routines, said Lenin. They share little of their lives with workmates and friends, and avoid having sensitive conversations on the phone in case the lines are tapped. But Lenin’s overriding concern is his mother, an otherwise strong woman, delighted with her grandchildren and proud of her family, who now frequently breaks down, overcome by grief.

Schoolchildren play in the Nueva Lempira community of the Bajo Aguán region of Honduras

The family know that paramilitaries don’t kill for sport, that they serve a master. And although no court has proven who that master is, the residents of Bajo Aguán have long denounced the state security forces – who are provided with sophisticated spying technology by foreign companies and governments, nominally for the fight against drugs – for working with narcos, and prominent politicians and businessmen.

In Bajo Aguán, those farmworkers who remain continue trying to build a community amid the exodus. But there is the sense of a looming threat. At the entrance gate to one reclaimed palm cooperative, called Lempira, residents take turns standing guard. Inside, there is a school, a health clinic and a local-governance system. It is an impressively self-sufficient place built with the cooperative’s own manpower and resources – the type of community that could help deflate corruption and undergird a better future for Honduras. But, as threats intensify and families flee, the social fabric woven by cooperatives unravels a little more. Forced emigration is yet another way for security forces to dissolve the farmworkers’ political struggle.

Ángel Lenin Flores and his mother hold a photo of José Ángel, a campesino leader murdered by a paramilitary band that has cropped up in a battle for land between campesino cooperatives and wealthy landowners in the Bajo Aguán region of Honduras

The Aguán Valley is known for being a hotspot in the drugs trade, and the trafficking of drugs through the region increases the threat of violence faced by the community. One of the three main landowners in Bajo Aguán, the late Miguel Facusse, was suspected by the US government of using his vast plantations for this purpose, although he was never prosecuted for it. Farmworker leaders, such as those present at the tragic MUCA meeting, have also condemned the military’s involvement in moving drugs.

But the battle over plantations of African palm is just the latest version of an old story: development schemes that empower corruption and organized crime, concentrate wealth and plough over resistance. The Flores family has lived it through the generations. Lenin’s grandmother came to the region to work in the *bananeras*, transnational corporations that enjoyed tight ties to political strongmen and state security forces. The family acquired land in the Aguán Valley that they later had to abandon during neoliberal land reforms in the 1990s.

Flores’s murder while trying to gain back that land reveals the newest dynamics of long-standing corruption and violence, most significantly around infrastructure and natural-resource-extraction projects in Honduras. The use of hitmen and paramilitary structures to destroy social movements is common, particularly because it enables powerful actors to continue operating above ground while delegating the work of violence to structures underground, thus safeguarding corporate and political reputations. Furthermore, the use of police and the military to enforce the wishes of powerful businessmen and politicians – for example, in the evicting of cooperatives – gives a veneer of legitimacy to essentially corrupt practices.

These are the same dynamics behind the murder of environmentalist Berta Cáceres and the continuing struggles of such groups as the Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras against megaprojects. Flores’s death – and the particular struggles faced by the MUCA – sheds light on widespread issues plaguing cooperatives in Honduras. ‘There is strong tension, colleagues who can’t sleep any more, threats, evictions,’ reveals Jamie Cabrera, a farmworker with the Gregorio Chávez cooperative. ‘There’s no cooperative that doesn’t have many families living in exile out of the country.’

A woman standing beside Cabrera, who asked to remain anonymous, added: ‘The ambition for power, for money … I’ve seen so many things in my time that I don’t understand. So many children who just want to live on their land with dignity, yet those people gun us down without thinking twice. That’s what people are fleeing. We are marked,’ she said. ‘It’s something you internalize. But I prefer to die speaking the truth.’ ●

‘VEERA HAD BEEN CAMPAIGNING AGAINST ILLEGAL CONSTRUCTION’

Bhupendra Veera
15 October 2016
Mumbai, India

BHUPENDRA VEERA

AT AROUND 9 P.M. on 15 October 2016, Bhupendra Veera briefly stepped out of his small, ground-floor apartment in a Mumbai suburb and asked the children playing outside to quieten down. It was time for one of his favourite shows on the spiritual television station, Aasta, and he wanted to watch it in peace.

He went to the bedroom, changed into his nightclothes, and sat down to watch television. Veera’s wife was in the kitchen, cooking.

A few minutes later, she went into the bedroom and was stunned to find Veera slumped in his chair, with blood splattered all around him. She had not heard anything unusual, and her husband, who was in his early 60s, had not been suffering from any condition. He was still alive, but barely conscious. His wife rushed him to a nearby hospital, but he died soon after. He died from a bullet wound, the family found out later.

Veera was an activist who had been campaigning against illegal construction and land grabs in the city’s Kalina area. Mumbai is a land-starved city. With over 12 million inhabitants, it is among the most densely populated urban areas in the world. Its civic infrastructure is lacking, and housing prices are among the highest in India. The local real-estate sector is known to be corrupt. Politicians, various officials and police authorities are all believed to be complicit.

Veera’s family suspected that the murder had been arranged by Razzak Khan, an influential local figure and former elected representative of the Indian National Congress. Khan had been implicated in illicit activities. ‘He [Khan] used to have political support, [and] connections with civic authorities and the police,’ said Sudhir Gala, Veera’s son-in-law. ‘He was notorious. Everyone knew about his criminal activities.’

Two days after Veera’s death, police arrested Khan and his son Amjad for plotting and executing Veera’s murder. In January 2017, the crime branch of the Mumbai police filed a charge sheet against the two men in the Mumbai Sessions Court. At the time of writing, however, the trial had not yet started, and the men were still out on bail.

In 2010, Veera began his campaign against the local ‘land mafia’ – in particular, the Khans – following a personal property dispute. Veera’s family said the Khans had taken over their warehouse in the neighbourhood and claimed it as their own. The two families were fighting the matter out in court at the time of Veera’s death.

As Veera started to connect with more victims of alleged land grabs, what had started as a personal matter soon took on broader social relevance. Veera's son-in-law said the Khans had a history of nefarious dealings in the area. 'How do you stop them and get justice for everyone?' asked Gala. '[Veera] started raising his voice against these illegalities.'

Veera used India's Right To Information (RTI) Act to access information about land and property in the area. Passed in 2005, the act allows citizens to petition any government body for information. Since it was passed into law, the Act has become a powerful tool for exposing corruption and promoting transparency. Various reports claim that Veera's RTI queries ran into the thousands. In Veera's home, stacks of papers lie in trunks and cupboards gathering dust.

'He was not an activist at first,' said Clarence Pinto, a fellow activist in the area who had known Veera for three years. 'But circumstances placed him in that situation. He started knocking on the doors of various authorities. If you are very persistent, then the authorities have to act.' Veera persisted in appealing to the authorities, including the Lokayukta – the state's anti-corruption ombudsman. His efforts began to pay off, and the ombudsman ordered the demolition of several illegal structures put up by the Khans.

Veera's family and fellow activists believe this was what led to his killing. After the murder, his son claimed that Veera had also unearthed information about illegal water connections arranged by the Khans in the neighbourhood.

According to the police charge sheet filed in January 2017, Amjad Khan arrived at Veera's home, shot him and fled. The neighbours were attending a wedding, so there were no eyewitnesses. In his bail application, Razzak Khan denied any involvement in the offence. Amjad Khan's wife also claims that both her husband and her father-in-law are innocent.

Before his death, Veera had approached the police several times requesting protection; he complained of threats received from the Khans and various officials.

Fellow resident Raymond Galbano said that one of his properties had also been captured by the Khans. They are alleged to have evicted Galbano's tenant and installed another tenant of their own. Galbano was advised to approach Veera for help. After Veera's murder, the Galbanos were among those who lobbied the office of the higher police authorities; they demanded speedy and just action, and accused the police of being apathetic and ineffective.

Demolished parts of an illegal construction in the neighbourhood

'People were scared after this happened. So many people have been cheated but they don't want to come forward,' said Gorettie Galbano, Raymond's wife. 'Two years have passed and the perpetrators have not been brought to justice.'

In the days after Veera's death, groups of activists approached the chief of the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai – the city's civic body – seeking action against the land disputes, and accusing the corporation and police of neglecting citizens' complaints.

'When there are "heavyweight" people with money and power, the police bend to them,' said Aftab Siddique, a civic activist who was part of the protests. 'We submitted a lot of documents showing how land grabbing occurs in this Kalina-Vakola area. We told the authorities that if they had done their job, then this would not have happened.'

Veera was one of a tribe of activists seeking to take on the local mafia driving illegal construction in his neighbourhood. It was his relentless campaigning that was believed to have earned him the ire of the Khans. One politician claimed that Veera had been using the RTI Act to blackmail others, but activists strongly rejected this allegation, and Veera's son threatened to file a defamation suit against the politician.

Veera's family is frustrated by the delay in the legal proceedings, but they continue to hope for justice. Though his murder sent ripples of fear through the community, many continue their activism work undeterred. 'We get threats every day,' said Pinto. 'But if you come together and fight, then those who are in the wrong will fear you.'

Bhupendra Veera's wife in the kitchen of their home.
He was assassinated metres from where she is seen standing.

Bill Kayong
21 June 2016
Sarawak, Malaysia

BILL KAYONG

IN THE MALAYSIAN STATE OF SARAWAK, land-related tussles between local communities and large companies have been going on for decades. Stories of harassment, violence and intimidation are not new, but no one ever thought it could cost someone their life. That is until the morning of 21 June 2016, when local activist Bill Kayong was shot dead at an intersection while on his way to work.

In the town of Miri, a coastal area bordering Brunei Darussalam, locals rely on the oil and gas industry for jobs. Others, who typically belong to indigenous tribes and live on ancestral land, depend on their crops. Over the years, people like the Dayak have turned to palm oil as a source of income. With the help of external funding, they have transformed their land into small plantations. But, as time passes, one village after the other has received visits from companies laying claim to their land.

Kayong was the political secretary to Dr Michael Teo – a medical doctor who runs a private clinic and is a local parliamentarian. For years, Kayong had been supporting the Dayak people in land disputes. He had been raising awareness among various tribes, bringing people together whenever a village needed support. The case that sealed his fate, however, was a land-grab issue near Sungai Bekelit, some 60 kilometres south-west of Miri.

For nearly a decade, villagers living in the longhouse (a traditional building that is home to dozens of families) had been protesting against a local palm oil company, the Tung Huat Niah Plantation, over land ownership. The state government had given the company a provisional lease of over three hectares: a move that the villagers challenged in the Native Courts. In Sarawak, forest land is defined as state-owned and often includes areas where local communities have lived for a long time.

Kayong made repeated visits to the village, holding talks and arranging transport for villagers to attend court hearings, which are often postponed without notice. It becomes a costly exercise for villagers who undertake long journeys to defend their cases. According to Kayong's friend and land-rights lawyer, Abun Sui Anyit, some unresolved land disputes go as far back as 15 years. Cases continue to pile up.

'Bill was known as a hardworking, principled man. Once he decided to help others, he'd do it without hesitation,' Anyit said. 'He was able to mobilize the Dayaks to come out of their village and head to the city to attend court hearings. People respected him. When he called, they'd turn up.'

Kayong had a remarkable ability to bring the community together. Friends describe him as a powerful and persuasive speaker who was able to get hundreds of Dayak people to show up at rallies. Their trust was built on Kayong's work as a mediator, connecting villagers to rights groups and lawyers to help their cases.

Teo recalled that Kayong began receiving threats a year before his murder. 'Bill and myself both got death threats from people acquainted with Tung Huat's director,' said Teo.

‘BILL GOT A CALL WARNING HIM THAT HE WOULD BE KILLED’

Four men were tried for Kayong’s murder, including the plantation company director, Lee Chee Kiang. But three of the accused, including Lee, were discharged and acquitted after the prosecution failed to establish a case against them. Of the four men, only a nightclub bouncer, named Mohamad Fitri Pauzi, was convicted of murder and sentenced to death.

Teo said he received death threats after he met with Lee to discuss the land dispute at Sungai Bekelit. ‘Bill also got a call warning him that he would be killed. He got scared and took a bus back to his home town, 14 hours away from Miri,’ Teo said. ‘He hid there for two nights and I shut my clinic.’ They filed a police report, but no arrests were made. Months later, Teo was attacked with a baseball bat and suffered a collarbone fracture.

In the lead-up to Kayong’s murder, a green Toyota began to follow him. ‘Bill told me he was being followed and I told him we needed to protect ourselves,’ said Teo. The parliamentarian bought two knives, one for each of them.

For Kayong’s wife, Hasyikin Hatta, his death came out of the blue. ‘He was a quiet man at home. I rarely asked questions about his work,’ she said. Recalling that day three years ago, she said it was a morning just like any other. It was nearing Eid, and Hasyikin was preparing to make *kuih*, bite-sized pastries. ‘Suddenly a friend called and said: “Your husband has been shot”,’ she explained softly. ‘I thought it was a lie until I went to the scene and saw it for myself.’ Kayong died instantly from two bullets fired in the drive-by shooting.

A young Bill Kayong with his wife, Hasyikin Hatt, and their two children

Activist Bill Kayong holding up a local paper in the parliamentary office for a campaign in November 2015

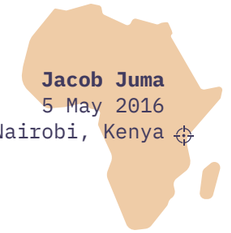
Fights between villagers and company representatives have occurred countless times in longhouses. In some instances, people have died when these scuffles turned violent. ‘In the past, hired thugs would enter villages and cause disturbances,’ said Teo. But Kayong’s murder was different. This was a targeted killing using firearms.

Three years have passed and the case has been closed. However, Kayong’s friends and family say that justice has yet to be served. Teo calls the trial a sham, while Anyit says only the gunman was jailed while the mastermind remains free. They are lodging an appeal with Malaysia’s new attorney-general to reopen Kayong’s case. The initial court case was flawed from the start, Teo said, explaining that the prosecution had not called up all the witnesses and failed to draw links between the gunman and others accused.

Fitri, the gunman, also stood trial for violently assaulting the Sungai Bekelit village chief, Jambai Ali. The chief’s car was run off the road and his arm slashed with a samurai sword seven months before Kayong’s murder.

After Kayong’s killing, activism within the Dayak community faltered. Driven by fear and lacking a strong leader, locals are doubtful they would get the support needed in the fight to retain their land. ‘After his death, the Dayak community is split. No one is able to unite the Dayaks like Bill did,’ said Anyit. Teo echoes this: ‘The Dayaks fell quiet. No one is on their side: not the state government nor police.’

At least a dozen police reports have been filed by villagers in Sungai Bekelit over harassment from people described as ‘gangsters’ forcefully entering the area. To date, no arrests have been made. ●



Jacob Juma
5 May 2016
Nairobi, Kenya

JACOB JUMA

AT 9.30 P.M. ON 6 MAY 2016, the body of Kenyan businessman Jacob Juma was found lying in a pool of blood on Ngong Road in Nairobi.

Juma, who was born in 1971 in Mungore, a village in Kenya's Bungoma County, had been a tireless crusader against corruption and a close ally of many politicians in the opposition. He was not afraid of condemning corruption; in fact, he openly talked about the widespread issue on social-media platforms.

Corruption in Kenya runs through many hands, allegedly involving, among others, politicians, civil servants and businesspeople. Some members of the country's business community have been known to support dishonest politicians in order to protect their own business interests, and politicians frequently aim to reap big rewards from businesspeople during election campaigns.

Juma had refused to be part of this bent system. As a self-made billionaire in Kenya's business fraternity, he had rubbed shoulders with the high and mighty in government. But, unlike many of his cadre, who would deliberately ignore political misconduct to maintain good relations, Juma refused to tolerate such criminality. He therefore quickly became an enemy of the corrupt.

In the wake of Juma's murder, opposition politicians pointed fingers at Deputy President William Ruto, accusing him of being responsible for all the woes faced by the late Juma. Ruto was among some of the country's most powerful politicians who had repeatedly been named in corruption sscandals in Kenya; Juma had kept addressing the problem, which made him an immediate target. On one occasion, Juma had posted a Facebook update in which he accused Ruto of trying to have him killed. Significantly, Juma's death came at a time of great political tension ahead of the elections the following year. As Jacob's brother, Philip, revealed: 'During the time of his death, political temperatures we very high in this country. We feared for our lives too and decided to keep silent; we went underground. We left everything for the government.'

Opposition leader Raila Odinga had recently taken the lead in highlighting the issue of government corruption. And when news about Juma's death spread, Odinga joined those who deeply condemned the murder by talking about it openly at his political rallies. Many Kenyans have also taken to social media to condemn the killing, calling it a political assassination. In a tweet on 1 August 2018, political activist and human-rights crusader Boniface Mwangi lamented: 'Killer cops are a danger to everyone. They are the same ones politicians and business people hire to murder their rivals. Jacob Juma, Chris Musando, George Muchai just to name three high profile murders done by contract killer cops.'

'HE QUICKLY BECAME AN ENEMY OF THE CORRUPT'

As Mwangi indicated, the assassination of political activists who have publicly decried corruption is not a new thing in Kenya. Organized-criminal groups have been used in many cases to eliminate dissenters, often with no one being held accountable. According to George Musamali, a security expert in Kenya, several assassinations have been reported in Kenya's history, dating back at least as far as 1969: 'Tom Mboya, Robert Ouko and Dr [Odhiambo] Mbai, are among those we have witnessed. All of them, their deaths were politically related. These people were politically famous and the only way to silence them was by killing them.'

Both Mwangi and Musamali singled out the death of Chris Musando, head of information technology at the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission, who was murdered a few days before the country's general election in August 2017. 'He wanted Kenya to have a clean election and he was targeted for his stand,' said Musamali. 'Sadly, Kenyans went silent after his death, yet he was fighting for them.' Such incidents are used to actively intimidate opposition, tamper with democracy and generate a climate of fear among citizens.

It is believed that Juma's murder was a similarly well-planned event, involving some of the powerful individuals he associated with. For one, the assailants seemed to act under clear instructions; they trailed Juma, appeared to be aware of his movements, and avoided areas with CCTV surveillance. The exact ambush spot for Juma's car is unclear, but the assassins shot him on Ngong Road, where there are no security cameras.

The car in which Jacob Juma was shot

It is not clear whether Juma was assassinated because of his business dealings or his political stand. However, what is clear is that he had felt his life was at risk as early as a year before his death. And he had spoken about his impending demise on several occasions, something that troubled his family and followers. According to Philip, the family had known that Juma's life was most likely at risk: 'Before he died, he talked about his life being in danger on social media, and also confided to us as a family. We helped him to go and record statements about it. The law enforcers did not take any action after the report. We remained worried about his life until the unexpected happened – he was shot by unknown people in cold blood.'

Similarly, although the government promised to investigate his death and punish those responsible, nothing has yet been said about the progress of the investigations. Philip spoke of the agony the family has been in since his brother died. In a shaky and heavy voice, he said: 'We have not heard anything concerning the investigations that the government promised to give us. It has all been silence, all through. There is nothing going on, no communication even from government about our brother's death. They promised to investigate and bring to book the killers.' He continued: 'As a family we have been praying, and still do so, that we will get justice concerning the death of our brother. Our brother spoke about corruption and condemned those behind it and later he lost his precious life.'

'JUMA'S MURDER WAS A WELL-PLANNED EVENT'

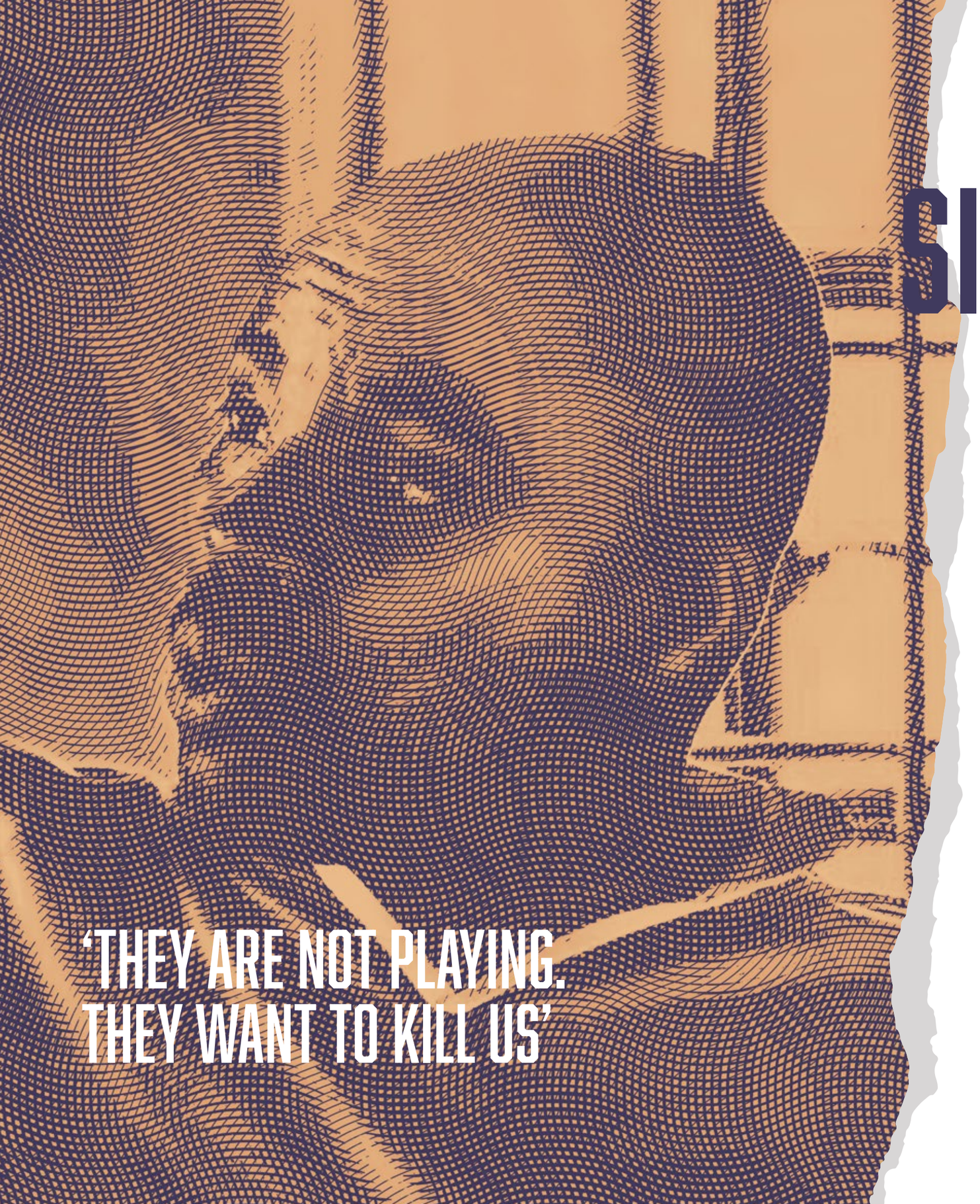
According Musamali, it cannot be ascertained with any certainty whether Juma's death was an assassination, because no investigation has been done. However, he admitted that it is the most likely possibility: 'He might have been killed by a criminal gang or any other organized group that could have targeted him because of his business deals and political associations. But, largely, we can say it was an assassination.'

Musamali added that investigations on such cases are always complex because whoever does this kind of killing makes sure there is no evidence left behind. Indeed, Ndegwa Muhoro, the director of the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) at the time of Juma's death, confirmed that Juma's killers had tampered with the scene of the crime after shooting him several times.

Ngong Road, Nairobi, the scene of the murder

But a second problem facing such investigations is the lack of police autonomy. 'In Africa we do not have independent police units,' Musamali said. 'This makes it difficult to follow up on these cases because of political inclination. There is usually no political will and lack of concern by police when they realize the nature of the death.'

According to a 2016/17 human-rights report by Amnesty International, security forces in Kenya carried out enforced disappearances, extrajudicial executions and torture with impunity during this period, resulting in the deaths of at least 122 people by October 2016, all of them members of the political opposition, civil-society activists or journalists. And while Kenya's Ethics and Anti-corruption Commission states that at least 30 per cent of GDP – equivalent to about US$6 billion – is being lost annually to corruption, the death of Juma and others highlights the human cost of government misdealings. ●



Sikhosiphi ‘Bazooka’ Radebe
22 March 2016
Mbizana, Eastern Cape, South Africa

SIKHOSIPHI RADEBE

‘THEY ARE NOT PLAYING. THEY WANT TO KILL US’

IN MARCH 2016, Sikhosiphi ‘Bazooka’ Radebe (51), was gunned down outside his home in the Lurholweni township in Mbizana, Eastern Cape, in front of his teenage son. The attack was allegedly committed by two men dressed as officers of the South African Police Service (SAPS).

Radebe was a man of many dimensions: a community leader; a father; a mechanic; the founder of a soccer club for unemployed youngsters; a minibus-taxi owner; and a former member of Umkhonto we Sizwe, the defunct armed wing of the African National Congress. It was Radebe’s prowess with the soccer ball as a youngster, however, that earned him the nickname ‘Bazooka’. But what distinguished him in adulthood was his leadership of the Amadiba Crisis Committee (ACC) and, in particular, his vocal opposition to two major ‘development’ projects supported at the highest levels of South African government.

The first of these is an Australian-led plan to extract up to 346 million tons of ilmenite, titanium and other heavy minerals from the Xolobeni area in the Eastern Cape’s scenic Wild Coast region. In fact, the name Amadiba comes from one of the traditional councils situated along this 22-kilometre stretch of Indian Ocean coastline targeted for mining by Transworld Energy Mineral, a subsidiary of Perth-based Mineral Commodities Limited (MRC).

Although Radebe and fellow members of the ACC were also opposed to a separate national-government plan to build a toll highway through the middle of their subsistence farmlands on this same coast, it was the mining proposal that worried Radebe the most because of the risk it poses to families in the region. Lawyers acting for the ACC said that up to 70 families are at risk of being evicted from their ancestral land if the plan goes ahead.

It is against this background that we come to the evening of 22 March 2016, when Radebe was murdered outside one of the two homes he had in this area.

Radebe’s family and friends said that the two men posing as police officers were driving a hijacked white VW Polo sedan with a flashing blue siren on the roof. A curious dimension, they said, was that the car had allegedly been hijacked shortly before the murder, and the two hijack victims were still in the car. His close family and friends claimed that these witnesses were not properly interviewed by police, and that the abandoned vehicle was not examined by forensics experts.

These suggestions of mismanagement add to the widely held suspicion that Radebe's death was not a 'routine' murder. Nonhle Mbuthuma, a fellow executive-committee member of the ACC, for one, is convinced that Radebe was the victim of a coordinated hit, a consequence of his influential role in the committee: 'He was the stronghold of the ACC,' said Mbuthuma. 'He was loud. He was not hiding … He could see that the strategy was to weaken the leadership of the ACC, so that mining could go ahead. The strategy was to get rid of the leaders, to kill the resistance.'

Mbuthuma also has good reason to fear that she could be the next target. During a telephone conversation with Radebe shortly before he was murdered, Radebe had warned her about the existence of a hit list featuring the names of three senior ACC leaders. It was during this call that Radebe gave her the chilling warning: 'They are not playing. They want to kill us.'

Just 70 minutes later, Mbuthuma received another call, this time to say that Radebe had been shot. Thinking that he was only wounded, she raced over to his house to help. 'I did not know he was dead,' she said. 'But when I saw him lying there on the ground covered by his blanket, I lost hope.'

'I should have been crying like hell when I saw his body,' added Mbuthuma. 'But Bazooka's warning words came back to me: "Don't allow them to take you. Make sure your bones can be found by your family." He was warning me…'

Mbuthuma's life has been significantly altered by Radebe's murder. 'I feel powerless at times because, the way I see things, it does not give me hope that we will be protected,' she revealed. 'As a mother, I feel stressed. Now it could be me at any time. Maybe I will die and there will be no justice. If justice is done, there is closure. But if there is no justice, it leaves a sore that is never closed. Bazooka's children want to know who killed their father. Their hearts are bleeding.'

'IF THERE IS NO JUSTICE, IT LEAVES A SORE…'

Nolwazi Radebe at the entrance to her brother's home, where he was shot dead on 22 March 2016

While a senior police officer has suggested that Radebe's death could be related to violent feuds between taxi owners in the area, Mbuthuma believes this theory has no foundation. Instead, she said that the murder must be viewed against a wider pattern of attacks against community members perceived to be anti-mining. She noted how about six months before Radebe was killed, several members of the anti-mining community around Xolobeni had been wounded, threatened or intimidated during the so-called Christmas attacks of 2015.

Mbuthuma also revealed that Radebe suspected that his cellphone was being monitored and his movements tracked, and that attempts had been made to bribe him to gain his support for mining. Indeed, according to John Clarke, a social worker who has been advising the Amadiba community for nearly 12 years, Radebe had rejected a R600 000 bribe offered to him in 2010 by a senior government official to persuade the ACC to support mining. Shortly after Radebe's murder, MRC issued a statement strongly denying any involvement.

Wiseman Radebe (centre), flanked by family members, speaks at a memorial service for his slain brother, Sikhosiphi 'Bazooka' Radebe

However, more than three years later, no one has been arrested for the murder, giving credence to the belief that the investigation was botched or even deliberately sabotaged by police officers and under the influence of senior government officials. Mbuthuma said she believes that the failure to arrest Radebe's killers is due to the involvement of 'higher politics' and that a senior police official was 'blocking the investigation'. Richard Spoor, a prominent human-rights lawyer acting for the ACC and Radebe's family, also believes that the police investigation was 'bungled from the start'.

Although the identity of the killers remains unknown, Spoor said that proposals to mine in rural areas often create perverse financial incentives for members of local communities to ensure that mining goes ahead. 'People in Xolobeni fear for their lives… I'm not saying that the company has done that, but when you bring in money and rewards into this type of environment you are playing with fire. It is dangerous stuff,' he said, adding that it was unclear who would benefit directly from a community empowerment structure set up by the mining company.

Earlier in 2018, the Radebe family sent a legal letter to the National Prosecuting Authority and the SAPS Directorate for Priority Crime Investigation (The Hawks). 'There are strong suggestions that the investigation has been intentionally impeded,' attorneys Henk Smith and Johan Lorenzen stated in the letter. 'At best, the investigation has been given insufficient attention and resources.'

Smith and Lorenzen also noted how the family, frustrated by the police failure to make any arrests, had hired a private investigative group, The iFirm, which is led by two former police generals. In a confidential report to the family, The iFirm concluded that 'The non-cooperation of the SAPS members made this (private) investigation an impossible mission.'

However, The iFirm also expressed the belief that basic police measures are still available to solve the case.

Smith and Lorenzen said: 'We are gravely concerned that such long and unjustified delays in delivering justice threaten the integrity of the justice system and cultivate a culture of impunity that places our clients in grave risk. The longer this investigation languishes, the lower the prospects of successful prosecution become.'

Although four months after the murder, MRC announced that it would divest its majority 56 per cent interest in the Xolobeni dune-mining venture, nearly three years later the company does not appear to have done so. ●

Nelson García
15 March 2016
Río Lindo, Honduras

NELSON GARCÍA

ON 15 MARCH 2016, a gunman arrived at the home of Nelson García in Río Lindo, Honduras, and shot him dead in front of his wife and young children. García's murder took place less than two weeks after the assassination of world-renowned environmental activist Berta Cáceres (see page 124). Both had played an important role in the Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (known by its Spanish acronym, COPINH).

As the leader of COPINH and the recipient of the 2015 Goldman Environmental Prize, Cáceres was a well-known figure and her murder drew international attention. García, on the other hand, enjoyed little recognition outside of his community where he was known as a committed activist and organizer for COPINH. Primarily a dental technician who collected scrap metal on the side to make ends meet, García had led a separate existence as active participant in protests against the planned eviction of Honduras' indigenous Lenca community from a settlement in Río Chiquito. He had been recruited by Cáceres some years before to participate in a movement to occupy land in Río Chiquito, which, according to COPINH, had been illegally claimed by local politicians for corporate profit.

'We were living "illegally", but we were encouraged by Berta's strength,' a spokesperson for the Lenca community told *Outside* magazine's Joshua Hammer in 2016. 'Berta came here every couple of months. Nelson came every single day.'

Originally from Peña Blanca, a small city on the banks of Lake Yojoa, nestled among lush, rolling hills, 38-year-old García was someone who put the needs of others ahead of his own. His turn to activism therefore came as no surprise to his family. 'He was extremely into solidarity, especially with those who are dispossessed,' García's father, Santos, told the author during a visit to Peña Blanca. 'It's something like a heritage for us,' he continued. 'We are all of the same thinking; whenever we see someone in need, we help.' Santos suspects that this empathy for those who do not have anything is the reason his son got involved in activism in the first place.

Honduran authorities initially tried to explain Cáceres's assassination as a robbery gone wrong, and then, when that didn't stick, they suggested it was a crime of passion. However, a team of international lawyers concluded that state agents and high-ranking

'HE WAS EXTREMELY INTO SOLIDARITY, ESPECIALLY WITH THOSE WHO ARE DISPOSSESSED'

business executives were involved in the strategic planning, execution and subsequent cover-up of her murder. Several men with ties to Honduran security forces and the company whose hydro-electric projects Cáceres had opposed were eventually found guilty of participating in the planning and execution of her murder.

García's family and COPINH insist that the same unholy triumvirate of politicians, corporations and criminal organizations were also behind Nelson's murder. In fact, according to García's aunt, María, police officers hinted as much on the day of his assassination. When she arrived at the crime scene, one of the police officers asked María if she knew that her nephew had been involved with COPINH. She said she did. 'Then you must know where the death is coming from and why,' the officer warned.

García's executioner, a local gang member named Didier Enrique 'Electric' Ramirez is in jail, but there is little sense of justice having been done nor any semblance of closure for the family and community. Given that García was murdered less than two weeks after Cáceres, and that other COPINH organizers were routinely harassed and threatened by state and paramilitary authorities, his family and fellow activists maintain that his death was part of a broader campaign to send a warning message to potential activists.

In 2017, a two-year investigation by watchdog group Global Witness determined that Honduras is the deadliest country in the world for environmental activists. 'Nowhere are you more likely to be killed for standing up to companies that grab land and trash the environment than in Honduras', the investigation concluded. And these murders are frequently committed with impunity. Human Rights Watch has gone as far as saying Honduras is a place where 'immunity for crime and human rights abuses is the norm'.

Nelson García was opposing evictions of the Honduran Lenca community from an informal settlement before his death

Garcia's home and the scene of his death

Notably, even after his murder, García's family has faced constant harassment. His wife and children, who were continually threatened by local gang members, have successfully been granted asylum in the United States. María, who works in an office near where Ramirez was arrested, often receives threats in person and has endured phone calls warning her that her blood will be spilled at the exact location where her nephew's murderer was arrested.

It is within this context that crimes like the cold-blooded murder of dissidents and activists, such as Nelson García, can be glossed over by authorities. In a country where homicide rates are among the highest in the world and gang violence looms over daily life in many towns and cities, politically motivated murders can always be explained away as an unfortunate event rather than a calculated act of terrorism. Violence is both a means to intimidate and a pretext for making sure that justice is never served and those responsible are never held accountable.

García's family has filed several complaints to the government asking for a real investigation, but they say that local authorities have expressed little interest in investigating the threats they still receive or in delving deeper into the motives behind the murder.

'I'm interested in knowing that one day, we are given real justice,' María told the author. 'We don't know who are the masterminds that sent him to kill my nephew.' Her husband, also named Santos, expressed the same certainty that a larger system was responsible for García's death: 'The guy who pulled the trigger might be the one who is in jail because of ballistics, but who is the one who paid that person? That is what we need to know.' ●

Berta Cáceres
2 March 2016
La Esperanza, Honduras

BERTA CÁCERES

ON 2 MARCH 2016, two gunmen stormed a house on the outskirts of La Esperanza, a town in Honduras, and murdered Berta Cáceres. A life-long activist who had successfully mobilized indigenous communities and their allies to fight illegal land-grabs by powerful corporations backed by political elites, Cáceres was aware that she might one day become a martyr.

For a time, there was hope among Cáceres's friends and family that her international acclaim, which saw her meet with the Pope, speak to audiences across the globe, and win the Goldman Environmental Prize in 2015, would somehow protect her. Killing someone such as Cáceres would surely draw international attention and, in theory, demands for accountability. 'I thought that perhaps they wouldn't be able to kill her because of that,' her mother, Austra Berta Flores, told the author.

Honduras has been described by Human Rights Watch as a place where 'impunity for crime and human rights abuses is the norm', and where, according to a 2017 report by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 'corruption is the operating system'. In the end, Cáceres's assassination was a harsh reminder that in this kind of setting, anyone who challenges the interests of powerful businesses and political elites is in danger.

The political climate in Honduras is particularly dire for environmental activists. A two-year investigation by watchdog group Global Witness determined that Honduras is the deadliest country in the world for environmental activists. 'Nowhere are you more likely to be killed for standing up to companies that grab land and trash the environment than in Honduras,' the report concluded.

Cáceres came from a long line of activists, none more trailblazing than her mother, who became the first woman to be elected governor of the department of Intibucá in 1981, and who went on to serve as a congresswoman at the national level. As part of her fight for the rights of indigenous people, Austra Flores was among those who led the push for Honduras to ratify the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, also known as International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention 169, or ILO-169. 'This is the instrument that defends the life and property of indigenous people and their territories, their languages, their customs, all of which had been constantly under attack,' explains Flores.

Berta, or Bertita, as her loved ones often refer to her, inherited her mother's penchant for breaking down barriers. 'Bertita learned from me in this huge struggle,' Flores said. 'She learned to know the needs of all indigenous peoples.'

In 1993, in response to threats posed to indigenous Lenca communities by illegal logging activities, Berta co-founded the Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras, known by its Spanish acronym, COPINH. The work of fighting to protect the territorial rights of indigenous Hondurans took on a new urgency in the mid-2000s amid a spate of government-approved logging, mining and energy projects, which threatened to displace entire communities.

'CÁCERES WAS AWARE THAT SHE MIGHT ONE DAY BECOME A MARTYR'

Underpinning Cáceres's activism was a belief in solidarity across struggles. Through COPINH, she was able to broaden and intensify the fight for the rights of poor and indigenous people whose livelihoods and, in some cases, cultural existence, were under attack. 'Bertita used to say, "Together we are stronger. Organized, we are stronger",' explains her brother, Gustavo Flores. The result, according to those who joined the struggle, was a political awakening for indigenous communities who had previously been marginalized and ignored by their own government. 'This was not a mixed people's revolution, which is what we had heard before, or a white people's revolution,' said Cáceres's daughter, Bertha Isabel Zúñiga. 'This had to do with recovering and rescuing our identity.'

The most high-profile battle began in 2006, when Lenca people from the Río Blanco community noticed the arrival of heavy machinery and construction equipment in their town. This, it turned out, was for the Agua Zarca Dam along the Gualcarque River, a hydroelectric project to be constructed by Honduran company Desarrollos Energéticos S.A. (DESA) in partnership with Chinese state-owned company Sinohydro, with funding from the World Bank, the Dutch development bank (FMO) and development financier FinnFund. Yet despite the fact that ILO-169 calls for free, open, and prior consent of the indigenous communities affected by such projects, no such consultation had taken place. In fact, Honduran politicians continued to promote and facilitate the project's implementation despite the fact that local communities expressed overwhelming opposition to it, citing concerns that indigenous communities would be cut off from the water supplies they relied on.

Cáceres was opposing construction of a hydroelectric project that would have put local communities at risk

COPINH and Cáceres worked with the community in Río Blanco to lead the fight against the Agua Zarca Dam both through direct action in the form of blockades and demonstrations, as well as through legal channels, bringing the case to the Inter-American Human Rights Commission. The powers that backed the project responded by targeting COPINH and its allies with harassment, death threats, mass arrests and violence meted out by paramilitary actors and private security contractors.

Several years later, in 2013, Honduran security forces operating out of DESA's local headquarters opened fire on protesters, killing one indigenous leader, Tomás García, and injuring several others. Cáceres, her children and several other activists were forced to go into hiding for a period of time amid constant death threats. But Cáceres remained undeterred, and her activism eventually led to two of Agua Zarca's main backers, Sinohydro and the World Bank, withdrawing their support for the project.

Years of constant harassment, death threats, and attempts on Cáceres's life eventually culminated in her murder in March 2016. Two gunmen broke into the house where she was staying, killing her and wounding Mexican environmentalist Gustavo Castro, who survived by pretending to be dead until the attackers had left. At first, Honduran authorities suggested her death was the result of a robbery. Then, they implied that it may have been a crime

'CÁCERES'S DEATH WAS ORDERED BY OPPONENTS OF HER ACTIVISM'

Bertha Isabel Zuniga continues the work of her mother at COPINH

of passion. Yet even after it became undeniable that Cáceres's death was an assassination ordered by opponents of her activism, the investigation and subsequent judicial proceedings were marred by delays, irregularities and attempts at sabotage. In one incident in 2016, two vehicles stopped an appellate court judge and she was robbed of the Cáceres case file.

Amid delays, a team of international lawyers conducted their own investigation, concluding that state agents and high-ranking business executives were directly involved in the planning, execution and subsequent cover-up of the murder.

The process was thrown into further disarray, however, in September 2018 when lawyers representing Cáceres's family formally accused the three judges overseeing the trial of abuse of authority and a cover-up. The judges responded by ousting the family's lawyers, leaving the victims without representation.

Through it all, Cáceres's family remained steadfast in their efforts to ensure that at least some of those responsible for her murder would be held accountable. On 29 November 2018, more than two and a half years after her assassination, Honduran authorities finally delivered a guilty verdict for seven of the eight defendants accused of participating in Cáceres's murder. They included a manager for DESA, the former head of security for DESA and several men who had served in the Honduran military.

It is a rare case in which those responsible for the death of an activist in Honduras have been arrested, tried and convicted. Yet there is still a belief among activists, lawyers and others who have followed the case closely that political and business elites who were the architects behind the assassination have not been brought to justice.

Until this happens, Cáceres's family and their supporters have vowed to continue their quest for true justice: 'We will continue fighting until we see the real masterminds in jail and until we bring down this corrupt government,' said Flores, holding back tears as she spoke about her daughter. 'Bertita's soul is what keeps us in the struggle,' Cáceres's brother told the author in 2018. 'Berta taught us that fear paralyzes actions of the people. Despite all the great efforts to persecute us and try to inject fear into our lives, we double our efforts. We will never give up, even if we get killed, even if they murder us,' he continued, echoing a common refrain among the activists who carry on Berta's legacy.

'That's why we say, Berta didn't die. She multiplied.' ●

Gilles Cistac
3 March 2015
Maputo, Mozambique

GILLES CISTAC

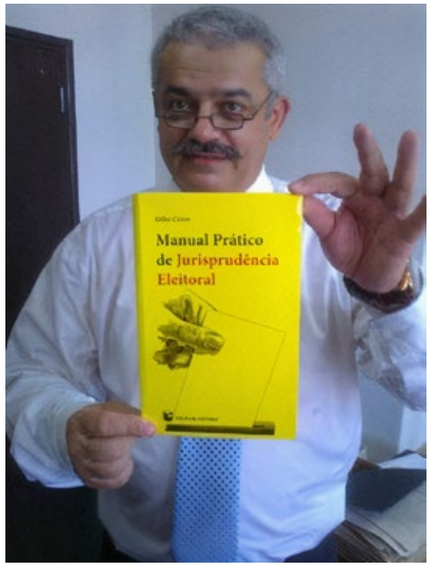
GILLES CISTAC HAD TRIED to fix a country that couldn't be fixed. These were the sentiments passed on by his daughter, Rosimele, on the occasion of her father's birthday, two years after his death. Her message bore all the frustration and anguish typical of a child suddenly bereft of a parent and made to live in this world alone – especially when that parent has been taken in an act of stark and abject brutality. Rosimele Cistac was forced to watch as the light ebbed from her father's eyes; he died in her arms.

On 3 March 2015, the prominent 53-year-old constitutional lawyer was shot outside a popular café in the centre of Maputo. According to witness accounts, he was getting into a taxi when four men approached in a car, lowered their windows and opened fire. The bullets that hit him went deep in his chest and abdomen, causing fatal injuries. Four hours later, he was declared dead at Maputo's Central Hospital.

In the wake of Cistac's murder, questions and suspicions started to arise. Although the attack occurred in broad daylight, the perpetrators have not yet been found. The investigation into the lawyer's death bore little fruit, and the context in which he was killed cast a light on his friction with the ruling party, Frelimo.

As a lawyer specializing in the constitution, Cistac had seen the solution to a problem that had plagued Mozambique since the country's transition from colonial power. He spoke openly of the need to decentralize the political power structure that has kept the country from realizing its potential as a true democracy. In a move that put him directly at odds with the party that has governed since 1975, Cistac proposed a way in which the opposition party, Renamo, could legally break away from the centralized government and establish autonomous regions. Under his plan, Renamo would govern the provinces of Sofala, Manica, Tete, Nampula, Zambezia and Niassa.

According to family and close friends, this proposal placed Cistac in the governing party's firing line. Before his death, threats had been made to his life; and even though these were reported to local authorities, Cistac and his family were not offered any protection. In addition to the threats, a Facebook campaign had been created with the sole purpose of demonizing the lawyer, insulting him on the basis of his race and French origins, and even accusing him of being a spy. The campaign



Gilles Cistac, who was a constitutional lawyer, holding the book he published on electoral law in Mozambique

included a profile chillingly called ‘Calado Calachnikov’ (Portuguese for ‘Silencing with a Kalashnikov’), an answer to the unspoken question of how to deal with the perceived dissenter.

Pushback against Cistac’s views also came from Frelimo officials and members of pro-government media outlets. Frelimo spokesperson Damião José decried Cistac as an ‘ingrate’ who had disrespected the people of Mozambique.

To understand the circumstances in which Cistac was killed, one needs to understand the political context of Mozambique itself, João M Cabrita, author of *Mozambique – The Tortuous Road to Democracy*, said during an interview. After the country achieved independence, the constitution was designed to facilitate a multi-party democracy, but Mozambique ultimately became a one-party socialist state, dominated by Frelimo. Despite the fact that democratic elections came into effect in 1994, every subsequent election cycle has resulted in the same outcome: victory for Frelimo. Throughout Frelimo’s administration, several activists, journalists and lawyers who have directly challenged the ruling party have disappeared, been detained, killed or attacked.

‘In a nutshell: Frelimo believes the role it played to free Mozambique from the colonial yoke confers upon its leaders the right to treat the country as their dominion, where the fundamental principles of democracy are absent from the totalitarian project introduced at the dawn of independence and which essentially remains in place. Like others before him, Prof. Cistac was a spanner in the works,’ said Cabrita.

‘LIKE OTHERS BEFORE HIM, PROF. CISTAC WAS A SPANNER IN THE WORKS’

The café in Maputo where Cistac was gunned down

Well-wishers lay a wreath in memory of Cistac

It is therefore no coincidence that Cistac’s stance on the decentralization of the state and criticism of the party’s strong influence on the judiciary rendered him a prime target. Cistac advocated impartiality within the judiciary, arguing that it was imperative that judges should be free of the influences of the political system. He argued that there should be structural reform, whereby some of the powers vested in the president would be curbed, namely regarding the appointment of magistrates.

In the midst of political machinations, Frelimo has utilized organized crime as a powerful weapon against dissent. Analysts have linked the party to instances of money laundering, human trafficking, and the smuggling of contraband, including drugs and ivory (associated with Frelimo patronage). Its methods for supressing opposition have included the deployment of ‘death squads’, widely believed to be the agents responsible for Cistac’s assassination and the deaths of several others, including Mozambican journalist Carlos Cardoso in 2000.

In essence, the state has been captured by organized crime. It festers under the protection of the political elite and is bolstered by endemic corruption, incompetence and greed in the highest echelons of power. Due to the staggering level of impunity that organized-crime groups enjoy under Frelimo, finding the perpetrators responsible for Cistac’s death could be almost impossible.

Cistac’s death not only reveals how deeply embedded organized crime is in Mozambique, it also demonstrates how frighteningly effective the government is at constraining the rights of the Mozambican people. According to Simphiwe Sidu, a lawyer belonging to the International Commission of Jurists’ Africa Regional Programme, ‘The killing of Cistac has definitely had an impact on the Constitutional right to freedom of speech of citizens of Mozambique in commenting on the current affairs of the country. It has increased a fear amongst human rights defenders in the country to freely speak on issues happening in the country.’

To many, Cistac was a man who wanted to change the system of the country in a way that held true to the spirit of the constitution formed in the wake of the country’s liberation. Such ambitions sadly cost him his life. His assassination is yet another reminder of the state’s willingness to dehumanize, maim and subjugate any who pose a threat to Frelimo’s continued political domination. ●

Boris Nemtsov
27 February 2015
Moscow, Russia

BORIS NEMTSOV

IT WAS NEARING MIDNIGHT on 27 February 2015, and the stars atop the Kremlin towers shone with their characteristic bright-red light. Boris Nemtsov and his partner, Anna Duritskaya, were walking along Bolshoy Moskovoretsky Bridge. It was a cold night, and the view from the bridge would have been breathtaking.

A snowplough passed slowly by the couple, obscuring the scene and probably muffling the sound of the gunshots fired from a side stairway to the bridge. The 55-year-old Nemtsov, a well-known Russian politician, anti-corruption activist and a fierce critic of Vladimir Putin, fell to the ground with four bullets in his back. Blurry video-camera footage, later released by the Russian government, captured in silence the screams of Duritskaya.

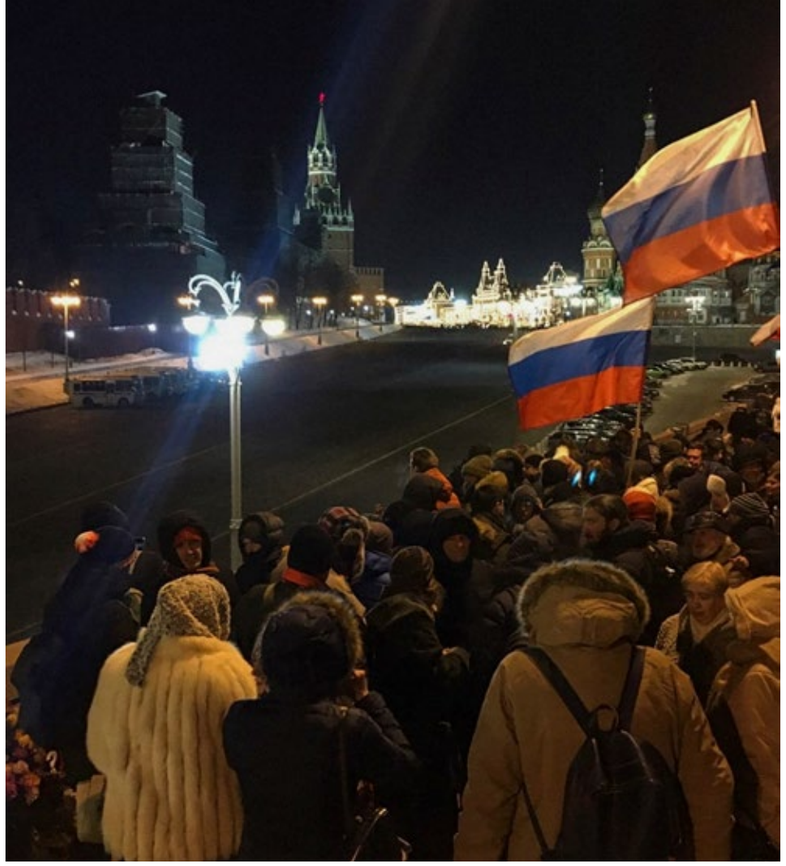
Nemtsov had become known in Russia in the 1990s when he was appointed as governor of Nizhny Novgorod Oblast by Boris Yeltsin. The country was mired in corruption after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and Nemtsov had used his position to begin fighting the problem. Hoping to eliminate fraud in the road-construction business in his region, he launched a new system in which construction companies would be paid only if they agreed to maintain the roads they built. As a result, it became unprofitable for contractors to cheat on their commitments.

Nemtsov became especially eager to expose the crimes committed by Putin, then prime minister, and his associates. In the early 2000s, when Nemtsov became one of the leaders of the Russian opposition, he devoted his life to the fight against corruption, embezzlement and fraud, claiming that the whole system built by Putin was akin to a mafia.

In 2009, he discovered that one of Putin's allies, Mayor of Moscow City Yury Luzhkov, and his wife, Yelena Baturina, were engaged in fraudulent business practices. According to the results of his investigation, Baturina had become a billionaire with the help of her husband's connections. Her real-estate development company, Inteco, had invested in the construction of dozens of housing complexes in Moscow. Other investors were keen to partner with Baturina because she was able to use her networks to secure permission from the Moscow government to build apartment buildings, which were the most problematic and expensive construction projects for developers.

Nemtsov's report revealed the success of Baturina's business empire to be related to the tax benefits she received directly from Moscow City government and from lucrative government tenders won by Inteco.

'[HE CLAIMED] THE WHOLE SYSTEM BUILT BY PUTIN WAS AKIN TO A MAFIA'



A mourning vigil held at the assassination site shortly after Boris Nemtsov's murder

In a separate investigation, the results of which were released between 2008 and 2012, Nemtsov accused Putin of building an organized-crime syndicate, whose goal was to syphon money from the Russian budget and keep him in power for as long as possible. According to this investigation, Putin had accumulated great wealth as the president of Russia, becoming one of the richest people in the world. Nemtsov linked Putin to billionaire businessmen Gennady Timchenko, Yury Kovalchuk and Arkady and Boris Rotenburg, all revealed to be his close and long-time friends.

Nemtsov declared war against criminals in the Russian government and security forces by promoting the Magnitsky Act, which was adopted by the United States Congress in December 2012. The act, named after a Russian lawyer who was tortured and killed for exposing the corruption of high-level police officials, allowed the US to freeze the assets of any Russian authorities who were implicated in crimes in Russia; it is one of the harshest laws so far implemented by the US government against Putin's regime. The act means that any person who has committed a crime in Russia, and avoided prosecution because of their loyalty to the regime, would be unable to spend their money in Western countries. A consequence of the act was the targeted persecution of the law's supporters; after Nemtsov was murdered, one of the law's other lobbyists, Nemtsov's friend Vladimir Kara-Murza, was poisoned.

Through his investigations, Nemtsov proved how fraud and other criminal practices pervaded Putin's Russia at almost every level. In 2013, he was elected as a Member of Parliament, which gave him access to information on the budget. He discovered blatant violations of the law taking place in public procurement processes.

His suspicion that Putin had abused his authority by sending soldiers into Crimea in 2014, led him to launch an investigation into Putin's illegal interference in Ukraine. After the annexation of Crimea, private contractors from Russia invaded the south-east region of Ukraine, supposedly accompanied by factions of the Russian army.

'HE BECAME AN EVER GREATER THREAT TO THE REGIME'

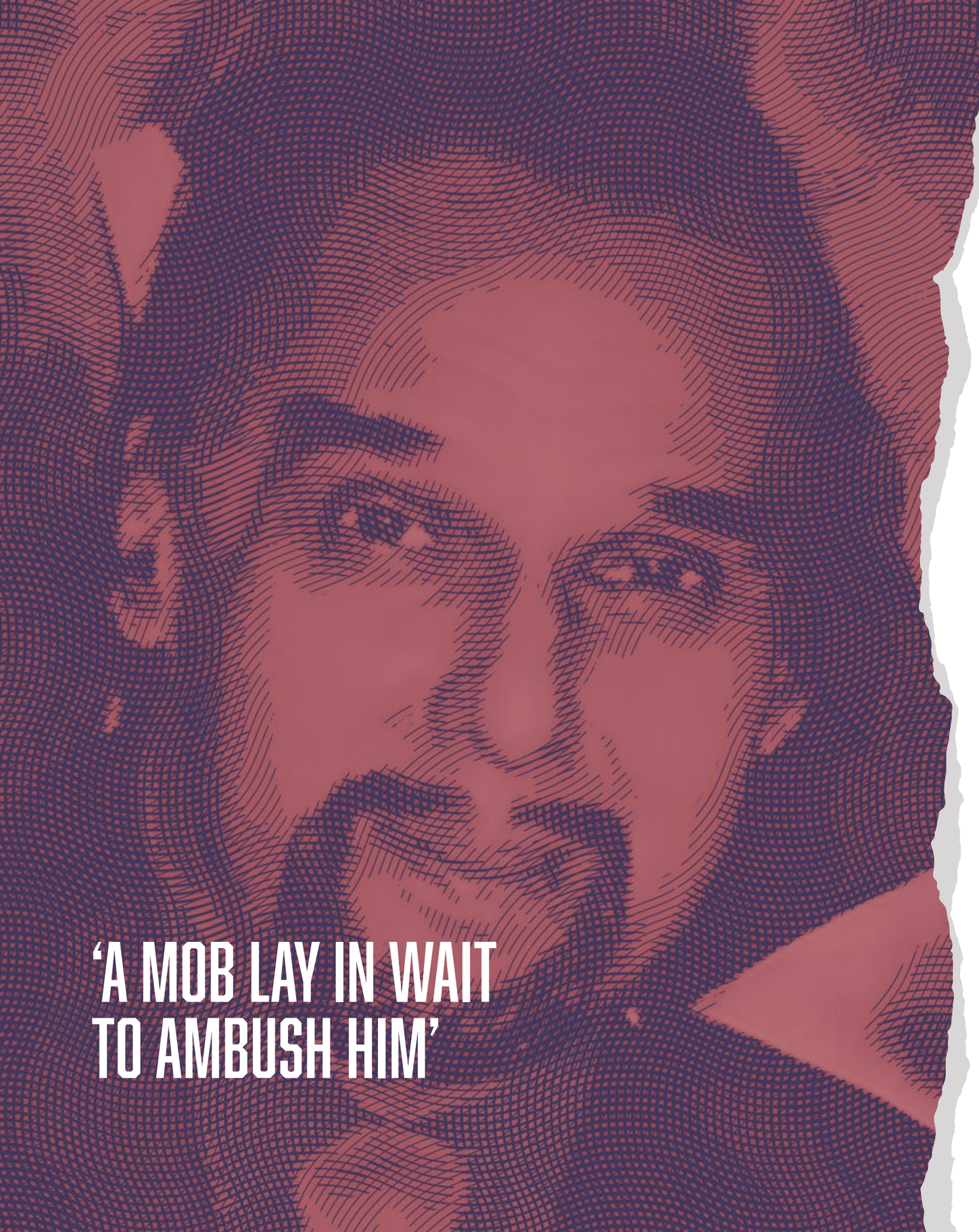
A few weeks before his murder, Nemtsov had said that he was going to work on a new report about the Russian invasion of Ukraine's Donbass region. He wanted to link the deaths of thousands of people – including passengers of the Malaysia Airlines plane shot down by a Russian-made missile in 2014 – to members of the Russian government and hold them accountable for crimes against humanity. As a first step, he had planned to meet with the relatives of soldiers who had fought in Ukraine.

As Nemtsov gathered evidence against Putin and his associates, he became an ever greater threat to the regime. Not only had he courageously demanded the prosecution of several Russian elites but he was able to back up his claims as a result of his committed research, the facts of which were irrefutable.

A few days before the murder, in an interview with Russian media, Nemtsov had said that he was afraid of Putin, who may attempt to plan his murder. He had also previously revealed that Ramzan Kadyrov, head of the Chechen Republic, had once threatened to murder him. Significantly, when Nemtsov's killers were eventually identified, they were revealed to be Chechens with close connections to Kadyrov. In July 2017, Zaur Dadaev and four accomplices were sentenced to stays of between 11 and 20 years in prison for Nemtsov's murder. Ilya Yashin, a friend of Nemtsov's, accused Kadyrov of having commissioned the assassination, for which the hitmen were allegedly paid 15 million rubles.

Although it cannot be said for certain that Putin was aware of the plot to murder Nemtsov, according to Vladimir Milov, a former deputy minister of energy, 'There is ever less doubt that the [Russian] state is behind the murder'. Four years later, the Kremlin is blocking any scrutiny of the investigation, and the trail of the mastermind behind the crime is growing colder. ●

Nemtsov leading a protest, prior to his murder



Nihal Perera
5 July 2013
Deraniyagala, Sri Lanka

NIHAL PERERA

ON 5 JULY 2013, NIHAL PERERA woke up, as he usually did, at the crack of dawn. He hoped it would be a productive day.

As the superintendent of Noori Estate, a sprawling tea plantation nestled in the mountains of Deraniyagala in Sri Lanka's Kegalle District, one of Perera's tasks involved gathering firewood from the estate's reservation. But on that fateful day, when the 72-year-old set out with his guards to inspect the property and collect wood to supply the factory's constant demand, a mob lay in wait to ambush him. Not only would they end up massacring him with shaving knives, swords and poles, but they would go on to display his flayed, naked body across town in the back of a pickup truck, in broad daylight.

Perera had been at odds with his murderers for many months leading up to his death. The mob was led by the chairman of the Deraniyagala municipality, Anil Champika, also known as Atha Kota (Sinhala for 'short hand' – allegedly after he lost his left forearm when a homemade gun he was carrying went off by accident).

Champika and his nephew, Amila Wijesinghe, had taken control of Noori Estate, grabbing the assets and living lavishly off the profits. Political patronage and the backing of members of the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party allowed Champika to plunder the estate with impunity; even the police were afraid to intervene. Perera, however, fearlessly battled the gang's pilfering of the estate on behalf of the workers, who for generations had depended on it.

According to IP Silva, one of the police officers who investigated Perera's murder, Champika and his mob had already assaulted the estate superintendent in February that year after he had protested against the gang's monopoly of supplying firewood to the factory. Perera's leg was fractured in the assault and he was threatened with a warning never to come back. After his wound had healed, however, Perera returned to the estate, under the protection of security guards assigned to him by Walter Bay, the American company that officially owned Noori, vowing to protect it.

'A MOB LAY IN WAIT TO AMBUSH HIM'

Workers at the Noori Estate tea plantation

On 5 July, at 9 a.m., Perera alighted from his pickup truck for a routine inspection of the estate, while two of his guards waited in the vehicle. It was then that Wijesinghe led a gang towards the parked vehicle. Perera, realizing something was amiss, ran for cover in a nearby abandoned house, while onlookers began to throw stones at the mob of nearly 15 people, at great personal risk, in an attempt to get them to disperse.

A man who wished not to be named revealed that he was stripped naked, tied to a lamppost and lashed incessantly because he had thrown stones at Champika's men. 'They told me I would be freed if I gave them my sister. I refused. I was tied to the lamppost from 10 p.m. that night until 10 a.m. the following morning,' he said.

According to testimony by an estate worker, one of Champika's men hit Perera on the head with a steel pole. As he fell to his knees, Perera was attacked with a sword. He was then taken to the officers' quarters, where the mob took turns beating him with metal poles and attacking him with sticks and swords.

Another worker, who survived the assault, said that Perera, who appeared lifeless, was then hauled into his own car. When his guards were made to get into the same vehicle, they saw that the superintendent had been beaten senseless and would probably not survive the rest of the ordeal. The three men were then driven to a more isolated location, about 500 metres from the estate. On their way, the mob stopped at a barber shop and took some sharp shaving knives.

Although Champika had planned the attack, he came only for the kill. He ordered his thugs to continue assaulting Perera. 'Sir was groaning in pain, it was hard for us to watch, because there was nothing we could do,' one of the estate workers testified. When Champika and Wijesinghe were satisfied with the work the mob had done, they left the scene, threatening the workers not to report the incident to the police. Thus many of the witnesses who eventually testified before the courts said that they had intentionally omitted parts of their initial statements to the police out of fear that they would suffer the same fate as Perera.

'CRIME AND POLITICS FREQUENTLY OPERATE HAND-IN-HAND'

Although the officers of the Special Task Force, a commando wing of the Sri Lankan police, were swiftly deployed to ensure that the workers were not harassed, villagers say it took time and a lot of courage to ensure this, because of the hold Champika had over the area.

'We feared for our lives when Atha Kota roamed freely. Girls would be jeered at on their way to school or when returning home. It came to a point where I could no longer send my daughter to school out of fear Atha Kota and his goons would abduct her. I would have no one to tell and nowhere to go to,' said Mahaheshwari, a seamstress, describing Champika's reign of terror over the isolated rural hamlet. 'The entire village knew of what took place. But none dared to speak. We were scared the same fate would befall us.'

The factory at Noori Estate, where Perera was the superintendent

Mahaheshwari said that when Sri Lanka's United National Party came to power in 2015, the new administration vowed to bring the perpetrators of Perera's gruesome murder to book, which gave the workers and witnesses confidence to give evidence before the court.

Consequently, when the trial of Champika and 20 others accused of Perera's murder began on 24 February 2015, there were some 72 witnesses in the indictment. A year later, on 25 February 2016, Judge Devika Abeyratne sentenced Champika, Wijesinghe and 16 of the accused to death in Avissawella High Court.

The murder of Perera and several others, including well-known politicians, journalists and activists, has brought to the surface the unacknowledged but well-known fact that crime and politics frequently operate hand-in-hand in post-armed-conflict contexts. This has become one of the key characteristics of Sri Lankan politics, where it is also not uncommon to find criminals operating with the blessing of politicians.

Although Perera had tried his best to safeguard the workers and the Noori Estate while he was alive, it was only through his death that the reign of terror ended in Deraniyagala. ●

Perween Rahman
13 March 2013
Karachi, Pakistan

PERWEEN RAHMAN

WEDNESDAY 13 MARCH 2013 should have been just like any other day for Perween Rahman, a social activist known for her tireless work bettering the lives of those living in poverty in Pakistan. But that evening, as she was driving home from work, masked gunmen riding on a motorcycle opened fire on her car, fatally injuring her. She died that day, her white shalwar kameez soaked in blood, the bullets in her neck putting an abrupt end to her life's work.

Rahman was a child of war. Born in 1957 in East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, she and her family had moved to Karachi after the country's violent segregation in 1971. This experience made her acutely aware of the pains of displacement, and it is perhaps what drove her, a trained architect from a privileged background, to dedicate her life to the residents of Karachi's Orangi Town, one of the largest informal settlements in the world.

'As she evolved in her profession, the one thing that pained her most was the poor being evicted from their homes, because she knew what it was to be dispossessed and lose one's home,' said Rahman's sister, Aquila Ismail. Out of this intense feeling grew her work to advocate for security of housing, which, said her sister, 'ultimately led to her assassination'.

After graduating, Rahman had worked for a prestigious firm of architects. But just a few months into the job, she realized that designing offices and houses for the rich was not what she wanted to do. According to Ismail, 'She felt that her professional skills were to be for the poor.' She left the job and in 1982 joined the Orangi Pilot Project (OPP), an NGO that works in sanitation, housing and healthcare for Orangi Town's residents.

The project was the brainchild of Dr Akhtar Hameed Khan, a development practitioner, whose work in participatory rural and squatter-community development gained him international recognition. Rahman joined the OPP as an unpaid intern, but quickly rose to become head of the organization's housing and sanitation programmes before taking over its research and training institute. And when Khan passed away in 1999, Rahman led the project.

Orangi Town began expanding in the early 1970s, when refugees arrived in Karachi from East Pakistan after the war of independence. The low-income community is now home to well over two million people of different ethnicities. As a key member of the OPP, Rahman became a familiar face in the sprawling settlement, and her projects managed to create some sense of togetherness among the different ethnic communities as an antidote to the persistent violence.

'HER WHITE SHALWAR KAMEEZ [WAS] SOAKED IN BLOOD'

Tensions between different communities and political parties have been part of Karachi's makeup since the 1950s, and the ethnically diverse slums are often at the forefront of these battles, and experience regular riots and militancy. Orangi Town has also been hit hard by terrorism. The Pakistani Taliban started to operate in the area in 2000, upon which most people no longer dared to venture into the settlement; Rahman, however, was not deterred and bravely continued her work.

'Perween gave poor communities the confidence to realize that they knew what was best for them and that achieving their goals was possible through self-sufficiency and by lobbying the government to play its part. This philosophy of shared responsibility has been instrumental in changing the manner in which people living in informal settlements all over Pakistan solve their development issues,' said her sister.

Orangi Town's problems aren't limited to violence and development issues, however. In the rapidly expanding megacity of Karachi, land has become a precious commodity. The city's inhabitants are constantly being threatened with eviction because the land they live on is not regulated – no ownership documents exist. And, as is often the case, luxury-housing projects seem to matter more to the government than the rights of the poor. But, as Rahman is recorded saying in Mahera Omar's 2016 documentary *The Rebel Optimist*, 'human development doesn't emerge from concrete'.

Perween Rahman walking with her colleagues from the Orangi Pilot Project

Rahman's work to help the residents of Orangi Town secure legal land rights had infuriated groups of land-grabbing criminals (or 'land mafias'). It is generally believed that these groups are closely connected to powerful members of political parties in Karachi. As Rahman adds in the documentary, 'The land mafia is the government itself.'

According to Ismail, Rahman was particularly vocal about the issue of land grabs: 'She stepped on powerful toes when she began to document how land was being snatched violently from the poor and handed to big developers. She had earlier documented the illegalities that caused the poor areas to be short of water. That report had shaken the water mafia,' Ismail explained. 'It was felt that her study of land supply would expose how the land mafias are within the government. Of course she had to be stopped.'

A day after Rahman's murder, an alleged Taliban militant named Qari Bilal was killed during a police encounter in the Karachi neighbourhood of Manghopir. Without presenting much

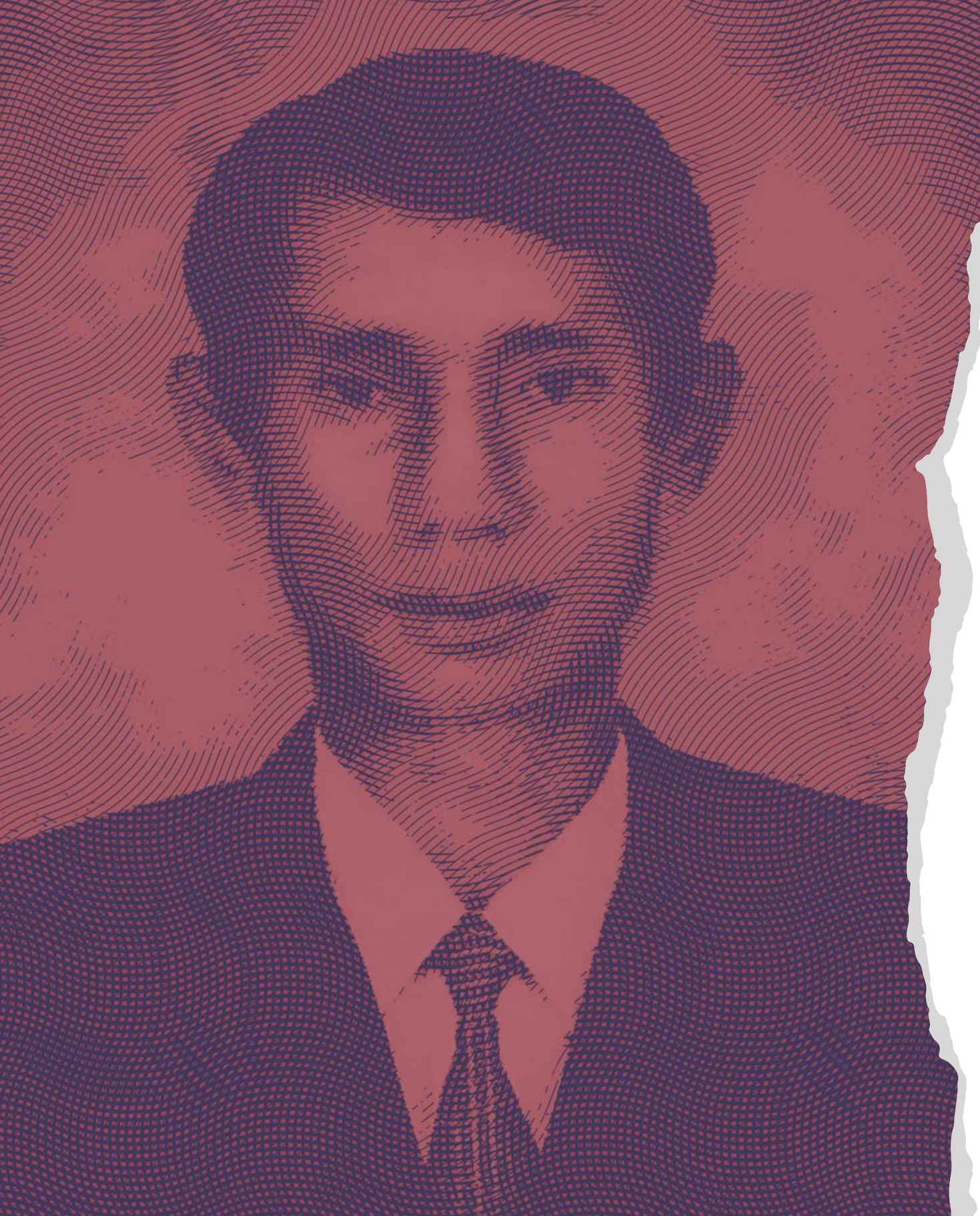
'THE FIGHT IS NOT OVER FOR RAHMAN'S FAMILY'

evidence, the police claimed that Bilal was responsible for Rahman's murder. However, it has since emerged that although militants such as Bilal may have been involved, they were allegedly hired by local leaders of the Awami National Party (ANP).

In 2014, the Supreme Court ordered a new investigation into Rahman's death after a judicial inquiry found that police officers had destroyed evidence and manipulated the investigation. The first of three joint-investigation teams was formed, which resulted in the arrests of Abdul Raheem Swati, a local leader of the ANP, and his son Mohammad Imran Swati, as well as three co-accused: Ayaz Shamzai, another local ANP leader, Amjad Hussain Khan and Ahmed Khan, a well-known figure among the city's criminal gangs. Rahman had previously singled out Raheem Swati as someone who was threatening the OPP. However, the case is still in the courts nearly seven years later. A third joint-investigation team has been given until the end of 2019 to release its report, but there is a fear that the real perpetrators will go unpunished because of their connections to those in power.

The fight is not over for Rahman's family and colleagues, who continue much of the work she had started and regularly receive threatening anonymous phone calls as a result. According to Ismail, '[Rahman's] most important legacy is that nothing matters more than the relationships you build and that all relationships have to be built on justice. She was the core of my existence.' ●

Some of the Orangi Town residents whose lives were improved by the Orangi Pilot Project's sanitation, housing and healthcare projects



Chut Wutty
26 April 2012
Koh Kong, Cambodia

CHUT WUTTY

'HE WAS PASSIONATE, AND HE WAS WILLING TO DIE FOR WHAT HE DID'

WHEN JOURNALIST OLESIA PLOKHII and her Cambodian colleague went on a reporting trip to investigate illegal logging in Cambodia's east, they never imagined the turn it would take. 'It was a horrific moment, you know, everything in your stomach drops,' said Plokhii. 'I looked over my shoulder and in the distance behind us we saw two motorcycles. Three soldiers and military police were coming on two bikes. They had AK-47s strapped to their backs.'

Environmental activist Chut Wutty had taken the two reporters from the national newspaper *Cambodia Daily* to a site belonging to the Timbergreen Company in Koh Kong, where he believed illegal logging was taking place in the rainforest. Wutty would not survive the day.

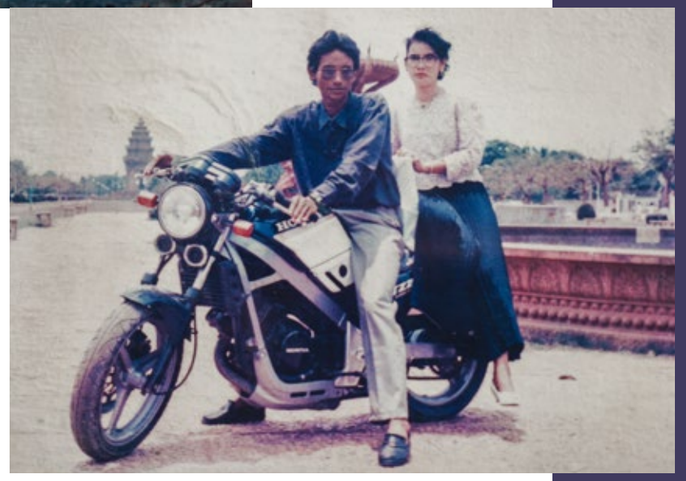
Wutty had been a Russian-trained Cambodian military officer before he turned to environmental protectionism at the beginning of the 2000s. When he saw that natural resources were being destroyed by corrupt officials and rich businessmen, he began to work with NGOs, such as Global Witness and Conservation International, before starting his own organization aimed at protecting Cambodia's already depleted forests from illegal logging. In his work, Wutty had led local communities to patrol forests and burn any illegally logged wood they found.

His military background came in useful, said Plokhii. 'He had a lot of institutional knowledge. He also had an emotional knowledge. He was tuned in, he knew people, he knew the answers. He knew etiquette and he was passionate, and he was willing to die for what he did.'

Marcus Hardtke, an independent environmentalist in Cambodia who worked closely with Wutty for about a decade, said that illegal logging is made possible by corruption at the highest levels of the Cambodian government. According to Hardtke, local governments tolerate illegal logging activities because they are paid off by both small-time and big-scale loggers. This corruption reaches high-ranking government officials, he said.

Hardtke described illegal logging as a 'textbook' example of organized crime. 'It operates outside the law,' he said. He explained it as being a hierarchical system, in which each person must pay a sum to the next person above them in the chain of power. This might be a formal superior, he said, or someone who holds more authority because of their position in the government, connections to authorities,

Chut Wutty and his son Cheuy Oudom Reaksmey (third and fourth from left) on a field trip



Wutty and his wife in front of Independence Monument, Phnom Penh

or wealth. Attempting to interfere in that chain is a dangerous game, Hardtke said. 'It elicits threats and, occasionally, killings.'

According to Plokhii, Wutty believed that rich businessmen and government officials should not profit from destroying the livelihoods of people dependent on forests. This belief would eventually cost him his life. Being a thorn in the sides of many well-connected businessmen, Wutty regularly faced threats from illegal loggers and authorities.

On the afternoon of his death, Wutty's old car wouldn't start when he tried to drive himself and the two reporters to safety. By the time they had managed to shortcut the wires and start the car, it was too late. 'Right when I was about to open the driver-side door, I heard a shot towards the car,' Plokhii said. Wutty was dead.

Plokhii and her colleague first fled into the forest, but then decided to turn back, as their chances of surviving in the jungle were even slimmer. By the time they returned, one of the military police officers, In Rattana, was also dead.

In October 2012, a court found Timbergreen's chief security guard, Rann Borath, guilty of 'unintentional homicide' for the death of Rattana and handed him a two-year jail sentence, three-quarters of which was suspended. Prosecutors had argued that Rattana had in fact shot Wutty. They said Borath had then tried to take Rattana's rifle and accidentally pulled the trigger, killing the military officer. 'It was a cover-up,' Plokhii said.

Wutty's son at a memorial at the scene of the shooting

Borath was released shortly after the trial. Human-rights organizations continue to call for a thorough and independent investigation into the murder. The government itself offered a variety of explanations, including that Rattana had shot himself out of remorse, that he had shot himself twice by accident, and even that Wutty had shot him. Human-rights organizations and observers have deemed all of those explanations implausible; many questions remain.

Wutty's son, Cheuy Oudom Reaksmey, is one of those still searching for justice. His childhood was shaped by his father's environmental activism. Reaksmey described how Wutty would barely sleep at home and would come to their house on the outskirts of Phnom Penh perhaps only twice a month. The rest of the time he would sleep in the countryside or in his office in the capital.

Now 27, Reaksmey has long followed in his father's footsteps. In 2016, he took over the presidency of Wutty's NGO, Natural Resource Protection Group, but his engagement in environmental causes dates back to his childhood. As a teenager, he would often accompany his father on trips while he was patrolling the forests. They would visit communities and discuss strategies for countering illegal logging.

This brought Reaksmey close to the risks the work entailed.

'I used to tell him to stop because one day he would die. But he wanted to die, because he wanted to die in honour,' Reaksmey said. 'It was hard for me as a child to tell him what to do. His personality was like a soldier; he forged ahead.'

Yet, despite being aware of the risks, Reaksmey didn't actually believe that his father would be assassinated; he was more worried about him being arrested or beaten up.

On several previous occasions, Reaksmey had been relayed rumours that his father had died – all proven wrong. So when he received the phone call on 26 April 2012, he at first took it for yet another unsubstantiated rumour. 'At 10 a.m. [my father] had called me and told me that he would be travelling back to Phnom Penh,' Reaksmey revealed. Just two hours later, Wutty was shot.

'I could not believe it until I saw his body,' said Reaksmey. 'It is difficult to accept that, because we used to have a father and now we don't.' ●

Darío Fernández Jaén
6 November 2011
Penonomé, Panama

DARÍO FERNÁNDEZ

ON 6 NOVEMBER 2011, as national festivities were taking place across Panama (it is the day that the US officially recognized Panama as a republic in 1903), the neighbourhood of San Antonio in Penonomé was suddenly shaken. A gunshot to the head ended the life of 65-year-old Darío Fernández Jaén, former governor of Coclé, the province of which Penonomé is the capital, and a respected leader, politician, lawyer, broadcaster and educator.

Some 40 kilometres from Panama City, Penonomé became the epicentre of a story that spread quickly across the country and gave impetus to a media campaign already being waged against attacks on journalists. Television networks confirmed the news: one of the most prominent politicians of the Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD) had died.

Fernández was born on 10 March 1946 and grew up in the countryside of Coclé; he had deep roots in the region and had dedicated much of his life to communicating with and solving the needs of the community. As a lawyer and politician, he had immersed himself in the revolutionary process led by the former General Omar Torrijos Herrera. He was a founder of the PRD in Coclé and, between 1984 and 2009, was three times elected governor of the province.

Later, after leaving the world of politics, Fernández obtained a degree in journalism and became the owner and programme manager of the radio station Mi Favorita, where he hosted a political-commentary show critical of former president Ricardo Martinelli and his administration.

Fernández had never believed he was in any danger, despite having been threatened over the station's coverage of alleged fraud. In October 2011, Radio Mi Favorita had aired a story about a case of land fraud committed by the same person who had illegally transferred the deeds for a property known as Finca 70 (Estate 70) using the name of Fernández's mother, Juana Marta Jaén for the transfer.

Just before 8 o'clock on the evening of 6 November, as Fernández approached his home on foot, waiting for him in the street was Joel Guerra Flores (aka 'Chiri'), a member of a notorious gang of criminals known as The Barracudas. Flores shot him point blank in the head. Mortally wounded, Fernández collapsed in front of his wife and son.

Witnesses had seen Flores prowling the area just days before and, before the attack, Fernández had allegedly been stalked by other

members of The Barracudas. Hours before the murder, Miguel Arner García (nicknamed 'Picoro') had knocked on the door of the politician's home, but was unable to locate him. The job of tracking Fernández down was then passed on to Deshy Quirós Matal (aka 'China'), who was tasked with shadowing him and then giving the signal to the hitman, Flores, for the execution. The dark night was complicit in the deed – Flores was able to slip away unnoticed down an alleyway after the hit.

This was not a random act of violence, it was an assassination. According to police investigations, the criminal organization responsible for planning Fernández's murder had been involved in a range of other serious offences in addition to homicide, including property theft, and intimidation and bribery of witnesses. The group's main operations had involved targeting abandoned or neglected properties and deceased, sick, absent or foreign landowners. They had acquired land illegally by forging documents, setting up fake companies and using the identities of deceased people. This way, they had been able to conduct multiple irregular deeds transfers within a short period of time.

On 7 May 2013, Flores and five others appeared in court in Coclé, on trial for the murder of Fernández. The prosecution argued that the individuals were members of a criminal organization led by Ricardo Martínez Quirós, and that they had collaborated to commit aggravated intentional homicide and aggravated criminal conspiracy. According to the prosecution, this was a premeditated crime. A protected witness named Flores as the main perpetrator and mastermind behind the murder. By killing Fernández, Flores had sought to gain impunity for the cases of land fraud committed by his organization.

A poster at the site of the murder calls for justice

Former governor Fernández at a party rally

'FERNÁNDEZ HAD DIRECTLY ACCUSED THE CRIMINAL GROUP OF THE FINCA 70 FRAUD'

Fernández had become aware of the existence of the gang after they had used the name of his mother to conduct an illegal transfer of land. Prosecutor Roberto Moreno confirmed that, on his radio show, Fernández had directly accused the criminal group of the Finca 70 fraud, and that he had uncovered the scandal.

On 26 June 2013, the court established the criminal liability of five of the defendants: García, Flores, Matal, Alfredo Nouvet Conte ('Fello') and Mayra Hall Conte. They were handed prison sentences of between 33 and 41 years. The defence lawyers dismissed the charges on the basis of insufficient evidence and attempted to discredit the veracity of the case, saying that they would appeal. Quirós, who remains a fugitive from justice, is suspected to be residing somewhere in South America and has been listed on INTERPOL's watch list at the request of the Panamanian government, Moreno confirmed.

Although the link between land fraud in Coclé and corrupt local officials has yet to be determined in the case of Fernández's murder, Rodolfo Aguilera, a lawyer who acted as a witness in the trial, cited another case in which the association is clearer-cut: 'It is difficult to determine if there were corrupted officials involved, but in our particular case, involving my client Devon Ann Rolls [also a victim of the same criminal organization], we notified the director of the public registry that the property was going to be transferred for a second time and that the officials of the public registry did not prevent the second transfer of the property.'

Fernández is recognized in Washington DC's Newseum as a victim of hired assassins acting against freedom of expression and the denunciation of land corruption in Panama. His murder came amid an increase in attacks on journalists in Panama and shortly before the country celebrated Journalists Day on 13 November. ●

Jules Koum Koum
4 November 2011
Yaoundé, Cameroon

JULES KOUM KOUM

ON 4 NOVEMBER 2011, investigative journalist Jules Koum Koum, 51, died after his vehicle was crushed in a collision with a timber truck on the outskirts of Yaoundé, the capital of Cameroon. Koum was rushed to hospital but died from his injuries soon after. At first glance, the incident may have appeared to be a clear-cut motor-vehicle accident, but the circumstances surrounding his death remain mysterious.

Koum was the editor of a fortnightly independent newspaper, *Le Jeune Observateur*, and the Cameroonian correspondent for Reporters Without Borders (RSF in French). He was known for his investigations into organized crime, corruption, nepotism and, most notably, his exposing of the inexplicable amount of wealth amassed by Cameroon's former Minister of Defence, Edgard Alain Mebe Ngo'o.

Although Koum had been tenacious in all of his investigations, his criticism of Mebe Ngo'o had been especially relentless. He publicly challenged Mebe Ngo'o to explain how he had managed to accumulate such a large fortune in just 10 years while earning the ordinary salary of a civil servant. In an open letter to Mebe Ngo'o, published in 2011, Koum listed some of the minister's alleged possessions, which included fleets of vehicles (ranging from dump trucks, bulldozers and excavators to scores of luxury and vintage cars), castles, overseas apartments, luxury hotels, and hundreds of hectares of land in Yaoundé and the resort town of Kribi.

In 2009, RSF had expressed concern at the repeated intimidation and harassment Koum had suffered for his coverage of corruption. Reportedly, in September 2009, a group of armed men broke into his house and stole documents he was keeping as evidence against several high-profile government officials (including Mebe Ngo'o).

Koum Koum's vehicle and the timber truck that crushed it

In the open letter, Koum accused the minister of mafia-style business tactics, and implicated him in a burglary at the offices of Minister of Finance Essimi Menye, claiming that Menye was a 'target' because of his ongoing investigations into Mebe Ngo'o's expenditure.

Koum also claimed that Mebe Ngo'o had sent Colonel Bidja Henri Robert, Cameroon's head of military security, a briefcase of cash to bribe him, but that he had refused to be silenced. Since then, Koum had reportedly received death threats from Mebe Ngo'o, which he referred to in the open letter:

> [S]ince you have threatened to kill me, know that the destiny of another man can never be found in the hands of another man. Know that it will be difficult for you to benefit from all the fortune you have been amassing every day for the past ten years, as long as we are here. If you get me assassinated, a thing I am not afraid of, know that neither you nor your children would have a peaceful existence, because there will always be people who will demand that you render account for your deeds.

It was just a few months after this public challenge to Mebe Ngo'o that Koum died. In what may or may not be a coincidence, Koum was about to launch a radio station in Yaoundé that week, and had plans to establish a television channel – developments that could have had serious consequences for those he was investigating.

At the time of writing, eight years after Koum's death, no arrests had been made, and there were no significant leads in the investigation. It was reported that there were no tyre marks on the road surface to indicate that the driver of the truck had braked to avoid the head-on collision, and that the driver had 'disappeared', adding to the suspicion that the crash was not accidental. Some reports even suggest that the truck had chased Koum to Ahala, a neighbourhood just outside Yaoundé.

Shortly after Koum's death, a police source confirmed that they were 'working seriously on this case because a majority of Cameroonians would see the hand of the Minister of Defence Edgard Alain Mebe Ngo'o [in his death]'. A source in the Ministry of Communication revealed that the police were particularly concerned with the case not because of the Mebe Ngo'o angle but because Koum was the country's representative for RSF: 'The government does not want, once again, to be faced with criticism from the West concerning press freedom in Cameroon. The political situation is already very complicated to manage as concerns relations with Western chancelleries,' the official declared.

'THE CIRCUMSTANCES SURROUNDING HIS DEATH REMAIN MYSTERIOUS'

Despite these concerns, police investigations have yielded no results, seemingly granting impunity to those who order these kinds of assassinations, and offering little comfort to those investigating organized crime.

Of some consolation is the fact that, on 5 March 2019, Mebe Ngo'o was arrested and charged with the embezzlement of public funds to the value of CFA196 billion (approximately US$392 million). He is currently serving time in Kondegui Prison in Yaoundé.

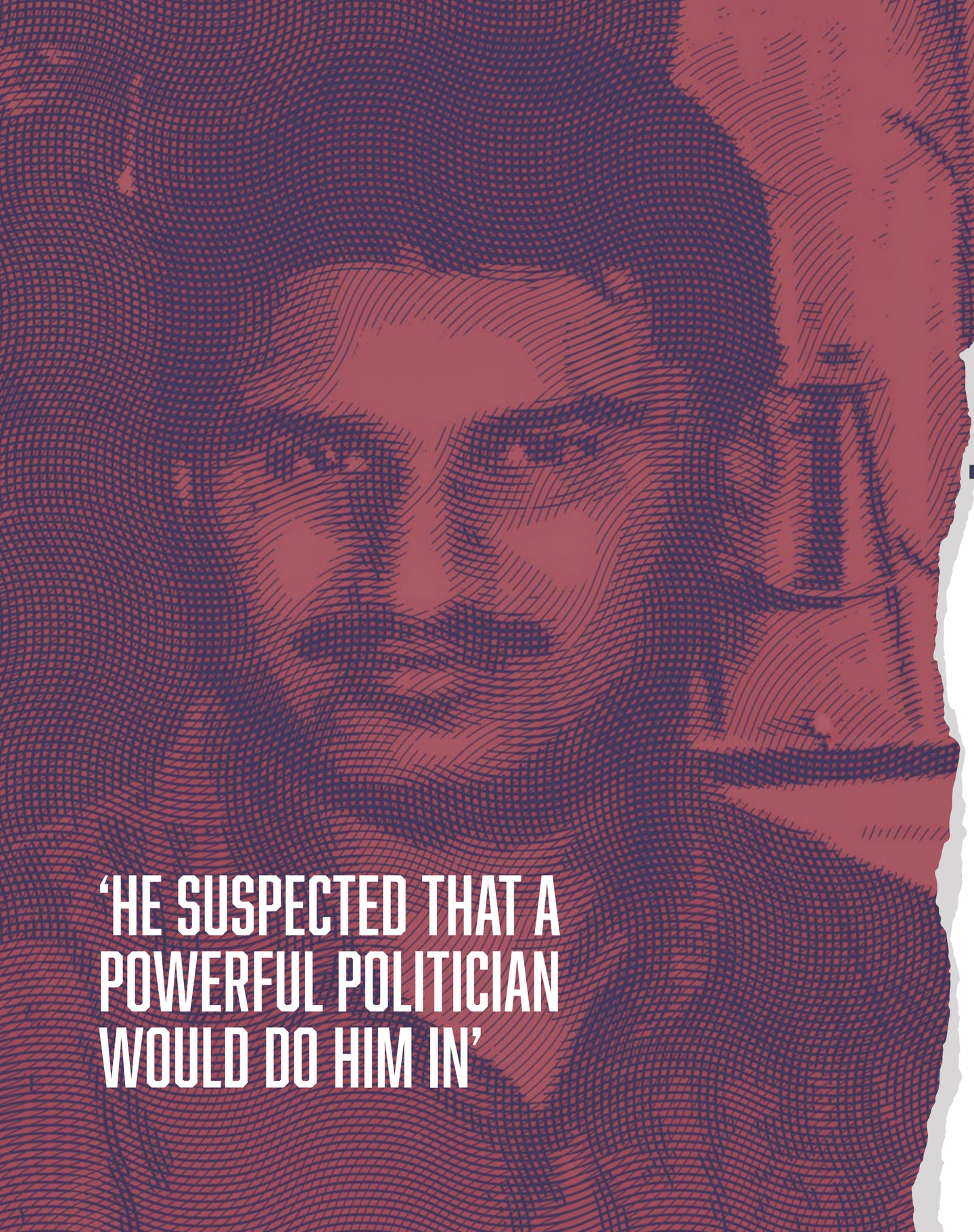
Most of the evidence used against Mebe Ngo'o and his wife, Bernadette, who was subsequently also arrested, came from investigative reports written by Koum. 'No one will forget Jules Koum Koum's courage and commitment,' said Jean-François Julliard, secretary general of RSF. 'Nothing scared him. He was always pressing the Cameroonian authorities to do more for media freedom. He distributed Reporters Without Borders assistance grants to fellow journalists and visited them when they were in prison. His objectivity, determination and active presence on the ground made him an exemplary correspondent. Media freedom has lost one of its most ardent defenders.'

Koum left behind his parents, wife and three children, Thierry, Jessica and Dorette. When asked about the death of her husband, his wife said: 'I do not want to say anything now that would traumatize our children. Furthermore, those who murdered my husband are still free and roaming the streets. They may decide to come after me and our kids. All I can say is that since man has refused to give us justice, we leave everything in the hands of God Almighty.'

Although Mebe Ngo'o was charged with embezzlement, the apathy shown by the police in uncovering the truth behind Koum's death does not bode well for journalists who expose organized crime and corruption. The fact the police investigation has stalled reinforces the belief that the passage of time always benefits the murderers. Organized crime derides law and order, and presents journalists with one of two choices: speak out and risk their lives or remain silent. ●

A front page report of Koum's assassination asks: 'Who killed him?'

Walk held at Avenida Jerônimo Monteiro, in Vitória, Brasil,
in honour of Marielle Franco and Anderson Pedro Gomes



Amit Jethwa
20 July 2010
Gandhinagar, India

AMIT JETHWA

THE NEWSFLASH APPEARED a little after 8.30 p.m. on 20 July 2010, as Bhikhalal Jethwa was watching television at his home in Khambha, a village in Gujarat's Amreli district. The breaking news alert said his son Amit had been shot at outside the Gujarat High Court in Gandhinagar, the state capital. Bhikhalal and his wife quickly gathered themselves and headed out, reaching the city by 2 a.m. By then, Amit, an environmentalist and transparency activist, was dead.

Amit Jethwa, 33, a pharmacist-turned-activist was shot and killed outside the court by two men riding motorcycles. He was attacked while on his way to his car after meeting a lawyer friend, whose office was near the court. Just a day before the murder, Jethwa had confided in Anand Yagnik, another lawyer – and one who would eventually become an important witness in the murder case – that he feared for his life.

He suspected that one Dinu Bogha Solanki, a powerful politician and minister, whose illegal mining activities he had been opposing, would do him in. Solanki's men had previously attacked and threatened Jethwa.

In the parched climes of Khambha, where Amit grew up along with a brother and a sister, he used to run the Gir Nature Youth Club. He fought assiduously to protect the local ecosystem, planting trees, opposing illegal construction in the sensitive coastal zone and crusading against wildlife poaching in the nearby Gir National Park. Through his activism, he had uncovered a lion-poaching gang and exposed corruption among forest officials.

But what earned him a spot in the crosshairs of Solanki, a parliamentarian with the Bharatiya Janata Party, was his campaign against Solanki's alleged illegal limestone mining in prohibited areas.

'Amit found out that Solanki did not have permission to operate in those areas,' said Bhikhalal. 'And, because of his activism, Solanki's business was being affected.' As a result, he routinely received threats, and after he was attacked one time in 2008, one of Solanki's associates told Bhikhalal to restrain his son. 'That was just the trailer, I was told,' said Bhikhalal, referring to the non-fatal attack. 'They said the whole movie still remained.'

Jethwa was trained as a pharmacist and worked in a local hospital where he exposed the illegal sale of medicines by one of the doctors. That was where he first ran up against Solanki, who, according to Bhikhalal, was connected to the hospital and had Jethwa transferred for speaking out about the illicit transactions.

From 2007, Jethwa began filing requests under India's Right to Information Act, which allows citizens to petition government bodies for information. He had filed more than 1 000 queries, according to his father.

'In 2009 the Act really started getting used by people, then this incident [Jethwa's murder] occurred, after which people might have become afraid to raise their voices,' said Vijay Nangesh, the lawyer friend whom Amit had met just before he was shot.

'HE SUSPECTED THAT A POWERFUL POLITICIAN WOULD DO HIM IN'

‘IN 2018, EVEN THE TRIAL COURT JUDGE SOUGHT POLICE PROTECTION’

For a few years, Jethwa persevered, using the information he received to move the courts. Matters came to a head when he filed a public interest litigation in the Gujarat High Court seeking an end to illegal mining activities, particularly within the five-kilometre boundary of the Gir National Park. During these proceedings, Solanki’s name emerged. A few days later, two contract killers, allegedly hired by Solanki, killed him.

It is widely believed that the local police were heavily biased in favour of the accused. Yagnik, himself a long-time legal crusader against the Gujarat government, also alluded to the nexus between politicians, the state machinery and the mining mafias.

The police were dragging their feet in its investigation, Bhikhalal believed, so he petitioned the court to transfer the investigation to the federal agency, the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), which he hoped would be more impartial. The local police had named six people in their investigation, including Solanki’s nephew, but not the man widely believed to be the real culprit.

In November 2013, three years after the attack, Solanki was arrested by the CBI. A few months later, the CBI also claimed that Solanki was the main conspirator and had enlisted the help of policemen and criminals in this plot. When the trial took place, 105 of the 195 witnesses turned hostile. Solanki had been threatening and intimidating the witnesses, and had created a vitiated trial atmosphere. Following a petition in the High Court, a retrial was ordered. At one stage, in 2018, even the trial court judge reportedly sought police protection. The verdict of the fresh trial is now awaited.

Amit Jethwa had left this building after meeting a lawyer friend when he was shot by hired contract killers

Jethwa’s father, Bhikhalal

After Jethwa’s death, Khambha village went into three days of mourning and solidarity. One resident, who did not wish to be named, recalled that thousands came out to march in support of Jethwa.

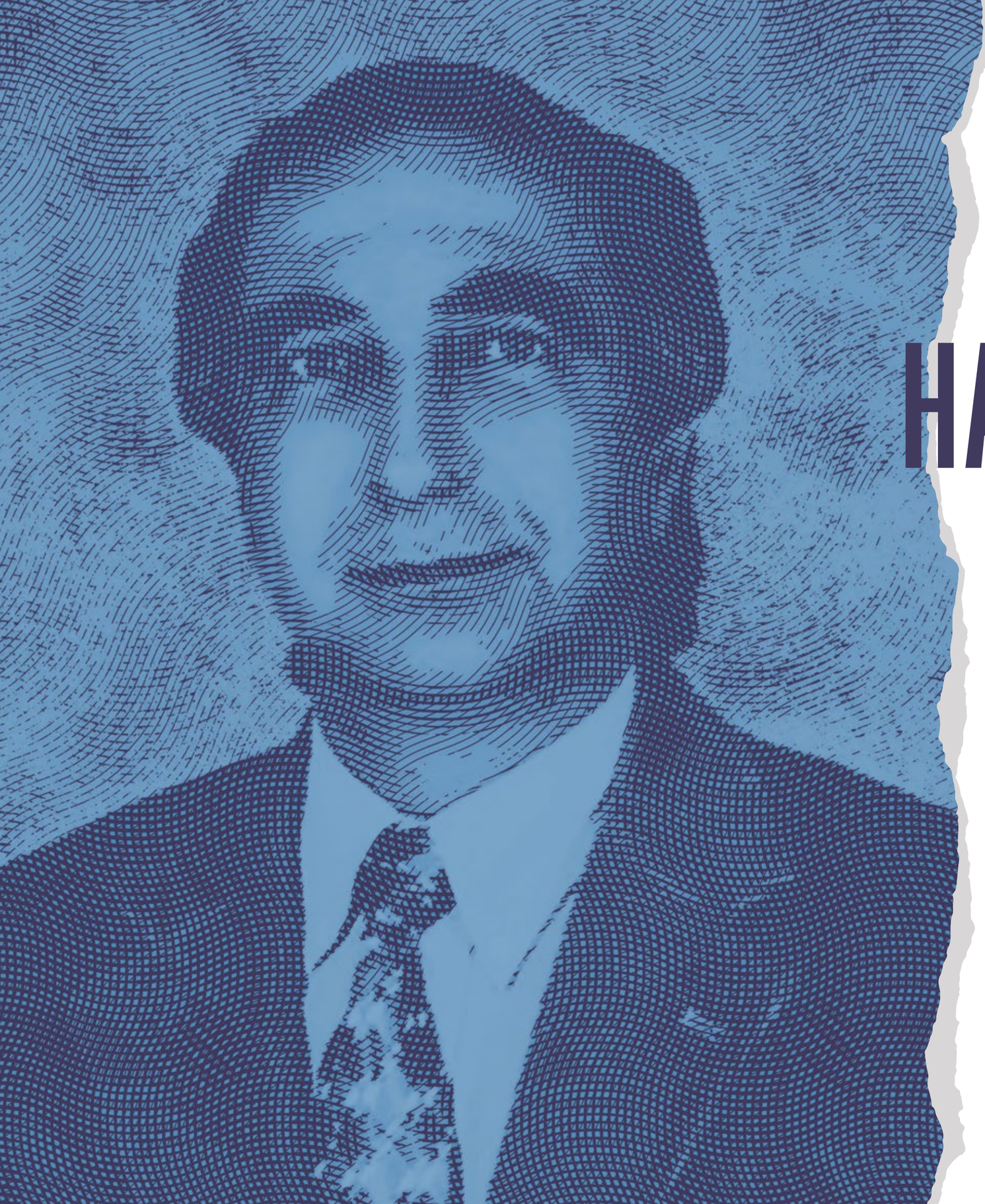
The killing, it seems, was aimed to both silence Jethwa and spark broader fear in the activist community. But Pankti Jog, a ‘Right to Information’ activist, believes it achieved the opposite effect, and only strengthened citizens’ resolve towards achieving their right to transparency. The day after his death, about 200 people, mostly activists, gathered where Jethwa had been shot and made a resolution to sustain his fight. ‘The pressure on activists and the threats may be increasing but people have not stopped asking for information,’ said Jog. ‘We said we won’t let the issues die down.’ Activists continued to lobby on the same issues Jethwa had been advocating, she said, and they won a partial victory when the government began putting up online information on mining leases.

The law minister, while speaking at an event two months after Jethwa’s killing, named him and said that stern action should be taken against those who attack activists. Jethwa was also honoured posthumously for his transparency activism by various organizations.

Jethwa’s friends and colleagues, none of whom were willing to be named, remembered an environment-loving man killed for doing the work that was important to him. One childhood friend and colleague dissolved into tears when recalling his commitment to fighting the good fight. ‘This is a criminal state, and society and the law are blind,’ said the friend. ‘Without the general, what will the soldiers do?’

Meanwhile, Jethwa’s father, Bhikhalal, is trying to pursue his son’s work through a new organization he has established. Gujarat has seen several attacks on transparency activists, accounting for 12 of 82 such killings in India, as of 2019, according to the database maintained by the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative.

‘All the families are silent except for me,’ said Bhikhalal. ‘I am the only one fighting against all these powerful people.’ ●



Cihan Hayirsevener
19 December 2009
Bandirma, Turkey

CIHAN HAYIRSEVENER

ON 19 DECEMBER 2009, 53-year-old journalist Cihan Hayirsevener was shot on his way home in Bandirma, a port town on the Sea of Marmara in north-west Turkey. The assailant immediately fled the crime scene in a vehicle that was waiting for him.

Several hours later, local police announced that Hayirsevener had lost his life at the Uludag University Hospital in the neighbouring city of Bursa. The announcement was intended to prevent social unrest from breaking out in Bandirma. In truth, according to the author's sources, Hayirsevener had lost his life in the ambulance on the way to the hospital. The bullet had severed a major artery in his left leg, and he succumbed to heavy loss of blood.

At the time, Hayirsevener was the managing editor at *Güney Marmara'da Yaşam* (meaning 'life in South Marmara'), a daily newspaper he'd founded that covered local societal, political and economic news. Located in the province of Balikesir some 116 kilometres south of Istanbul, Bandirma has a population of more than 150 000 people, and is home to one of Turkey's major ports.

Before his death, Hayirsevener had been investigating and reporting on several corruption cases that involved the Bandirma municipality, the town's mayor and several local businessmen. According to his colleagues and family, he had received several death threats.

'I am afraid. I think they will do something treacherous. I feel that something bad will happen,' Hayirsevener had told his friend and colleague, Ramazan Demir, onboard a ferry to Istanbul just two days before the murder. Demir added: 'He said that he would tell me everything in the next [couple of] days, but that never happened …

'Cihan was a senior journalist who had worked at leading national media houses. He later moved to Bandirma [in 1999], a town he loved. He started to cover the town as a journalist and investigated very troublesome topics,' Demir explains.

Demir is chair of the Balikesir Journalists' Association. Hayirsevener had encouraged him to run for this position, as he thought the organization could serve its cause more effectively. Later, both Demir and Hayirsevener joined the administration of the association. At the time of his murder, Hayirsevener was a member of the association's disciplinary committee.

A room at the Balikesir Journalists' Association offices dedicated to Cihan Hayirsevener

Hayirsevener's funeral ceremony was held in Istanbul on 22 December 2009. He had previously worked in the city, and his family still lived there. Family, friends, journalists, representatives from the association, human-rights groups and many other people attended the service. 'The reason why he was murdered was that he did his job and wrote the truth,' said Demir, recalling what the journalist's daughter, Gaye Hayirsevener-Clifford, had said at the ceremony. Later, in an interview with the Turkish daily, *Vatan*, she said: 'My father was a hero. He worked as a journalist for 29 years. He loved Bandirma and Balikesir and dedicated his life to fighting against crime gangs and corruption, which only harm the city.'

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, Hayirsevener had been reporting on a local corruption scandal involving three owners of *Ilkhaber*, a daily newspaper in Bandirma. They were found guilty of accepting cash pay-outs from a former mayor. Before his death, Hayirsevener's investigation was believed to be focusing on what the payments had been intended for.

'At the time of the murder, the owners of *Ilkhaber* were already in prison, but it didn't stop them from taking Cihan's life. Those people even owned a media house as a vehicle to blame other groups and promote themselves and their interests. Cihan had revealed their politically linked underground life, and the media started to cover this issue, thanks to Cihan's efforts,' Demir said. The corruption scandal amounted to some 20 million Turkish lira (close to US$13 million at the 2009 exchange rate). It included the construction of a thermal power plant, which Hayirsevener and his media house criticized.

At the time of the murder, the owner of Ilkhaber Media, Ihsan Kuruoğlu, was in prison on previous corruption charges. In 2013, he was sentenced to 17 years for masterminding and ordering Hayirsevener's murder, and another 10 years for establishing an armed crime organization, violating firearms law, and corruption charges. Surprisingly, the court also ruled that Hayirsevener's writing about Kuruoğlu was a reason for an unjust provocation.

Hayirsevener's killer, Serkan Erakkus, was sentenced to life. Five other Kuruoğlu family members and Ilkhaber Media workers were sentenced to terms that varied from two to 11 years.

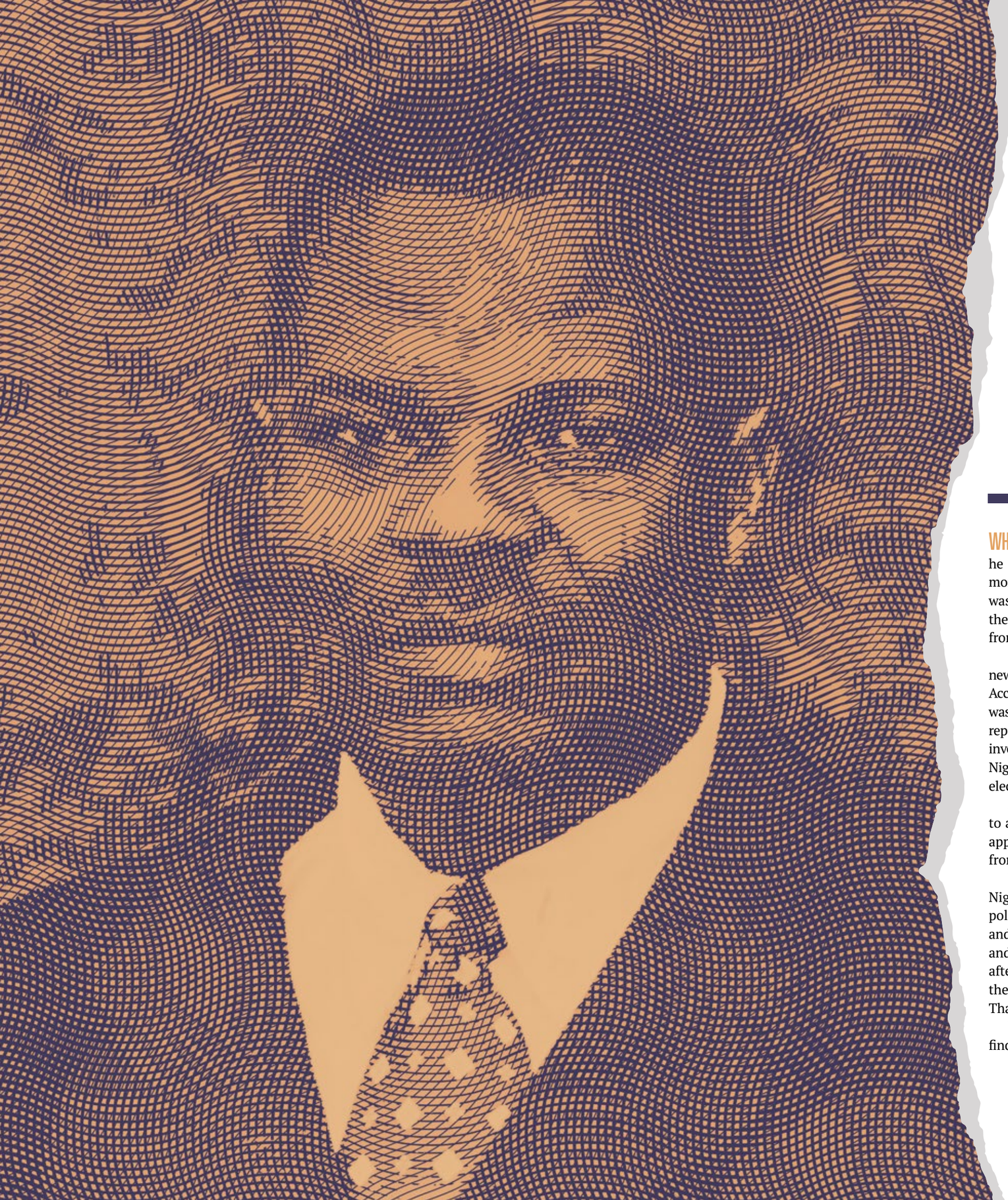
Reporters Without Borders (RSF in French) said it welcomed the court's ruling. 'The decision is an encouraging one for all reporters in Turkey who were attacked and threatened by powerful local interest groups. However, the court's interpretation of the unjust provocation was intolerable after the death of journalist Hayirsevener,' RSF said, as Bia.net reported.

'Being a local journalist is a very hard job. First, you always have financial issues and you do not have the support of national media. Cihan was receiving death threats but no one provided security for him,' said Demir. 'Cihan's murder was a message to journalists about what may happen to them when they report the truth about organized-crime groups and other dark structures. Unfortunately, nothing got better after Cihan's death and the court ruling.'

Demir and his association think that only journalists can protect journalists though their solidarity. Every year, the Balikesir Journalists' Association Organizes events to commemorate Hayirsevener and his murder to raise public awareness about the protection of journalists. 'We organize events at the anniversary of Cihan's murder; we tell his story to people. We also have a room dedicated to Cihan, which is open to visitors. We have not forgotten and will not forget Cihan,' Demir adds. Hayirsevener was also acknowledged as a martyr for press freedom by the Turkish Journalists' Association.

'CIHAN'S MURDER WAS A MESSAGE TO JOURNALISTS'

The author would like to thank the Balikesir Journalists' Association for sharing photos from its archive.



Bayo Ohu (full name: Ogunbayo Ayanlola Ohu)
20 September 2009
Akowonjo, Lagos State, Nigeria

BAYO OHU

WHEN BAYO OHU ANSWERED THE KNOCK on his door while he was preparing to go to church that fateful Sunday morning of 20 September 2009, little did he know that it was assassins coming for his soul. As he opened the door, the armed assailants wasted no time in shooting Ohu, in front of his two children. He died later in hospital.

Aged 45 at the time of his death, Ohu was assistant news editor of *The Guardian*, an independent Lagos daily. According to the Nigerian Union of Journalists, the murder was a hit: Ohu was targeted, they said, for his political reporting. They believe the murder is related to a media investigation he was working on into alleged fraud in the Nigeria Customs Service and his reporting of the Ekiti State elections, which had been marred by anti-media violence.

His wife, Blessing, confirmed his death was linked to an alleged fraudulent certificate issued by a recently appointed customs official, information she acquired from *The Guardian*.

Blessing spoke of the nonchalant attitude of the Nigerian police towards her late husband's death: 'One policeman came to ask me about a particular cell phone and if it belonged to my husband. I looked at the phone and told him it was not my husband's and he left. Then, after three days, another set of policemen came, sent by the inspector general [the police chief] to console us. That is all I have had from the police.'

Blessing is convinced the police did not do enough to find her husband's killer. Yinka Odumakin, spokesman for socio-cultural organization for the Yoruba people, Afenifere, was also curious about why the assailants took away Ohu's laptop. Odumakin said the police ought to interrogate the then Comptroller-General of the Nigeria Customs Service, Abdullahi Dikko, over Ohu's murder – especially given his press stories about Dikko, and because there have been previous accusations of misconduct against Dikko. According to Ayodele Samuel, a Nigerian activist, an individual called Olajide Ibrahim swore an oath through his lawyer, Festus Keyamo, that he had forged certificates for Dikko in 1995.

Although three men were later accused of the murder, like many similar killings in Nigeria Ohu's assassination has remained unresolved, and none of the authorities seems to be concerned, regardless of how the family of the slain journalist feels. A UNESCO publication reports that, like Bayo Ohu, journalists Godwin Agbroko, Paul Abayomi Ogundeji, Zakariya Isa, Nansok Sallah, Enenche Akogwu and Ikechukwu Udendu, were all killed, and yet the status of the investigations into their deaths was not available because Nigeria had not acknowledged or responded to UNESCO's official request to provide information.

'OHU WAS TARGETED FOR HIS POLITICAL REPORTING'

Scene of the murder

In Nigeria, as elsewhere, leaving such killings uninvestigated only emboldens other criminal syndicates, often allegedly headed by high-ranking state elites, in their activities. As long as the government and the police turn a blind eye, there are bound to be many more like Bayo Ohu who will be snatched from their loved ones for daring to challenge the power of organized syndicates. Former Nigerian president Olusegun Obasanjo, upon leaving office in 2007, had alleged that the killers of former Attorney-General of Nigeria Chief Bola Ige, murdered in 2001, were drug barons he was about to expose. And, more recently, the intimidatory power wielded by Nigeria's criminal networks has seen a highly performing governor of Lagos State, Akinwunmi Ambode, drop his bid for a second term after former governor Bola Tinubu, who enjoys the patronage of political thugs in Lagos, bullied him out of the race.

Bayo Ohu was laid to rest on 25 September 2009 in his home town, Iseyin, Oyo State. Yet justice has not been concluded in the same way. A former police officer, Ogbonna Onovo, confirmed that the police claimed his murder was a simple case of armed robbery on the basis of possessions that had been taken at the time of the murder. Two phones were later recovered; however, his wife confirmed they were not his. Many suspect that Ohu was targeted because of his line of work.

The failure of the police to provide a concerted response around the case is further emphasised by the fact that in 2012 the Lagos Sate High Court, headed by Justice Latifa Okunnu, set free Ohu's suspected killers, Ganiu Sulemon, Idris Balogun and Dada Adesanya, citing insufficient evidence and unavailability of witnesses. The three had been charged with conspiring to murder and murder. The judge referred to an absence of police witnesses submitted by the prosecution. In her words, 'They abandoned the case and did not turn up,' denying the court evidence needed to convict the men.

This lack of fidelity to the law by the Nigerian authorities seems to be a never-ending cycle. In 2016, when the federal government decided to reopen the case of Bola Ige and similar high-profile killings, an inquiry never materialized. Meanwhile, for those whose case files were reviewed, it is the same old story: no progress. All the while, Nigeria's organized-crime-related killings continue.

Talented journalists will continue to leave Nigeria and other countries where organized-criminal cartels can source hired assassins to carry out killings of media professionals, like Ohu. Those who remain and continue their investigative work do so at their own risk. When Nigerian Nobel Prize-winning writer and activist Wole Soyinka described the then ruling People's Democratic Party as 'a nest of killers', he probably meant it in a wider context – that no one is safe in a country where defending the truth, or voting against a certain party or individual in an election, is seen as a crime that carries a street verdict of death.

As the Nigerian government looks the other way, some individuals have chosen to step in and offer support to the families of the bereaved. In December 2012, the Richard Akinnola Foundation, set up to support the families of murdered journalists, presented a cash donation to Ohu's widow. But no matter how much is given to such families, it can never bring back their loved ones, whose sole 'offence' was trying to right the wrongs of their society through the power of the pen.

'ALL THE WHILE, NIGERIA'S ORGANIZED-CRIME-RELATED KILLINGS CONTINUE'

Sympathizers at Ohu's buria

‘MARCELO BEGAN SPEAKING OUT AND LEADING ENVIRONMENTALIST MARCHES’

Marcelo Rivera
9 July 2009 (the date on which his death is commemorated; exact date of death is unknown)
San Isidro, El Salvador

MARCELO RIVERA

WHEN HE WAS A TEENAGER, Miguel Ángel Rivera joined his older brother, Marcelo, to do community work in their home town of San Isidro in the department of Cabañas, El Salvador. In the early 1990s, they would collect donated books and take them to an abandoned building that had been used to store cadavers during the country’s civil war. This became San Isidro’s first library and cultural centre.

The Rivera brothers soon founded the Asociación San Isidro Cabañas (ASIC). Their organization has, as Miguel Ángel explained, an ‘umbilical connection’ to two other prominent community groups in the region – the Asociación de Desarrollo Económico Social de Santa Marta (ADES) and Radio Victoria.

Cabañas is a traditional stronghold of the Salvadoran military, with links to conservative politicians and businessmen. ‘There had been no protests here ever, not even during the war,’ said Miguel Ángel. Against this backdrop of terrified silence, the brothers began to raise their voices and those of the community.

Their work attracted a violent backlash when they launched a campaign to raise awareness about the potential dangers of gold mining. Pacific Rim, a Canadian mining corporation that was later sold to Australian company OceanaGold, had been granted permission to prospect for gold and silver in Cabañas. When they discovered deposits, the company solicited permission to build a mine. They also launched a public-relations campaign, promising that the mine would bring jobs and progress, and that the environment would remain healthy. The company tried to allay fears around two concerns in particular: its plans to strip gold from the rock using cyanide, and a decision to power the mine using the Lempa River, El Salvador’s main source of drinking water.

Cabañas community leaders went to neighbouring countries to visit opencast mines, similar to the one that Pacific Rim planned to develop. Miguel Ángel visited a mining site in Honduras. He remembers encountering a giant pile of rock that had been stripped with cyanide; there was an overpowering chemical smell and a school next door. The people who lived around the mine, he saw, were missing teeth and suffered from rashes on their skin.

The locals spoke to him about having lost their agricultural livelihoods when the mining affected the water table, and wells dried up. Miguel Ángel recorded these interviews and, on his return, ASIC showed the video to the communities of San Isidro. At the same time, Marcelo began speaking out on Radio Victoria and leading environmentalist marches.

In June 2005, people from the state partnered with community groups across the country and formed a central coordinating committee, the Mesa Nacional Frente a la Minería Metálica.

But as opposition grew to the proposed mine, Pacific Rim was making headway with El Salvador's political elite. Miguel Ángel said the company had a firm strategy in place by 2007. He believes that while they were canvassing bureaucrats in the capital to expedite the licensing process, Pacific Rim also established mutually beneficial relationships with various mayors across Cabañas. Leveraging the mayors' political networks, they would hire supporters to promote mining within communities. These moves by the mining firm exacerbated tensions. The list of parties who had a vested interest in Pacific Rim's success was growing. Their most visible obstacle was Marcelo Rivera.

'He was doing something that had never been done in San Isidro,' said Oscar Beltrán, a journalist at Radio Victoria, explaining how Marcelo was challenging long-standing corruption and traditional power structures by 'confronting them directly'. It did not go unnoticed – he barely survived a first murder attempt, when a truck with unidentified men tried to run him over. Yet he continued to serve as 'the visible face of protest,' Beltrán said.

In October 2005, a United States scientist named Dr Robert Moran released a scathing review of the company's environmental impact exam. The Salvadoran state was divided over the issue when then Salvadoran Ombudswoman for the Environment, Yanira Cortez, voiced her concern about the viability of mining in El Salvador.

'HE BARELY SURVIVED A FIRST MURDER ATTEMPT'

The protests in Cabañas were 'a desperate cry in the face of the threat that these projects may represent to life,' Cortez later stated in a deposition. She said that the state's decision to continue entertaining Pacific Rim's bid showed a 'disregard for human beings in favour of private financial interests'. Pacific Rim's progress in acquiring a concession then faltered and, in 2009, with pressure against the mining project mounting from civil-society groups and the media, the Salvadoran president announced that the government would not grant the company a mining concession. In an attempt to reverse this, Pacific Rim sued the government of El Salvador in April 2009 at the International Center for Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID) – a World Bank trade dispute settlement tribunal in Washington, DC.

Residents of Cabañas, El Salvador, at a celebration of El Salvador's win in a World Bank tribunal over Canadian mining company Pacific Rim. They hold signs protesting against mineral mining, 4 November 2016

A Radio Victoria journalist interviews Marcelo Rivera

Two months later, on 18 June, Marcelo Rivera was kidnapped. His body, which, according to the autopsy, showed signs of torture, was found about three weeks later at the bottom of a well in Cabañas.

The murder kicked off a wave of violence that lasted eight months, during which at least four anti-mining activists were murdered and many other people received death threats, including six journalists at Radio Victoria. Several people fled El Salvador, fearing for their lives. 'Every time we heard a car outside, we thought, "Shit, they're coming to get us", ' said Miguel Ángel.

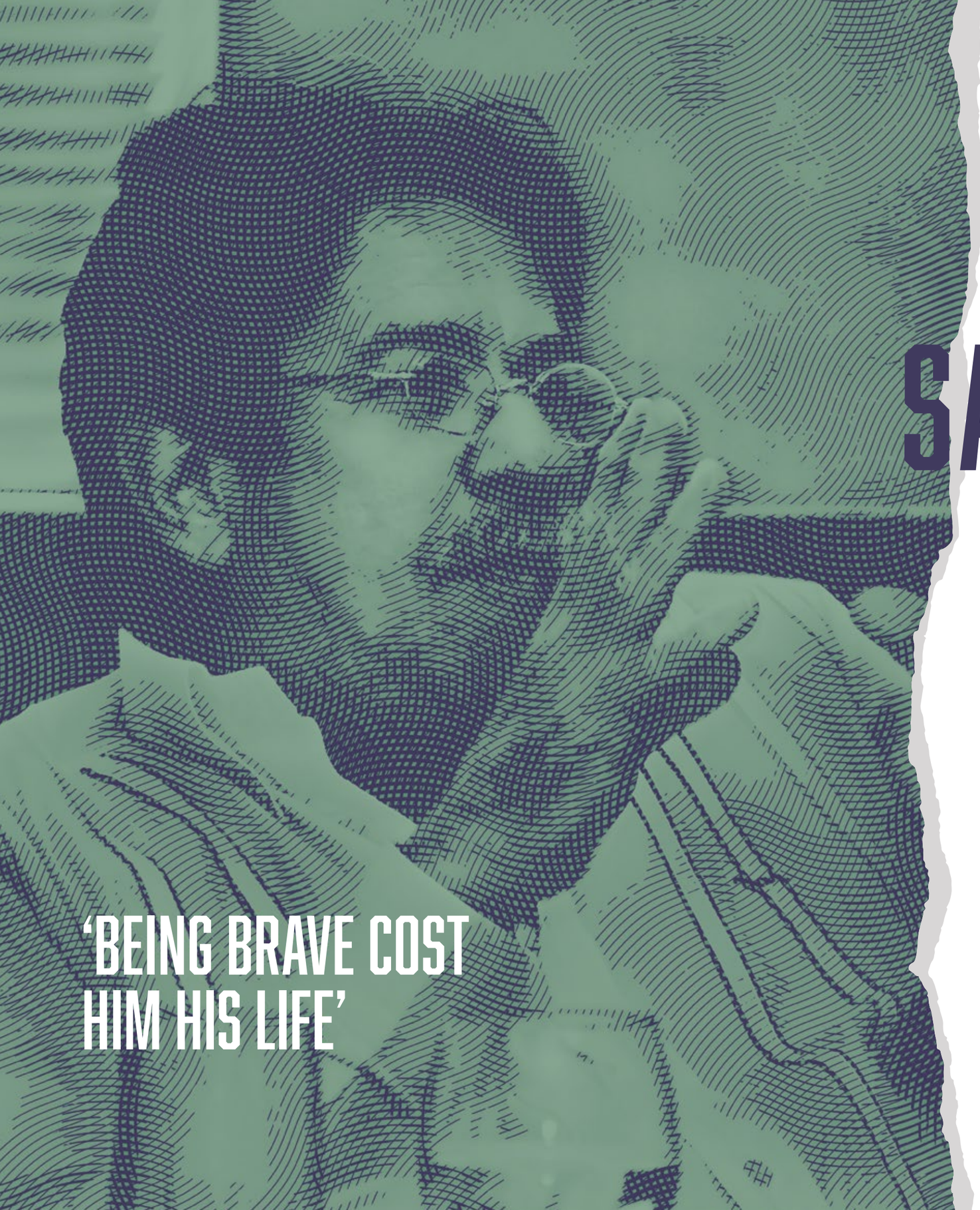
Local law-enforcement officers said that Marcelo had been drinking with members of a gang when a fight broke out, and that his murder was the result of 'common delinquency'. In September 2010, three gang members were convicted of killing Marcelo, and three more sentenced for covering up the case.

Given the details of Marcelo's activism and the context in which he was murdered, this was an unsatisfactory legal decision. Many believe his murder was, in reality, an example of a phenomenon that is frequently encountered in El Salvador, where gangs are hired as hitmen to carry out the dirty work of powerful people linked to organized crime. 'It wasn't just a small group,' said Beltrán. 'This was a large group of armed people who had military experience. The shells left behind where they shot Ramiro [one of the other victims] were from an M16 rifle. Those are military-issue only.' While these details fuel speculation, there have been few answers. But it seems clear that the violence was intended to advance pro-mining interests. 'It's not our job to investigate,' says Miguel Ángel.

A decade later, investigations have failed to reveal who masterminded Marcelo's murder. Pacific Rim has repeatedly denied involvement in his murder and the killings of other activists.

Beltrán said that the murder was intended to send a message: '"If we're capable of doing this to Marcelo, we can do anything to you." Emotionally, it hit us. Confronting the mining company meant confronting economic powers. But for us to be silent would have been inconsistent with Marcelo's work.'

In October 2016, Pacific Rim – now OceanaGold – lost its case at the World Bank's ICSID tribunal. And in 2017, El Salvador became the first country in the world to impose a ban on all metal mining. ●



Orel Elgardo Sambrano Toro
16 January 2009
Valencia, Venezuela

OREL SAMBRANO

‘BEING BRAVE COST HIM HIS LIFE’

ON 16 JANUARY 2009, after finishing work on his Radio América broadcast, Orel Sambrano went to a video store in Valencia, an industrial city in Venezuela’s Carabobo State, to look for a movie to watch later with his wife and daughter.

While he was waiting for the store to open, two men approached him on a motorbike. One of them dismounted and shot him three times at close range. The suspects fled, leaving Sambrano to die at the scene from a gunshot wound to the head.

The murder of Sambrano, a renowned journalist, shocked the Valencia community, and led to widespread national and international outrage at the lethal danger facing those practising journalism in Venezuela.

Sixty-one-year-old Sambrano was a professor at the University of Carabobo, the main higher-education institution in the region, and a lawyer. At the time of his death, he was dedicating most of his time to journalism. He was the editor of *ABC de la Semana*, a weekly publication dedicated to political news, and vice president of Radio América, a popular, working-class-oriented broadcasting company. He had also worked for 18 years as a political columnist for *Notitarde*, a widely read newspaper. Days before he died, Sambrano had arranged with Laurentzi Odriozola, the director of *Notitarde*, to resume his weekly column. Those close to Sambrano said he was excited about his prospective return to political commentary.

‘Do not take life so seriously, because we will not make it out of this one alive,’ was how Sambrano had ironically signed off his show on that fateful day. It would turn out to be his final broadcast, a permanent farewell.

Over the years, Sambrano had investigated and uncovered many cases of corruption and drug trafficking. He was highly disciplined in his professional life, with a no-nonsense attitude. But, to his relatives and friends, he was known for his empathy, charisma and good sense of humour.

Rubén Pérez Silva, who had been Sambrano’s first employer when he began his law career, and later a close friend, described him as a courageous man: ‘Being brave cost him his life,’ said the heartbroken Pérez, who was the first of Sambrano’s friends to arrive on the murder scene.

‘I SAW OREL ON THE HARD, COLD GROUND AND COULD NOT BELIEVE IT’

On the morning of his death, Sambrano had attended an interview forum called ‘Breakfast at the Newsroom’, which took place once a week at the offices of *Notitarde*. On this occasion, the interviewee was the then incumbent mayor of Valencia, Edgardo Parra, a member of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela.

Jacinto Oliveros, head of the newspaper’s photography department at the time, said: ‘That day we shared a good moment in the newsroom and at the conclusion of the forum, I took pictures of Orel and other newspaper colleagues. Then, sometime after noon, a police officer called me to say that The Professor, as several people called him, had been shot dead. I ran out and told my colleagues at the newspaper what had happened.

‘Upon arriving at the scene, I saw Orel on the hard, cold ground and could not believe it. He was my friend. I had to take pictures and was shocked by the sight of it.’

Sambrano’s murder made international news. The Office of the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights urged the Venezuelan authorities to investigate the crime ‘quickly and effectively’, while the Committee to Protect Journalists, Reporters Without Borders and the Inter-American Press Association also condemned the homicide.

According to investigations carried out by the prosecuting authority, Sambrano was killed for publishing information regarding the alleged links between businessman Walid Makled and his family and drug-trafficking networks. He had also uncovered the alleged participation of officials from the Legal and Criminal Scientific Investigations Corps and the State of Carabobo police, who were in charge of overall security in Makled’s family businesses, in criminal acts.

Mourners at Orel Sambrano's funeral

Orel Sambrano, meeting with colleagues

In March 2009, Rafael Segundo Pérez, a former State of Carabobo police officer, became the first person to be arrested in connection with Sambrano’s death, and in May 2010 he was sentenced to 25 years in prison for conspiracy charges related to the murder. José Manuel Luque Daboín, another suspect in the case, was arrested in July 2009 and detained by court order. Later, David Antonio Yáñez Inciarte, another former police officer, accused of being the man who shot Sambrano, was arrested during a drug bust in February 2010.

The prosecutor’s office also identified Víctor Rafael Reales Hoyos and Álvaro Luis Ospino Illera as being implicated in Sambrano’s murder. The pair were allegedly part of an organized-crime syndicate led by Makled.

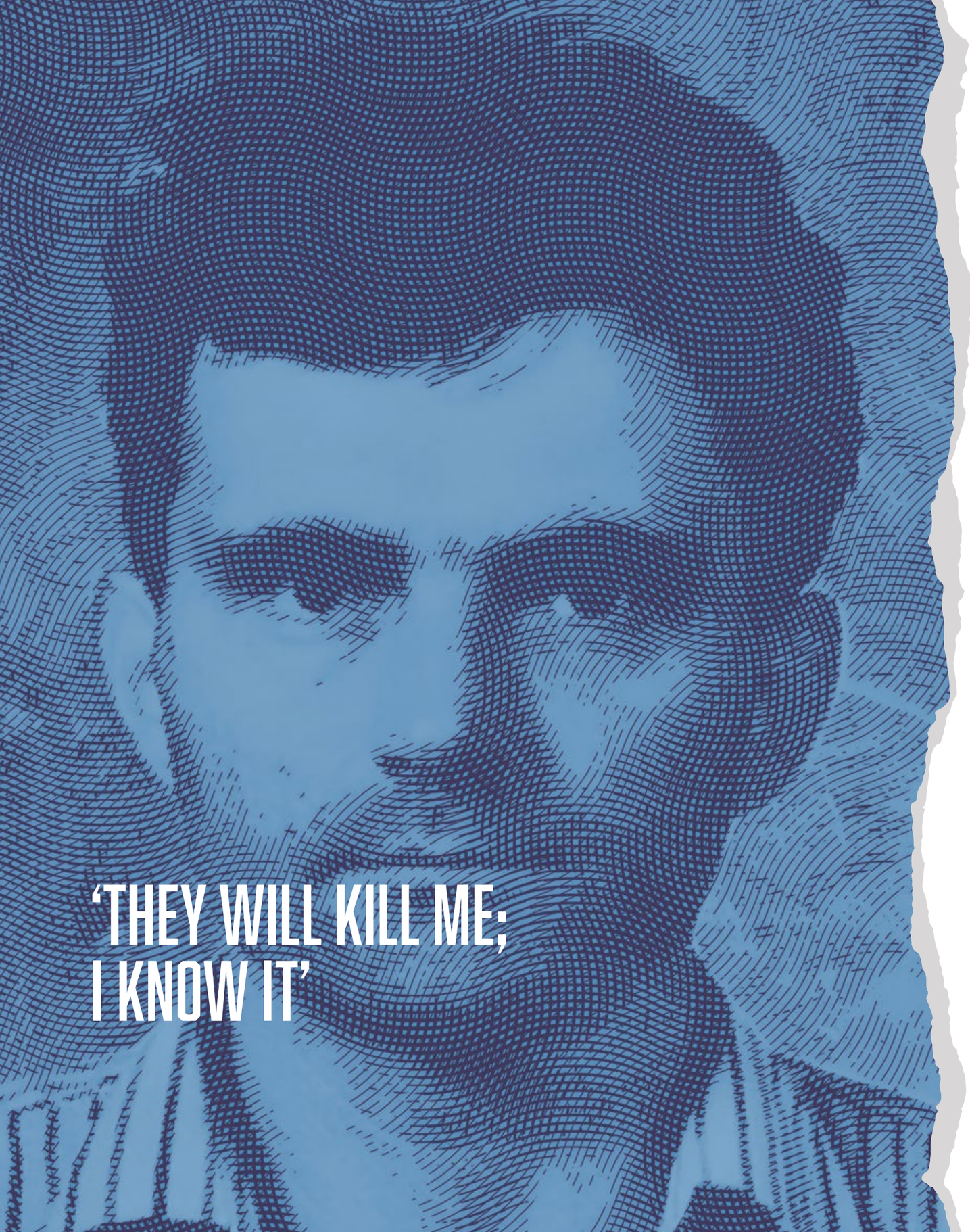
Makled, who was wanted for drug trafficking and the murders of Sambrano and entrepreneur and veterinarian Francisco Larrazábal, was arrested in Colombia, near the Venezuelan border, in August 2010, and extradited to Venezuela in May the following year.

In 2015, Makled was sentenced to 14 years for drug trafficking and money laundering, a sentence that was later increased to 21 years. He was, however, acquitted of the murder charges. In November 2016, Reales was sentenced to 20 years in prison on charges of contract killing. Ospino was charged with the same crimes.

Pérez, Daboín and Inciarte were also charged in relation to the earlier murder of Larrazábal, which took place just days before the killing of Sambrano. Larrazábal, whose farm was next door to Makled’s, was a witness in an investigation into Makled’s drug operations, and he was murdered in a strikingly similar way.

Many in the local journalism circles voiced words of respect for the late Sambrano. Charito Rojas, for one, remembered his fallen comrade as a vivacious and unfailingly cheerful person. ‘He was delighted when breaking new stories; he was in love with information and news,’ said Rojas.

Sambrano’s investigative journalism exposed some of the corruption, drug trafficking and organized crime that had been rampant in Carabobo, but which had not yet become part of the national conversation. His voice, a valuable and valiant tool in the battle for truth, was silenced by a criminal element fatally opposed to it. ●



Milan Vukelić
6 November 2007
Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina

MILAN VUKELIĆ

NOT LONG AFTER MILAN VUKELIĆ had told a journalist that his life was in danger, a bomb exploded under his car, killing him and injuring two passengers.

Vukelić, a whistle-blower on local organized crime in the construction sector in Bosnia and Herzegovina, was known for probing construction groups and disclosing information to journalists about irregularities in building projects around Banja Luka, the country’s second largest city. It was an environment in which whistle-blowers were not protected.

After his mother’s house and his car had been set on fire earlier the same year, he told journalist Vladimir Susak that an attack on him was coming. ‘They will kill me; I know it,’ the journalist recalled Vukelić saying. Susak told the author that despite his foreboding, Vukelić had continued to provide information on illicit construction activities, fully aware of the danger he was facing.

Vukelić began working at the Banja Luka Construction Bureau, an entity that oversees and controls building developments in the city, soon after he had qualified as a civil engineer. He was a dedicated worker and proud to be there. His sister, Ljiljana Todorović, said he had insisted on following rules and laws to the letter. That, in an organization where irregularities, non-compliance and bribery were supposedly reported, and where the construction bureau was allegedly involved in shady construction deals and budget irregularities. Construction work in Banja Luka is reportedly embroiled in corruption and bankrolling, allegedly involving political parties, the private sector and powerful individuals.

‘THEY WANTED TO MAKE HIM SEEM CRAZY’

Vukelić was in charge of approving finished construction projects financed by the Banja Luka city authorities. Milan was involved in the construction of completely new buildings and, without his signature, no development could be officially opened. In 2006, he refused to sign off on some of the biggest new construction sites in the town, including the City Park. He found works on the central Krajina Square were substandard and had missed the contractual deadline, citing several irregularities in the process. He also discovered that the price of constructing a city public-works water project had been hiked illegally by €1 million (close to US$1.3 million at the time).

Around 2006, he had begun to amass hundreds of pages of documents that he believed implicated the head of the Construction Bureau, Čedo Savić, in corruption. He asked journalists to inspect them, Susak said. ‘His office was packed with these documents. When people came to see them, he would lock the door out of safety. He was eager to talk about this reported evidence of a “construction mafia” to journalists.’

Vukelić had received threats, he told journalists. After reporting on city construction irregularities, he was summoned by the police, but instead of being asked about those irregularities, he told journalists and family later, he was interrogated about what he was doing. Police officers mentioned his family in a threatening way, he told the media at the time. Those threats did not deter him, but they did disturb him.

‘He was interrogated by the police as if he were a criminal. It was offensive, because he was an honest person. It affected him because he was afraid for his family, although not for himself. He told his wife to protect the children, to keep them inside,’ Todorovic remembers.

Vukelić's home was raided by the police after he made the documents public and they ordered him to undergo psychiatric evaluation. ‘They wanted to make him seem crazy,’ Susak explained.

During the police interrogation, Vukelić was shown a list of signatures of employees at the bureau, saying they were opposed to his making the documents public. All his colleagues, except for one who supported Vukelić, avoided him.

Another journalist, whom Vukelić met frequently, Miljan Kovač, wrote in his book (in translation, Those who are stealing are also killing: who killed Milan Vukelić?) that Vukelić's colleagues considered him to be incorruptible. The night Vukelić died, 6 November 2007, Kovač was due to meet him to discuss a new story about corruption that the civil engineer was about to expose. However, as he explained in his book, Kovač had not been feeling well and decided not to go.

Vukelić was killed soon after he drove away from the bar he owned when, just 200 metres from the police headquarters, a bomb exploded under his car, killing him on the spot. After the incident, a high-ranking member of the police, Gojko Vasić, told the media that ‘Vukelić obviously touched certain people who are untouchable and then they decided on this cruel act’.

The site of Milan Vukelić's murder, Banja Luka

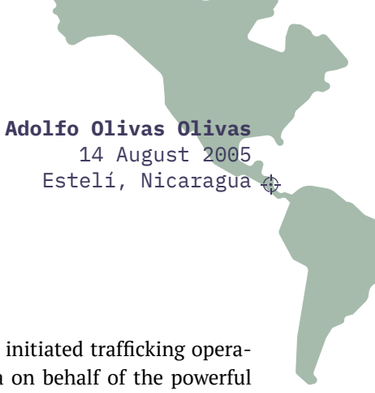
Vukelić's final resting place

More than a decade later, the killers have not been found. Vasić said in an interview that the murder had been carried out by a professional who was an expert in explosives. Local independent media in Banja Luka claimed it was perpetrated by an organized criminal group.

In December 2008, the police chief at the time, Uroš Pena, said the police knew who the perpetrators were but were having difficulties proving it. Hounded continually by the media, the police say the investigation is still ongoing.

Most of the cases around the construction mafia that Vukelić was exposing have not been processed by the police or prosecutor’s office. Although one rare case that did end up in the courts was concluded with a token fine. Vukelić’s boss, Savić, whom Vukelić had reported for corruption, was sentenced to a fine of €4 500 in 2013 (about US$6 000 at the time) for giving away a bureau apartment to a non-bureau employee.

Not long after the murder, Milorad Dodik, former long-time prime minister and president of Republika Srpska and current chairman of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, said no one from his party was involved in or responsible for Vukelić’s death, but refused to elaborate on how he knew that.



Rony Adolfo Olivas Olivas
14 August 2005
Estelí, Nicaragua

ADOLFO OLIVAS

RONY ADOLFO OLIVAS OLIVAS had never previously received death threats for his journalistic work. He had never before faced the dilemma of having to choose between pursuing an investigation and abandoning it over concerns for his own safety. But when he was eventually presented with this decision, he went with the first option. He ended up paying for it with his life.

In the early hours of the morning on 14 August 2005, Olivas was shot and killed outside his home in Estelí, northern Nicaragua.

Olivas was a correspondent for Nicaragua's, *La Prensa*, a newspaper for which he had worked for almost 15 years, and a long-standing reporter for Estelí's local radio station, Radio Liberación.

About two weeks before his murder, Olivas had started to publish a series of articles in *La Prensa* together with fellow journalist and co-author Elizabeth Romero, reporting on a drug-trafficking cell operating in Estelí and other parts of Nicaragua. The findings of their research showed how Nicaragua had developed into an international drug-trafficking hub. The country had hitherto been regarded as a transit zone for drugs, rather than as a destination or replenishment market.

The first of these articles, titled *Asoma gran red narco* (A great narco network emerges), published on 31 July, implicated several Nicaraguans and foreigners living in Estelí in drug trafficking. One person mentioned in the article was Samuel Gutiérrez Lozano, a Mexican who had allegedly initiated trafficking operations in Nicaragua on behalf of the powerful Sinaloa Cartel. Not long after Olivas had filed his report, Gutiérrez phoned him to refute the claims, adding that he'd had to flee to Mexico to obtain proof of his innocence. A transcript of their conversation was published in *La Prensa* under the headline *No soy jefe narco* (I'm not a narco boss).

Olivas had become increasingly interested in the issue of drug trafficking in Estelí after a clandestine runway was discovered on a farm near the Nicaraguan capital, Managua, in July 2005. He resolved to unearth the names of those residents of Estelí involved in the trafficking and began following the trail of Gutiérrez's brother-in-law, Freddy Luis Arango Cruz. He was the son of María Francisca Cruz Herrera, who would be arrested seven years later and sentenced to 15 years in prison for her role in drug trafficking as a liaison for the Sinaloa Cartel.

Shortly after the articles had been published, Olivas received a series of phone calls from a woman who demanded that he retract the information and stop his investigations, or else he would be murdered.

'NICARAGUA HAD DEVELOPED INTO AN INTERNATIONAL DRUG-TRAFFICKING HUB'

Residents of Estelí demand an exhaustive investigation into the assassination of Olivas

Although the revelatory articles were published under the bylines of Olivas and Romero, Romero did not receive any threats. 'Adolfo faced more risks because he knew the ringleader [Gutiérrez] personally,' explained Romero. She also revealed that Olivas had been in possession of key information concerning the drug dealers, including property plans. And when in April 2007 the Nicaraguan police conducted one of their largest anti-drug-trafficking raids to date, those arrested were discovered to have been operating just as Olivas had claimed in his investigative reports.

The threats did not deter him from pursuing his investigations. 'My dad took no security measures,' Olivas's daughter, Benazir Olivas Melgara, said. 'He didn't think they were capable of killing him.' The only precaution that he did take was to approach the Nicaraguan Association for Human Rights to relay his findings and seek their advice. The organization's director, Roberto Petray, confirmed that Olivas had asked him to accompany him to file a formal complaint with the Nicaraguan police.

On the day of his murder, Olivas was returning from a night out. He and a friend had been to a club called La Pasadita and had shared a ride home in a taxi. The taxi driver, Santos Roberto Osegueda Palacios, had first dropped off Olivas's friend; then, after arriving at Olivas's home, had climbed out of the car and fired two gunshots into the journalist's back, perforating his heart and one of his lungs. According to witnesses, Olivas's last words were, 'They got me.'

The crime took place at about 4 a.m. Osegueda claims that when he tried to collect his fare, Olivas pulled out a gun to shoot him, and he had fired in self-defence. But another passenger who was in the taxi at the time refuted this version of events.

In October 2005, Osegueda was sentenced to 25 years in prison for murder. The court's conclusion that the crime was a straightforward murder angered Estelí residents, who demonstrated outside the prosecutor's office, demanding that the case be investigated as an assassination with links to drug traffickers. The public outcry was based on the fact that Olivas had revealed the names of six people allegedly linked to drug trafficking just a couple of weeks before he was murdered: four lawyers, the son of a politician and an ex-policeman. Olivas's research suggested that these individuals were laundering the money they earned from trafficking drugs.

'THE POLICE DID NOT TAKE INTO ACCOUNT ALL THE LIKELY CAUSES OF THE CRIME'

The Inter-American Press Association, a media advocacy group, urged the authorities not to rule out of the murder investigation the threats Olivas had received. Yet, neither the Nicaraguan police nor the prosecutor's office has investigated the people revealed by Olivas in his reports. 'The police did not take into account all the likely causes of the crime,' said Romero. 'They preferred to close it as a common crime committed by a heated cab driver who ended up shooting his passenger over a payment dispute.'

Olivas's friends and family regret that the journalist's murder has been reduced to an argument about a taxi fare. Benazir Olivas said that the family have chosen not to look into the true motives of the murder out of fear of what may happen to them if they were to. 'The people on that list were from Estelí; if we keep investigating, they could do something to us.' ●

Relatives mourn over Olivas's coffin

Deyda Hydara
16 December 2004
Kanifing, Gambia

DEYDA HYDARA

‘[HE] HAD ALWAYS WANTED TO BE THE VOICE OF THE VOICELESS’

IT WAS 16 DECEMBER 2004, and editor and journalist Deyda Hydara had just left his office in the Gambian capital of Banjul. He was on his way to celebrate the 13th anniversary of the independent newspaper *The Point*, which he had co-founded with his friend of 35 years, Pap Saine. The two had planned to meet at the ceremony of a wedding they had both been invited to. But Hydara never arrived, and when Saine tried to call him, his phone was turned off. Later, Saine received a call informing him that the friend he’d had since childhood had been shot and killed.

Born on 9 June 1946, Hydara was one of Gambia’s most distinguished journalists. He had worked as a reporter in Senegal and as a correspondent for the French news agency AFP's Office in Dakar, Senegal for 33 years before his murder. But it was his more subversive work at *The Point* that is likely to have gained him his most powerful adversaries. He was a thorn in the side of the government at the time, led by former president Yahya Jammeh, who has been in exile in Equatorial Guinea since January 2017.

Saine and Hydara had grown up together, entered journalism together and in 1991 had gone on to create *The Point* together. Saine, who continues to run the newspaper along with Hydara’s son, says that the late journalist had always wanted to be the voice of the voiceless. Hydara had felt the need to educate and inform the people of Gambia, which he did most notably through his subversive column ‘Good Morning Mr President’. The column was addressed directly to President Jammeh, who had seized power in a coup in 1994. Jammeh was not a fan.

Yahya Jammeh’s 22-year rule was marked by widespread abuses against critics and political opponents, which included forced disappearances, extrajudicial killings and arbitrary detention. But it was the media that Jammeh and his government were the most averse to, as Saine explained from his home in Banjul. ‘They were watching us, monitoring us. They were not press-friendly; whatever we did that time they would take note. During Jammeh’s time, they were on the [case of] journalists who ran away; some journalists were killed; some were tortured. They did everything possible to discredit you,’ he said. ‘For 22 years, it was a nightmare for a journalist … there was self-censoring – you had to be

The place where Deyda Hydara was murdered, Banjul, Gambia

careful what you say, what you write and everything, so there was self-censorship [and] there were the draconian laws.'

But despite the threats to his safety, Hydara had continued to fight against the country's repressive government. He was notably outspoken on the issue of press freedom and was in the process of taking the government to court over the new anti-media laws it was trying to impose. It was just two days after the court hearing that Hydara was killed. According to Saine, he had received a number of threats: 'He knew that they were after him. One day in the office he told the staff, "I am wearing bulletproof. I know these people are waiting for me and want to kill me any time".'

Saine said that the combination of his column and the court challenge was the reason for Hydara's murder, and that he, too, had reason to fear for his safety. As soon as Saine got the call to say that Hydara had been shot, he went straight to the hospital where Hydara's body had been taken. Saine said that while he was at the hospital, government agents had warned him that he was also in danger. The next year, a high-ranking government official told him to stop the column, which he had continued in his friend's honour; it was an order from Jammeh, declared Saine.

Hydara was a role model to many and a fierce proponent of press freedom, and his death left something of a vacuum in the Gambian media, Saine said. 'Everybody was traumatized and surprised he was dead. A man helpful to international development killed like that. [His death] affected many young journalists

'I AM WEARING BULLETPROOF. I KNOW THESE PEOPLE ARE WAITING FOR ME AND WANT TO KILL ME'

or those who wanted to join the field to be journalists. After his demise, parents would not want their children to join the field,' Saine revealed.

While Saine's own friends and family asked him to stop working as a journalist, out of fear for his safety, others have encouraged him to carry on the fight: 'Some friends convinced me and said to me that I must continue the struggle and the legacy of Deyda and press freedom in this country.'

Under Jammeh's rule, Saine was arrested many times, including once in 2009 when he was jailed alongside members of the Gambia Press Union (GPU) for putting out a statement asking the government to speed up its investigations into Hydara's death. The government claimed that the group had accused it of being behind the death. As a result, Saine and his fellow GPU members were sentenced to two years in prison, but fortunately they were let out after a month.

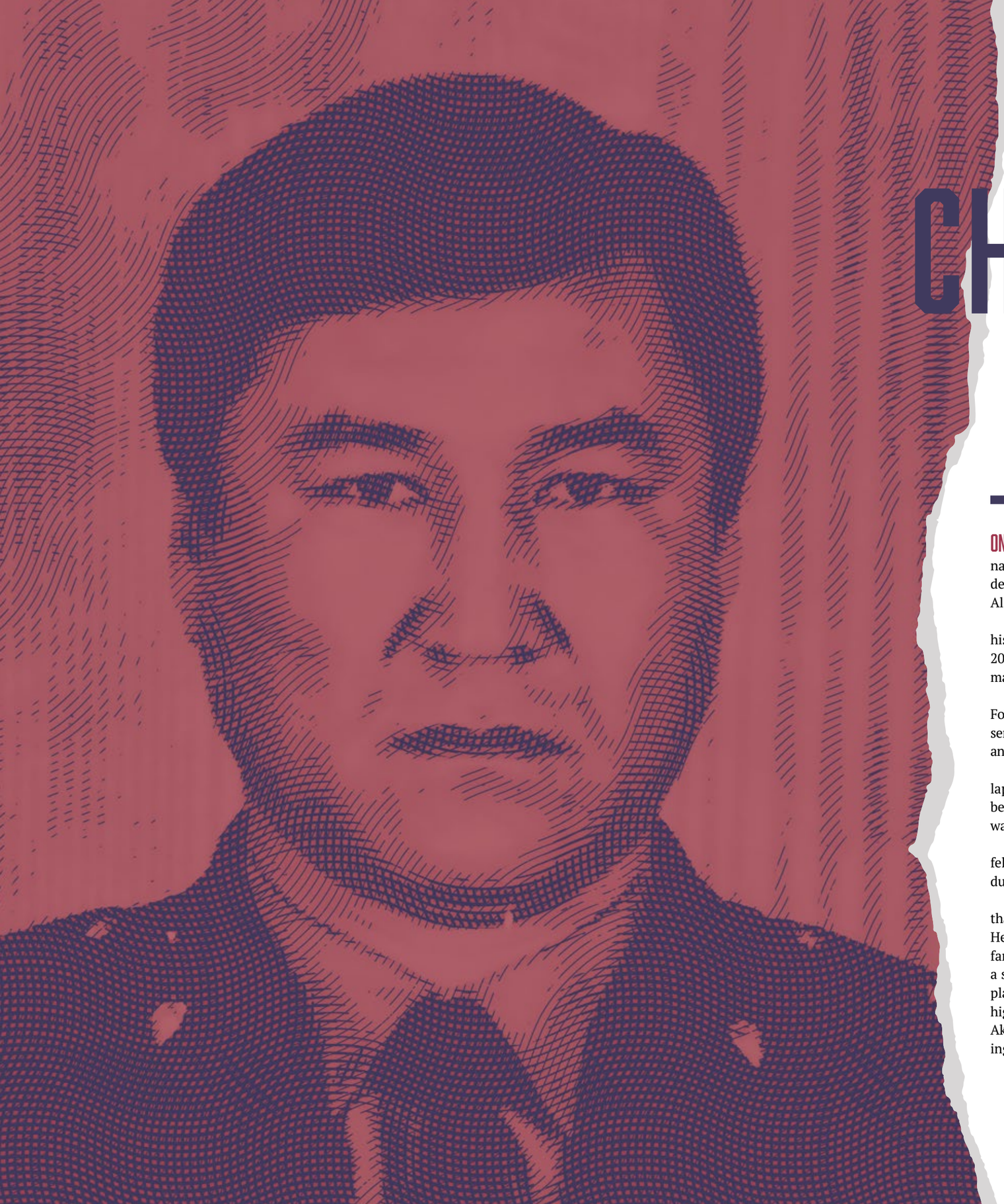
It wasn't until Jammeh's fall in 2017, after he lost the December 2016 election to Adama Barrow, that the 'Good Morning Mr President' column was reignited. The column is a legacy of Hydara's that his family was keen to see continued, and is an important way of remembering all that the journalist had fought and died for. And, in recognition of Hydara's sacrifice for press freedom, the front cover of every issue of *The Point* carries his portrait.

The GPU also celebrates and remembers Hydara every year. The union's secretary-general, Saikou Jammeh (no relation of the former president), said there is no doubt as to who is responsible for Hydara's death: 'Jammeh was so bitter with people having a dissenting opinion, he wanted to suppress the press and suppress the citizens and the best way to do that was to curtail media freedoms. He attempted that but didn't succeed. He found the person between him and that stupid goal was Deyda.'

Hydara's family went to the Court of Justice of the Economic Community of West African States over his death. In 2014, the court found that the Gambian government had failed to meet its obligations by not conducting a thorough investigation of the journalist's murder. The court also found there was a climate of impunity in the Gambia, 'stifling freedom of expression'. Hydara's family was awarded US$50 000 as compensation for the government's failure to effectively investigate the death and a further US$10 000 to cover legal costs. So far, only half of the compensation has been paid out.

In 2017, arrest warrants were issued for the two suspects in Hydara's murder – Sanna Manjang and Kawsu Camara. Both Manjang and Camara were former members of the armed forces, as well as members of the so-called Green Boys, a militia that carried out dirty jobs for Jammeh. However, both are now living outside the Gambia and therefore have not yet been arrested.

On 5 October 2018, the Gambian Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission was launched to look into alleged human-rights violations that had taken place during Jammeh's rule. It began its hearings in January 2019. Supported by this new atmosphere of reconciliation, Pap Saine and Saikou Jammeh claim it is now a lot easier and safer to be a journalist in the Gambia. However, Hydara's legacy and dedication to press freedom serves as a reminder of why the public need to support a free press and why the anti-media laws still on the books in the Gambia need to be opposed. ●



Chynybek Aliev
5 May 2004
Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

CHYNYBEK ALIEV

ON 5 MAY 2004, Kyrgyzstan celebrated Constitution Day – a national holiday, which, that year, marked 11 years of the independent Kyrgyz Republic. It was also the day that Colonel Chynybek Aliev was assassinated.

Aliev was born in 1961 in the province of Issyk-Kul. He started his police service in 1981 and was later promoted to colonel. In 2005, he was posthumously promoted to the rank of a police major-general and awarded with the Erdik Order (for bravery).

Aliev headed the Kyrgyz anti-corruption department from 2004. Following a direct order from the interior minister to investigate a series of assassinations, he set up the 'Sixth Unit' to investigate grave and serious crimes, including exposing organized-criminal groups.

The 1990s had marked a turbulent period, following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Organized-crime networks were becoming increasingly influential, and those who stood in their way risked violence and death.

On this particular day, Aliev's priority was to join and lead his fellow law-enforcement officers to ensure public safety and order during the national festivities.

The previous day, Aliev had told his pregnant wife, Dilyara, that he was close to cracking a particularly sensitive operation. He would ordinarily never share classified information with his family, but, on this occasion, he seemed unusually anxious. With a sense of imminent urgency and danger, Aliev explained that he planned to show then president Askar Akayev proof that six of the highest-ranking state officials had been colluding with Rysbek Akmatbayev – an alleged organized-crime boss – personally helping him to evade arrest.

Dilyara could not have imagined it would be one of the last things they would speak about. It was clear that the stakes were high in this special operation, but never before in the history of independent Kyrgyzstan had a police officer of her husband's status been assassinated. Later on, four other high-ranking police officers would similarly fall victim to criminal bosses.

Since the beginning of 2004, there had been seven assassinations of businessmen, criminals and one recently retired police colonel. At the time, Aliev and his department were investigating these crimes. The fact that over 30 assassinations had taken place over the previous two years only increased the pressure.

On 16 April 2004, Aliev detained Rysbek Akmatbayev's younger brother, Tynychbek Akmatbayev, a politician – who himself was suspected to be a crime boss and killer. During Tynychbek's detention, Rysbek repeatedly harassed and threatened the colonel by phone.

On 5 May, Aliev received one final call. It was Rysbek Akmatbayev. A few minutes later, the colonel stopped his car at a traffic light. Several dozen bullets fired from an AK-47 rifle perforated the vehicle, 17 of them piercing his body and causing immediate death. Aliev's colleagues who were with him were unharmed.

A few days before his death, Aliev had warned his brothers to avoid visiting their home province. His older brother, Askerbek, shared these details in an interview with a newspaper in 2008. It is telling that no major Kyrgyz paper or media house approached the Alievs for interviews at the time of the murder. Askerbek's house, meanwhile, was burgled – but nothing was taken.

A scene during a hearing of Rysbek Akmatbayev, alleged organized-crime kingpin

The police arrested the bodyguard of Almazbek Atambayev, who would later become the Kyrgyz president. Atambayev at first distanced himself from his bodyguard, but later fiercely defended him and said that they had been together on the day of Aliev's assassination.

Aliev's brother, Askerbek, said in a 2009 interview that the investigation of the murder had been incoherent and extremely slow. A lawyer by training, Askerbek studied the 24 volumes of the criminal case. He found conspicuous mismatches and falsified information, which affected the verdict. He concluded that, in the end, his brother had died because of corruption.

Rysbek Akmatbayev and his cronies were also brought to court. Described as a mafia boss and criminal kingpin, Akmatbayev had a criminal record of violent robbery, manslaughter and possession of firearms. He had previously served a term in Russia's notorious White Swan prison.

When the trial started, however, witnesses and victims refrained from attending the hearing – apparently as a result of extreme pressure and intimidation. Moreover, Akmatbayev and his core team somehow escaped detention, even though he'd been wanted on multiple murder charges since 2001. Before the trial could kick off, two witnesses were killed. One of them was a former police officer who had worked in Aliev's department. The officer had been dismissed for leaking sensitive information to Rysbek Akmatbayev.

Aliev and the vehicle in which he was shot dead

‘THE LAWYER REPRESENTING ALIEV'S FAMILY REFUSED TO SUPPORT THE CHARGES’

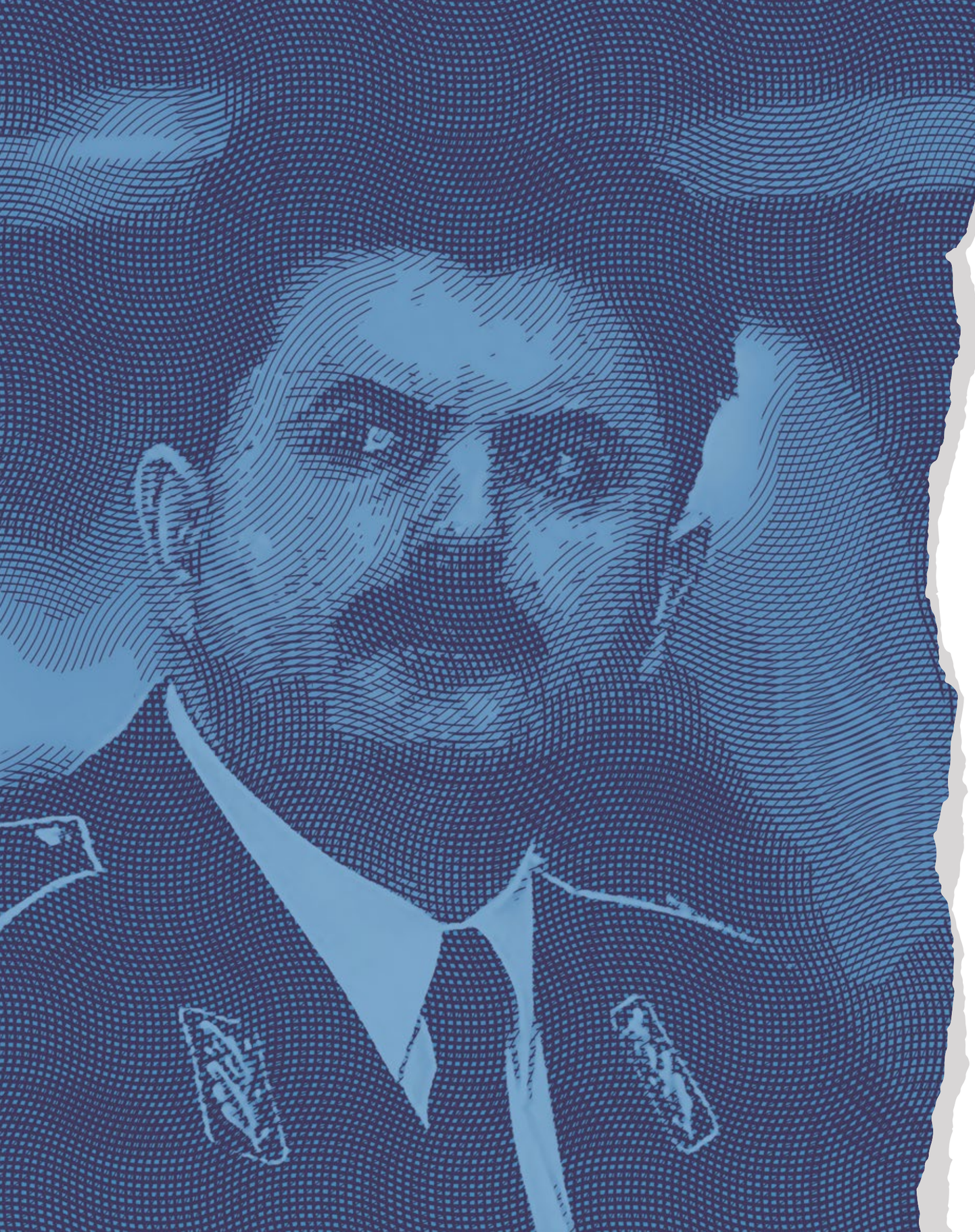
Only one of the four main television channels reported on the trial. The lawyer representing Aliev's family refused to support the charges. Even the prosecution refused to back their charges against the defendants. This led to all the defendants being acquitted in January 2006.

In the court, Akmatbayev approached Aliev's family, telling them that the then minister of interior had an interest in Aliev's murder. The colonel had been in possession of materials compromising six high-ranking officials. Their names remain a mystery.

Akmatbayev went on to successfully lead an electoral campaign for a seat in the national parliament, a seat previously held by his younger brother, Tynychbek, who had been killed by a rival gang. Rysbek would later also die in a drive-by shooting.

In 2009, the only defendant in the case remained the bodyguard, Erkin Mambetaliev. He was found guilty of three out of eight charges, including assisting in the murder of Colonel Aliev, and sentenced to life imprisonment. However, after the revolution of April 2010, Almazbek Atambayev returned to power. His former bodyguard was tried again, amnestied and released from prison. Mambetaliev became one of president Atambayev's most trusted aides.

In a 2008 interview, Askerbek Aliev said that his brother had been doomed to die early and while serving in office. He recalled that his brother had dreamed of owning a plot of land and some livestock. '[He would say], "This is true happiness: to graze cattle surrounded by nature. I envy farmers."'



Boško Buha
10 June 2002
Belgrade, Serbia
(then Yugoslavia)

BOŠKO BUHA

IN THE EARLY HOURS of the morning on 10 June 2002, Boško Buha, a general in the Serbian police and a deputy head of Public Security, headed home with a group of friends. They'd had dinner at one of the floating restaurants on the Danube in Novi Beograd, Belgrade's largest municipality. No one imagined then that Buha would be brutally assassinated that night.

He was ambushed in a hotel parking lot, where he was shot multiple times with an assault rifle at point-blank range as he approached his car. He was still breathing when the ambulance and his police colleagues arrived at the scene. But he had bullet wounds to the chest, which meant there was very little the medical team could do.

The shooter, who appeared to be a trained professional, immediately fled the scene. A large-scale investigation was launched, but it was hard to find physical evidence, since heavy rain had interrupted crime scene investigators that night.

Buha, a former Belgrade police chief, was known for speaking out against organized crime. Despite the lack of leads, there was a large degree of political pressure to solve the case, which catalyzed one of the most extensive investigations Serbia had ever seen. Dušan Mihajlović, the interior minister at the time, vowed that police would check every 'criminal nest' and interview everyone with a criminal record. This tactic seemed to work for the investigators, who were able to make initial arrests in October 2002 after interviewing dozens of people. The police identified Nikola Maljković as the main suspect. Maljković was a member of a Belgrade gang known as the Makina Grupa. The gang's leader, Željko Maksimović Maka, was never arrested and is still wanted by INTERPOL.

To date, no one has been convicted for Buha's murder, nor have the investigators been able to present a clear motive. The trial and the investigators' conduct would later be discredited because of alleged criminal procedures in the course of the investigation.

So, why was Boško Buha a target for a professional hitman? The answer might be found in his statements in the media and the sensitive information he'd made public. Vojislav Tufegdžić is a Serbian journalist and the author of a famous documentary about Belgrade's crime scene, called *See You in the Obituary*. In a series about unsolved crimes, Tufegdžić explains that Buha never hesitated to describe the real state of affairs in Serbia following political changes and the overthrow of former president Slobodan Milošević. 'He was saying that former powerful gangs that dealt in stolen vehicles had been diminished, but also warned that drug trafficking was in full swing,' wrote Tufegdžić. Buha was proud of the work he'd done to bring down the car mafia while he was Belgrade's chief of police. Many of these criminal groups

'HE WAS AMBUSHED IN A HOTEL PARKING LOT'

Mourners at the funeral of Boško Buha

were arrested, and a few mobsters were killed in shootings with the police. Buha not only spoke out about organized crime on the whole, but also warned the public that criminal groups were trying to connect with the new, pro-democratic government.

'I was offered to get in touch with people from the underground scene. Mafia tried to ingratiate themselves with people from DOS [a coalition of pro-democratic parties that came to power after the fall of Milošević]. They were offering different services and money to politicians, and even files that could be used to compromise their political opponents,' Buha said in an interview six months before he was killed. He also explained that gangs had armies of soldiers in Belgrade, and that their business was car theft, drug trafficking, extortion and kidnapping.

Could such statements show that Buha knew too much about the perilous intersection where organized crime meets politics? The answers may never be revealed, since most of the suspects fled from Serbia years ago.

One theory, however, points to the fact that organized-crime groups were angry about Buha's police work. He had been working on the so-called 'White book of organized crime', a document

'[DID] BUHA KNOW TOO MUCH ABOUT THE INTERSECTION WHERE ORGANIZED CRIME MEETS POLITICS?'

of the Serbian Ministry of the Interior that exposes some 118 organized-crime groups. These groups were alleged to have been responsible for some of the most serious crimes committed in Serbia. The book was published in 2002 and attracted huge media coverage.

Tamara Marković Subota is a prominent Serbian crime journalist who reported on Buha's killing. According to her, the Special Forces of the Serbian police were found to have been involved in the case to solve Buha's murder. Although that may not seem unusual, it should be noted that the counterterrorism commandos that form part of the Special Forces worked alongside Serbia's most notorious criminal group, the Zemunski Klan. Through its involvement in the investigation, the Zemunski Klan would have aimed to clear its members from being implicated in Buha's murder. On other occasions, members of the group had been tried in 17 murder cases, three kidnapping charges and two terrorist attacks.

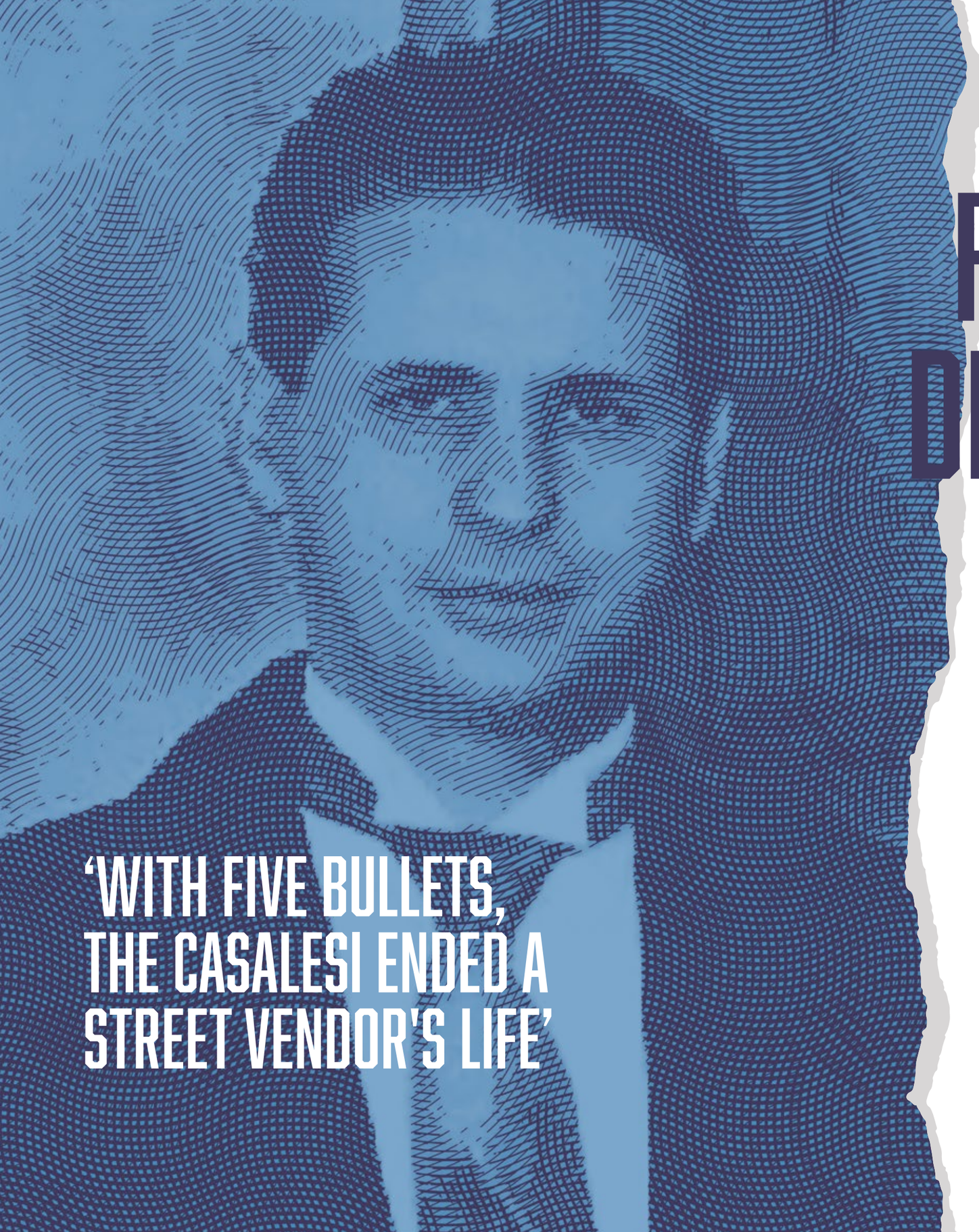
Mourners remember Buha

Furthermore, the 'informal investigations' were led by Milorad Ulemek Legija, commander of the Special Forces. Legija would later be sentenced for organizing the assassination of Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Djindjić in 2003. 'We never found out who ordered Legija to get involved in this case. That was never investigated,' says Marković Subota.

'Nikola Maljković, a lead suspect, even refused to say that he would stay silent during the court process. Anything he said could have been used to compare voices on phone calls that the police had secretly recorded. This way, the main piece of evidence was dropped,' Marković Subota explains, recalling the trial held in 2004 in the Special Court in Belgrade.

The story behind the arrest of the alleged perpetrators was said to be full of holes. One of the mobsters who worked with Maljković and Maka was kidnapped by rivals from the Zemunski Klan. He was reportedly tortured until he agreed to testify that Maka had arranged Buha's assassination.

Due to the lack of evidence, all the suspects were acquitted and released from custody. As Marković Subota recalls, they seized the opportunity and left Serbia. Maka was never arrested in the first place. 'The Higher Court ordered a retrial, but without indictees, the start of a new trial was never scheduled.' ●



Federico Del Prete
18 February 2002
Casal di Principe, Italy

FEDERICO DEL PRETE

IF YOU ARE KILLED IN SOUTHERN ITALY, there is always a suspicion that it might be your fault.

On the evening of 18 February 2002, Federico Del Prete was shot to death in a sidestreet in Casal di Principe, a town in the municipality of Caserta, at the age of 45. He left behind seven children. With five bullets, a clan of the notorious Camorra mafia, the Casalesi, ended a street vendor’s life.

Del Prete had been due to testify in court the following day against Mattia Sorrentino, a police officer who was a member of another organized-crime group, La Torre, based out of nearby Mondragone. The policeman had been extorting money from the town’s street vendors; in return for this ‘protection’ tax, he would allow them to sell their merchandise in the street markets. Years earlier, Sorrentino had coordinated the theft of six guns from the Mondragone police headquarters, where he worked. His role was just one of the many factors that led to Del Prete’s death.

The Camorra wield great control over southern Italy’s Campania region. Regardless of their scale, all businesses – from street vendors to large corporations – must pay the organization. As money flows to the mafia group, victims are too scared to speak out about the extortion they are subjected to. Between 1970 and 1990, more than 3 500 people were killed in Campania during the Camorra wars; other than the mobsters themselves, 400 of these were innocent victims, including police officers, judges and witnesses to mafia-related crime. Since 2000, the number of innocent victims in Italy has soared again in more recent waves of violence. However, Caserta’s struggles with the Camorra and its entrenchment in daily life are often overshadowed by the syndicate’s more notorious presence in Campania’s capital, Naples.

Del Prete was a simple man with little formal education. Following in his family’s footsteps, Del Prete had always traded in the streets. It is a demanding job, requiring workers to move from town to town each day. Having grown up in a home with 12 brothers, Del Prete also had an innate instinct to defend the poorest and weakest members of society.

The Camorra is not the only threat facing street vendors, who typically lack the resources and knowledge to defend their rights: none of the region’s municipalities provide basic services to enable these traders to work with dignity, such as toilets, water and electricity. Thus, Del Prete was confronted with two types of adversity – and no form of recourse for either.

Del Prete wanted to establish a trade union for street vendors, a move that would completely change the relationship between the Camorra and local businesses. A few months after its inception in 2000, the National Autonomous Union of Street Vendors grew to almost 5 000 members, all of whom alleged they had been denied certain basic rights and were victims of administrative wrongdoing.

As Del Prete gained their trust, members started to talk among themselves about the Camorra’s widespread racketeering that was affecting every town in the area as the syndicate extorted its victims. The Camorra violently coerced vendors with guns,

demanding money. Although these acts occurred in the street, in plain view, nobody ever intervened or spoke out, because the Camorra had full control over every social facet of the town.

Del Prete started documenting complaints about mafia activity and sent them to the local police, the Carabinieri, lawyers and municipalities. His name became ubiquitous as papers signed with his name appeared everywhere, putting himself at significant risk from the Camorra. At the time of his death, Del Prete had personally signed 86 complaints about criminal activity in the land of *omertà* (code of silence about criminal activity). As one detective said:

> The first time I saw a complaint by Federico, I couldn't believe my eyes. Not only did it report in detail how the Camorra was asking for money, but there was also a signature. I mean, at the time no one was talking; fear was the omnipresent emotion! When I received the fax, I really didn't know what was going on, but later on, I realized that I'd met a true fearless hero.

Because of Del Prete's brave initiative, detective Massimiliano Ercolano apprehended Sorrentino, who was a member of the La Torre clan. This was unprecedented.

Raffaele Cantone, the judge who presided over the trial against Del Prete's killers, recalled how he had uncovered another dramatic development: the 'plastic bag racket'. Cantone told the author:

'LATER ON, I REALIZED THAT I'D MET A TRUE FEARLESS HERO'

Scene of the killing

> [The] Camorra imposed itself on every street vendor. […] They were forced to buy plastic bags for five euros per kilo, instead of their standard price, which is around 1.23 euros per kilo. […] They were making millions of euros per year at the expense of those small and poor market businesses that battle on. […] And Federico wrote about every single problem and sent it to us.

On the day of Del Prete's funeral, only his family attended; none of the union members showed up. His death was met with silence and isolation as rumours of how perhaps he had done something wrong and how perhaps he was 'one of them' started circulating. At first, his legacy was erased.

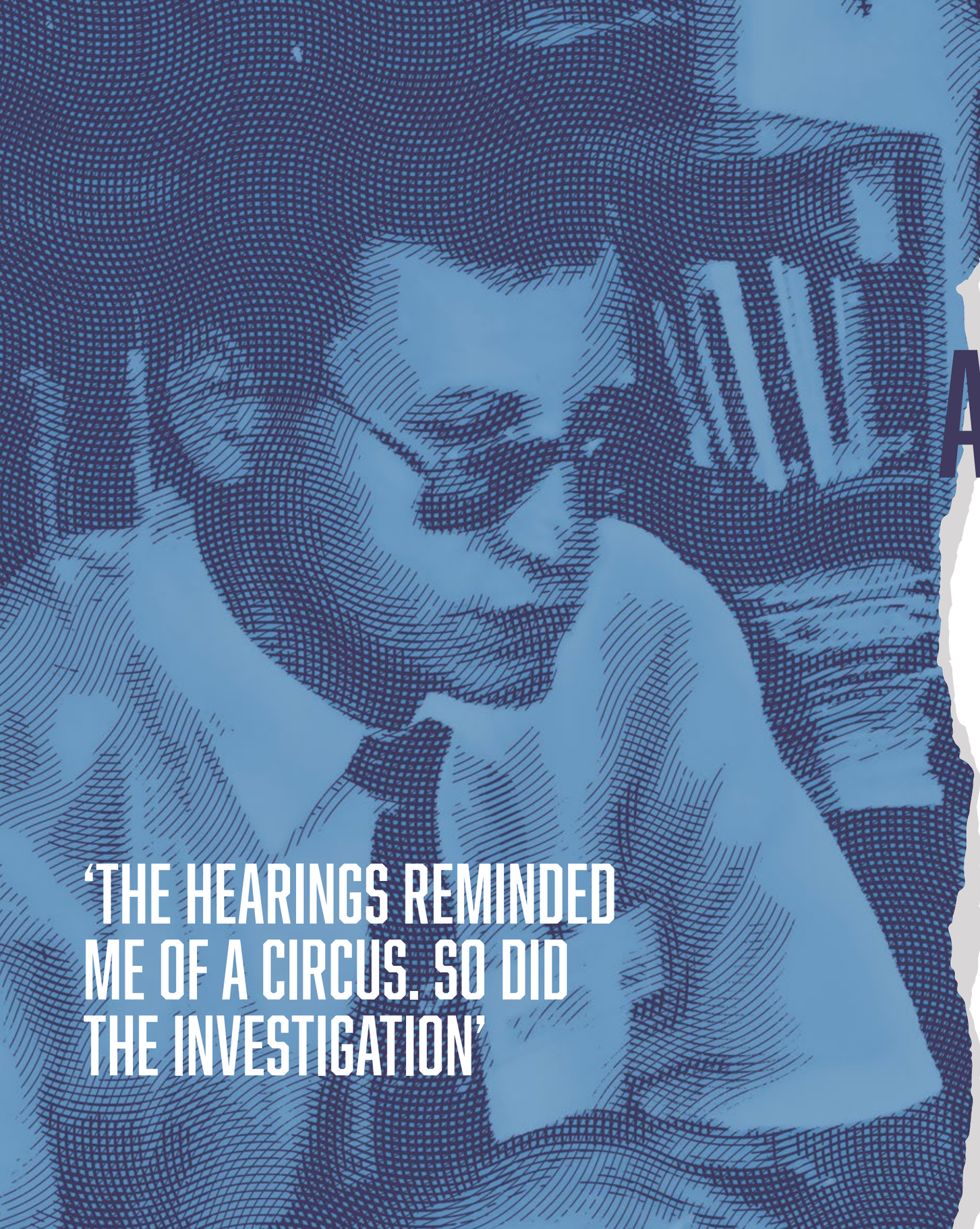
Despite the initial silence surrounding his death, Del Prete's family, along with support from news reporters, revived his memory as time passed. Del Prete's older brother, Vincenzo, spoke of how he had tried to protect his bravely determined brother, saying that he had tried to persuade him to emigrate to Venezuela. 'I could raise some money and [help him] start all over, but he didn't want any help'. Del Prete said that he couldn't give up his good work or betray the people who trusted him.

Today, Del Prete's example lives on: one of his sons produces ecologically-friendly plastic bags named in his honour. A property formerly occupied by the Camorra, and later confiscated by the state, was turned into a public space with an open-air market commemorating this working-class hero. Furthermore, street vendors began to acquire their rights, and fear and silence were replaced with platforms for constructive complaints and cooperation with law enforcement.

Del Prete's killer, Antonio Corvino, was ultimately convicted (he is now a *pentito* – an ex-mafia member who turns state witness), along with Sorrentino. Corvino also named accomplices, senior members of the Casalesi group, but they could not be convicted.

Del Prete's story is today widely told to those who visit Casal di Principe. What was once a Camorra town, which headquartered and housed one of Campania's most brutal clans, is now a free place that hosts a museum dedicated to the Camorra's innocent victims. Houses and buildings that once belonged to the Camorra are now used by the community; the town's mayor recently inaugurated a school on property confiscated from the syndicate. Because of Del Prete's activism and the sacrifices he made to defend his rights and working conditions of his fellow street vendors, economic life is once again emerging in this former mafia stronghold. ●

In a square in Casal di Principe, a public sign honours Del Prete



Igor Alexandrov
7 July 2001
Slavyansk, Ukraine

IGOR ALEXANDROV

‘THE HEARINGS REMINDED ME OF A CIRCUS. SO DID THE INVESTIGATION’

IGOR ALEXANDROV’S LAST TELEVISION SHOW was flighted on 13 April 2001. It was the third instalment in a four-part investigative series about various murders that had taken place in the Ukrainian cities of Slavyansk and Kramatorsk, located in the Donetsk region. The documentaries included the case of a Kramatorsk entrepreneur known in criminal circles as Yermak, as well as the murder of Slavyansk businessman Andrei Sobko.

Alexandrov was an established investigative journalist and editor-in-chief of the local Slavyansk TV station, TOR. In the third episode of his programme, *Bez Retushi* (meaning ‘without touching up’), Alexandrov announced that the fourth episode would reveal the names of those responsible for a series of murders. This promise never materialized. As he entered the offices of the TV station on 3 July 2001, he was heavily beaten up by a group of thugs armed with baseball bats. He died from severe head injuries four days later.

One of Alexandrov’s primary sources of information on organized-crime connections to various murders was Oleg Solodun, formerly the chief of the department responsible for combating organized crime in Kramatorsk. Solodun had been dismissed two years earlier after he discovered that his superior was involved in contract killings. Solodun explained in an interview: ‘[The contract killings] were committed in order to establish full control over the region by an organized-criminal group called 17 Site.’ He added: ‘During the investigation into the murder of “Yermak”, I received trustworthy information about the involvement of [the] Rybak [brothers] and my immediate superior, Police Lieutenant-Colonel VK Bantush.’

He immediately reported this to Volodymyr Malyshev, who headed the department for combating organized crime at the time. However, Solodun soon found that he instead became the subject of an investigation. ‘An official investigation was conducted against me and I was fired, while my subordinate was accused of possessing illegal drugs and imprisoned for six months,’ he said.

Svetlana Vyunichenko, editor at the local television channel TV plus, launched her journalistic career thanks to Alexandrov. After his murder, she covered the investigation and trial for local media. She says that Alexandrov was the first person who talked about the Donbas region as being heavily criminalized. ‘Donbas was a starting point for criminals to come to power. In those times, it was an unpopular topic. No articles were written, and no films made.’ In an interview, Vyunichenko recalled that the investigation and trial following Alexandrov’s murder left much to be desired. ‘The hearings reminded me of a circus. So did the investigation,’ she said.

The TV station building where Igor Alexandrov worked and was murdered

In July 2001, the authorities accused Yuri Verdyuk, a homeless man from Slavyansk, of murdering Alexandrov. He was acquitted in May the following year. The public reacted with anger and shock. Later, in 2006, 12 people were arrested and convicted for the murder. On 6 June, the Lugansk Appeal Court sentenced five people. Two brothers, Aleksandr and Dmitri Rybak, were sentenced to 15 and 11 years in jail, respectively, as the instigators of the murder; Aleksandr Onishko and Ruslan Turussov, the perpetrators, were sentenced to 12 and six years, respectively; while Serguei Koritski, said to be their accomplice, was sentenced to two and a half years.

Solodun, for one, isn't satisfied. While he agrees that the Rybak brothers were rightly found guilty for orchestrating Alexandrov's murder, he believes that Viktor Pshonka – the Donetsk prosecutor until 2003, who oversaw the first investigation of Alexandrov's murder – should be also be charged, together with former Ukrainian president, Petro Poroshenko. Despite many irregularities, Pshonka was promoted to become Ukraine's Prosecutor General in 2010.

Solodun says that Ukraine hasn't changed much since the rule of former president Leonid Kuchma ended in 2005. 'Ukraine is a criminal country. Little has changed,' he said. However, he added that large crowds had attended Alexandrov's funeral, something he believes the government would have taken note of. 'Alexandrov is a symbol of the fight against corruption, not only for the Donetsk region but the whole of Ukraine.'

Under Kuchma's administration, and then during the Maidan protests, which sparked the Ukrainian Revolution of 2014, Ukraine was considered one of Europe's most hostile environments for journalists.

Vyunichenko says that although Alexandrov made great headway in investigating organized crime, she doesn't believe he was able to change the situation. She says that even if Alexandrov's life had been spared in 2001, he would most likely have been killed for another investigation. 'But our society is changing. And it proves his death wasn't senseless. He has become a source of hope. He invited us to take up the fight,' she said.

Solodun, who published a book about the Alexandrov case, and who decided to stand by his principles until the end, said: 'I was fired in 1999 as a result of a falsified official investigation. In 2005, I was rehabilitated by the court, as the case reached the Supreme Court of Ukraine and the European Court of Human Rights.' In 2005, he was appointed at the Ministry of Interior once more, but after he'd 'blown the whistle', he didn't feel comfortable there any more. 'After Viktor Yanukovych's election as president, I resigned for moral and ethical reasons. Now I'm retired.'

Alexandrov with his wife and children

'HE WAS READY TO DO ANYTHING FOR THE PEOPLE HE LOVED AND THE CAUSE HE BELIEVED IN'

Anna Glavatsky, Alexandrov's daughter, hasn't read Solodun's book yet. She says she's not ready. She was 16 when her father was murdered. 'He was ready to do anything for the people he loved and the cause he believed in. Whether he had problems at work, we could not say for sure, because he'd always protect the family from his professional troubles. We are seeing changes in Ukraine. There is hope for the better.'

In February 2014, in a series of military interventions, the Russian military occupied the Crimea territory of Ukraine, annexing it, and, later, the Donbas region, in eastern Ukraine, in what has been seen by some as a violation of Ukraine's sovereignty. Slavyansk was one of the first cities attacked by Russian separatists during the Ukrainian crisis, after Yanukovych abandoned a European path for Ukraine, which resulted in a massive national revolt known as Euromaidan. The conflict in Slavyansk lasted for three months, and, on 5 July, the Ukrainian army managed to retake the city from the Russian-backed separatists. Currently, Slavyansk remains within Ukrainian jurisdiction, and although just 30 kilometres from the war zone, the city is slowly recovering from the conflict.

'I take care of my dad's grave,' said Anna, 'and I think about him and recall him only in superlatives. Sometimes, I wonder what kind of grandfather he would have been for my children. I miss him very much.'

Milan Pantić
11 June 2001
Jagodina, Serbia
(then Yugoslavia)

MILAN PANTIĆ

ON THE MORNING OF 11 JUNE 2001, Serbian journalist Milan Pantić went to buy some milk and a loaf of bread. He returned to his home in the Serbian city of Jagodina, arriving at the entrance to his apartment building just before 8 a.m. As he entered the front door on Branka Radicevica Street, Pantić was attacked and fatally hit with a blunt object. Reportedly, eyewitnesses saw two attackers fleeing the scene.

Some 18 years later, the case remains a mystery.

Pantić was a correspondent for the Serbian daily, *Večernje Novosti* (meaning 'evening news'). He was born in 1954 in a small town near Rekovac in central Serbia. He had previously worked at a local newspaper called *Novi Put* ('new path'). He was investigating shady privatization deals in Jagodina, which were widely believed to have been facilitated by corruption.

Serbian strongman Slobodan Milošević was toppled after his defeat in the 2000 elections, a few months before Pantić's killing amid massive anti-government protests. Milošević's legacy – one of mass murders, sanctions, Serbian isolation, war and thousands of refugees – was still very vivid. At the time, Pantić was writing about corrupt deals between the Jagodina brewery company, a cement factory, and various politicians and businessmen.

In an article published by *Večernje Novosti* on 10 June 2009, it was recalled that prior to the murder, Pantić had published a series of articles on economic crime in the district. The newspaper later created a journalistic award for courage and named it after Pantić. He was described as exceptionally committed, and someone who put his job first at all times. The newspaper explained that Pantić didn't speak much about the topics he was working on, 'for understandable reasons'. But the impact of his investigative reporting was 'seen every morning in the papers'.

Aleksandar Dobrosavljević, a then colleague of Pantić's, recalled that Pantić did not visit local bars for his leads and was an introverted person. 'Sometimes he would smile when he was asked: "How did you get this?" But he never revealed his sources – not even to close friends.'

His wife, Zivka, said that before Pantić was killed, he'd told his colleagues that he was receiving threats on his phone. The family eventually changed their home number. After the killing, Zivka learnt from the police that her husband had been followed and that an unknown man in a car had threatened Pantić.

Serbia's commission for investigating killings of journalists was established by the government in 2014 to help solve difficult murder cases in cooperation with the Serbian Interior Ministry and the state prosecuting authority. Among these cases is Milan Pantić's killing.

'SOME 18 YEARS LATER, THE CASE REMAINS A MYSTERY'

‘We informed the public about everything that the investigation showed, although the findings were not processed to the end. It is important to note that this may have made it difficult to work and gather evidence that is valid for the process,’ founder and chairman, Veran Matić, explained. In 2018, the commission said an investigation had revealed a possible motive and identified murder suspects in the Pantić case.

Asked why, to date, no arrests had been made, Matić said that the passing of time was one of the aggravating circumstances. He explained that the law-enforcement authorities failed to properly collect evidence from the scene, and that telephone conversations from the area where the murder occurred had not been checked.

He added that the police had also failed to interview possible witnesses immediately after the killing. ‘There are a lot of procedural actions that could have made it easier to prosecute.’ Yet, despite the impediments, Matić believes that there is sufficient political will for the case to be solved.

In an article published in December 2000, Pantić wrote that senior management at some hundred state-owned companies had changed following the democratic transformation that occurred in Serbia in October that year. In Serbia, it is common for new directors to be appointed in state-owned companies and institutions whenever major political changes occur. The majority of those appointed then, as now, were loyal to the ruling party.

Following the assassination of Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Djindjić in March 2003, police launched Operation Sabre. As part of the operation, Jovan Stojanović, the head of Jagodina brewery, and Živojin Trifunović, the former local police chief, were taken into custody. At a commemoration service for Pantić’s murder in 2015, the commission for investigating killings of journalists said the investigation indicated that his murder had been ordered by people connected to the Jagodina brewery.

Family members visit Milan Pantić's grave

A memorial plaque in honour of Milan Pantić

‘IF THE POLITICAL WILL FOR THE CASE TO BE SOLVED REALLY EXISTED, THERE WOULD BE PROGRESS’

In 2016, Matić explained that police had interrogated a suspect named Dragan Antic in Germany in connection with the case. A Bosnian citizen living in Munich, Antic was a member of the Tigers, a notorious paramilitary unit led by Serbian chief Željko Ražnatović. Also known as ‘Arkan’, Ražnatović was accused of war crimes and shot dead in January 2000. Although Antic denied involvement, it emerged that he had changed his surname (formerly Tesic) because of his past.

Another person connected to Arkan’s Tigers is Dragan Marković. Marković is commonly known by the nickname of Palma (meaning ‘palm tree’). The mayor of Jagodina from 2004 to 2012, and also called ‘the chief of Jagodina’, Palma is known for his pro-Russian and homophobic rhetoric, and has strong connections to the Serbian Orthodox Church.

He also heads the United Serbia political party, a junior coalition member of the ruling Progressive Party, which is led by Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić. Palma’s party is aligned with the Socialist Party of Serbia, led by Foreign Affairs Minister, Ivica Dačić. Palma, who fought with the Tigers in the 1990s, was elected as an MP in the Serbian Parliament in 2001. He also owns Palma’s Tigers, a kickboxing club where one of the fighters is Željko Ražnatović’s son, Veljko.

Dobrosavljević believes that if the political will for the case to be solved really existed, there would be progress in the investigation. ‘Everyone knew Milan was getting threats – mostly by telephone. He accepted it as part of the job. He was not a complicated man and did not complain much.’

When he arrived at the murder scene, Dobrosavljević saw Pantić’s body in pool of blood. ‘When I reached the building entrance, I was shaking. Beside him was a bag with a litre of milk and bread.’ ●

Virgil Săhleanu
7 September 2000
Iași, Romania

VIRGIL SĂHLEANU

ON THE MORNING OF 7 SEPTEMBER 2000, former union leader Virgil Săhleanu was on his way to the courthouse. He was due to appear before a judge in one of the three cases filed against him by his former employer, Tepro S.A. Iași. Two months earlier, Săhleanu had succeeded in having the court terminate a privatization contract between the Romanian state and the new owners of the factory, the Czech company Železárny Veselí.

Soon after leaving his apartment that morning, Săhleanu was approached by a man who hit him in the face with brass knuckles. Another man attacked him with a knife, grazing his chin before stabbing him six times. The two men continued to assault Săhleanu after he fell, before leaving the building in an unhurried manner. Săhleanu managed to climb the stairs and alerted a neighbour, who took him to hospital. He died an hour and a half later on the operating table.

The murder was the most violent event ever to occur in connection with a series of deals that privatized the factories built during Romania's communist regime. Soon after the Romanian Revolution of December 1989, many state-owned factories were sold. Often, the new owners resorted to massive layoffs, sold the machinery as scrap and closed the business. According to a study published in 2015, only 22 per cent of the 7 726 Romanian companies privatized after 1989 were still active and had more than 10 employees. The privatization process was '… one of the most [opaque] programmes in Romania', concluded the author of the study, Cristina Chiriac.

In the summer of 1998, Tepro S.A., a pipe producer in Iași, north-eastern Romania, was sold at auction to Železárny Veselí, a metallurgical company founded in the 1960s in former Czechoslovakia. At the time, it was owned by Zdeněk Zemek, a Czech billionaire. The contract – which meant the acquisition of 51 per cent of the total shares of Tepro S.A. – included an investment plan for the following two years. During the process, the buyer was represented by Czech businessman Frantisek Priplata.

In January 1999, the new owners decided to lay off 1 278 out of the 1 600 employees working there at the time. In its heyday, before 1989, the company had more than 6 000 workers. Săhleanu was elected as president of the Tepro workers' union in the middle of the crisis. Săhleanu – an engineer who had been working in the factory since the 1980s – had a record of conflict with management. In the mid-1990s, when he was transferred to a new department, Săhleanu filed a lawsuit, won in court and returned to his previous position.

A bust of Virgil Săhleanu was erected in front of the factory he had owned in Iași, Romania

Following the massive layoffs, the union lodged a case of labour conflict, and cited fraudulent practices and irregularities in the privatization of Tepro S.A. '[Săhleanu] was a strong, determined man,' said Constantin Rotaru, the current leader of the workers' union at Tepro.

The new management fired Săhleanu, but he continued his unionist activities outside the factory. He received veiled death threats, said Rotaru. 'I remember that the general manager said to him during a meeting, "Why are you fighting so hard? No matter what you do, weeds will grow on your grave." It turned out in court that he [the general manager] was the one who showed the aggressors where Săhleanu lived.'

Undaunted by the threats, Săhleanu alerted the local authorities, organized strikes against Železárny Veselí and sued the company. He succeeded in having the purchase contract between the Romanian state and Železárny Veselí declared null and void. '[Săhleanu] was discontented with the social and economic injustices in Romania in 2000,' says Rotaru. 'Unfortunately, that's what brought him to [his] death. I never thought we could have an assassination in Romania.'

In early September 2000, Priplata began to coordinate the attack against Săhleanu, with Cătălin Ciubotaru, the Romanian owner of Protect SRL, a security company. Ciubotaru's company had won a contract for providing protection services to Tepro, and Priplata told Ciubotaru that he wouldn't get paid if he didn't solve 'the Săhleanu case'. Priplata also agreed to pay Ciubotaru US$3 000 for the attack. The plan was to put Săhleanu in hospital for two or three weeks, during which Protect SRL would take over security at the factory and quell the protests.

Ciubotaru put one of his employees, Irinel Claudiu Bahna, in charge of the operation. Bahna got help from Ion Tofan, a former colleague who had recently been released from prison, and the two began to stake out Săhleanu's apartment, but a first attempt failed. As the deadline approached, the financial stakes for the attack increased and killing Săhleanu became an option. On 7 September 2000, Bahna and Tofan fulfilled their mission.

'HAD HE NOT DIED, THE FACTORY WOULD BE GONE'

Frantisek Priplata (left), the Czech businessman convicted in the case

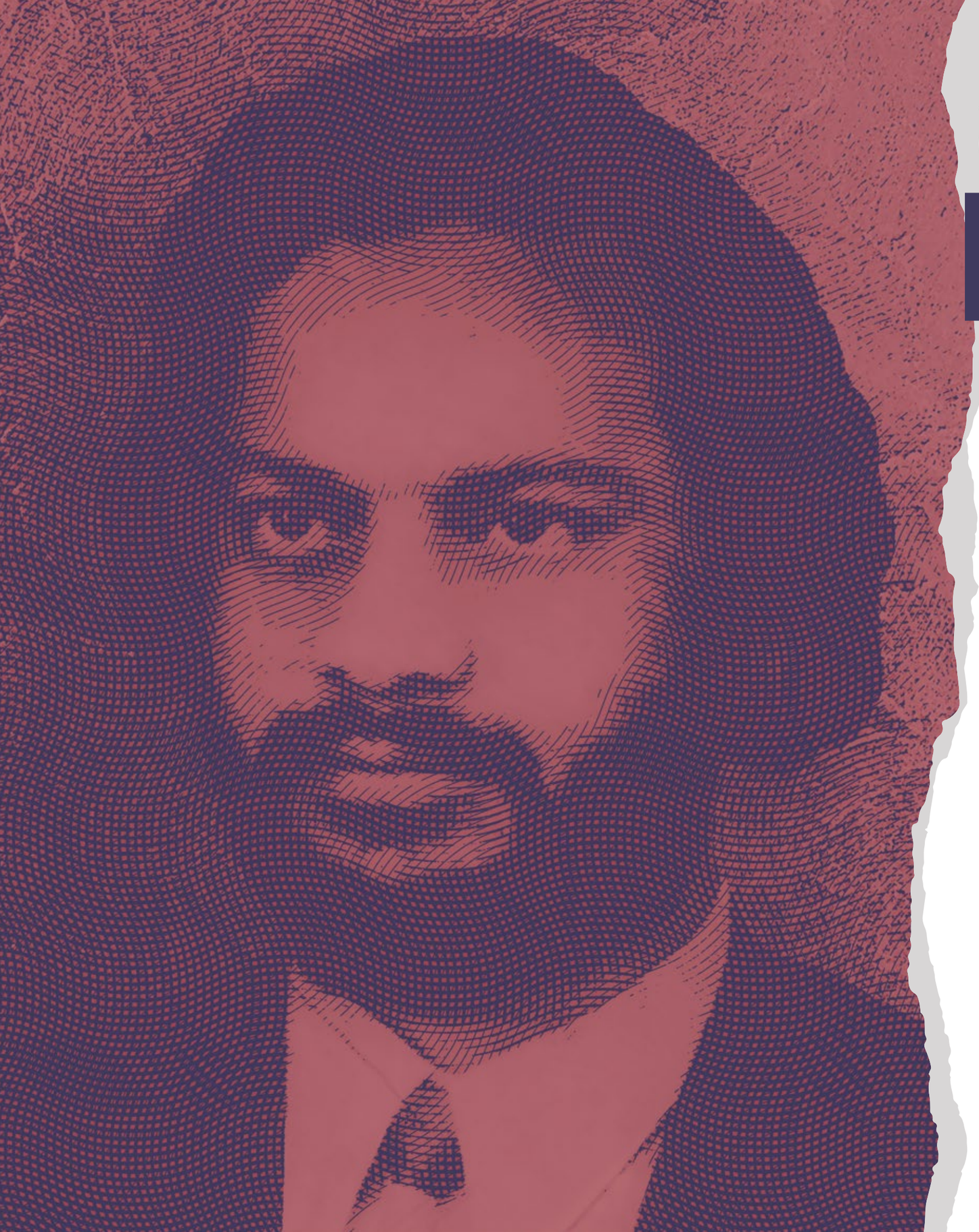
More than 5 000 people accompanied Săhleanu's coffin to the cemetery in Iași.

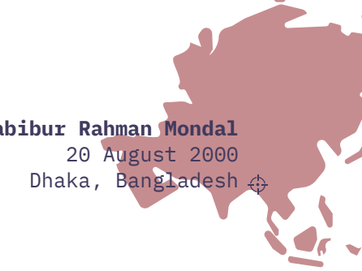
The trial started in November 2000 and ended five years later. For their involvement in the case, Tepro's director at the time received a 15-year sentence, while Ciubotaru was sentenced to 17 years. The two assassins were convicted and sentenced to 23 years in prison. Priplata was sentenced to eight years, but he avoided incarceration by hiding for two months, then fleeing Romania to the Czech Republic using a false Hungarian passport.

The Romanian authorities made several unsuccessful attempts to extradite Priplata. Additionally, a court in Brno, Czech Republic, refused to recognize the Romanian verdict because it considered that Priplata's right to defence had not been respected in court. As a result, the Romanian authorities would only be able to apprehend Priplata if he were to leave the Czech Republic. According to investigative journalism organization Rise Project, Priplata is still involved in a company in Romania that sells furniture and fabrics.

Železárny Veselí left Romania, but the state paid it US$3.1 million for its shares, plus interest. The factory was sold again to an Indian company, ArcelorMittal Steel. In 2017, according to the company's most recently available reported fiscal information, Tepro employed 258 people. However, productivity increased after the new owner invested some €30 million (about US$33 million) in new equipment, Rotaru explained. The factory is still alive and offers jobs to hundreds of people: a posthumous victory for Săhleanu. 'I am ashamed to say that had he not died, the factory would be gone,' says the current union leader.

The workers' union at Tepro still hope that 7 September – the day Săhleanu was assassinated – will be proclaimed as the day of Romanian syndicalism. 'Just a day for workers to remember that someone died, so they could eat a piece of bread today,' Rotaru said. ●





Habibur Rahman Mondal
20 August 2000
Dhaka, Bangladesh

HABIBUR MONDAL

SECURITY WAS EXTREMELY TIGHT on 20 August 2000 in the 400-year-old capital city of Dhaka, Bangladesh, with visits from two foreign leaders: Palestine's Yasser Arafat and Japanese Premier Yoshiro Mori. But even under this atmosphere of surveillance, alleged contract killer Kala Jahangir was reportedly able to shoot his target, Habibur Rahman Mondal, an advocate and local leader of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP).

Forty-four-year-old Mondal and his clerk, Arshad, were travelling to court by motorbike that morning when they came under attack by unidentified gunmen. Mondal was shot in the head and killed, but Arshad, who received a perforating bullet wound, managed to survive. It's been 19 years since then and Arshad is still in hiding.

From a place of safety, a hideout at night, Arshad narrated how Mondal's murder continues to haunt him and how it has had a devastating impact on Dhaka society at large. Despite concerns for his safety, Arshad testified as the main eyewitness in the 2003 murder trial, when the court handed death sentences to Jahangir and co-accused Saidur Rahman Shahid (alias Shahid Commissioner), leader of the Bangladeshi extremist group Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB).

Animosity had first ignited between Mondal and Shahid when the latter lost a municipal post to Mondal in Sutrapur. Shahid's bitterness then turned murderous when Mondal successfully filed a *naraji* (petition of disagreement; literally 'I don't accept') in court to challenge a report allegedly fabricated by the police that indemnified Shahid of the killing of two of Mondal's men in 1999.

From 1991 until his death, Mondal had filed numerous general diaries (reports) claiming that he would eventually be killed by Shahid. And in 1996, when the Bangladesh Awami League (BAL) came to power after 21 years, Mondal had narrowly managed to escape bombs hurled at his residence. All of which gave credence to the BNP's conviction that his murder was part of a 'government-led political vendetta'.

A close scrutiny of developments in the Mondal murder case, spanning two decades, exposes a criminal web within Bangladesh politics and governance that continues to threaten citizens' faith in the state machinery. Bangladesh officially being a democratic republic, its legal system is supposed to ensure justice, prevent corruption in the court system and uphold the basic essence of the rule of law. But all of this is complicated by the country's politics being duopolistic, made up of the pro-centre-left ruling BAL and its rival, the pro-centre-right BNP.

Mondal's assassination took place at the height of the BNP's electoral campaign and was summarily exploited for the purpose of reinstating the party to power in 2001. Led by Begum Khaleda Zia, who is currently in prison

'THEY CAME UNDER ATTACK BY UNIDENTIFIED GUNMEN'

‘MY HUSBAND WAS KILLED AS PART OF AN ACT OF POLITICAL TREACHERY’

on corruption charges, the BNP squarely blamed the then-ruling BAL for the murder, even though Shahid was not himself a member of the BAL. Shahid was always primarily associated with the Jatiya Party (JP), politically allied with the BAL since 1996.

With the victory of BNP in the October 2001 election, the Mondal murder case became a priority once again and the police summarily issued a charge sheet listing 18 suspects. In May 2003, a speedy trial tribunal handed the death penalty to Shahid and Kala Jahangir, and sentenced five others to life imprisonment.

However, in 2008, the high court overruled Shahid’s sentence on the grounds that the ‘prosecution failed to prove the charge of criminal conspiracy’. A defence team of senior lawyers, one of whom was later appointed to a ministerial position, were seen playing for key suspects.

The BNP lost interest in the matter, allegedly because the case would not grant them useful political exposure any more. Notably, the party leader, Zia, who had organized the movements demanding the immediate arrest of Shahid in 2000, had switched sides and led the defence team responsible for freeing Shahid in 2008. She even went to the highest court to free the five other convicts and succeeded.

On 15 July 2014, a three-member bench led by then Chief Justice SK Sinha set aside the sentences of the five other convicted. Justice Sinha called the charges ‘totally improbable’, concluding

Bangladesh Supreme Court

The building housing the Dhaka Bar Association

that ‘the prosecution has failed miserably to prove the charge against the appellants beyond shadow of doubt. So, they were entitled to “benefit of doubt”.’ Thus, all convicts were set free, with the exception of Kala Jahangir, who had allegedly committed suicide in 2003. Significantly, neither the state, the BNP, nor any other party has asked for a review of the case, despite this option being available to them.

‘We did not get justice,’ lamented Mondal’s wife, Nilufar Yasmin Diba. Recalling the events surrounding her husband’s death, such as Zia’s gift to her of a three-storey apartment building, Diba made a brave claim: ‘My husband was killed as part of an act of political treachery, and I was given the building on condition that BNP would conduct my husband’s murder case instead of me.’ She even pointed fingers at party men as suspects, a notion that was rejected by the BNP, some of whose members expressed concerns about her mental health.

A bloody path has continued in the wake of Mondal’s assassination. Many of the 27 witnesses who recorded charges against Shahid are on the run, some of whom are implicated in other crimes of seemingly political motivation. At least three witnesses and two convicts purportedly involved have been killed, either by unidentified miscreants or by law-enforcement agencies. Prosecutions for these killings have also made little headway, showcasing the complex system of criminality that persists in Bangladesh.

In a country with a state-reported annual murder rate of 3 800 and a backlog of three million cases in its courts, Mondal’s unresolved murder is a marker of a situation that seems untenable. Yet, a glimmer of hope came in January 2019, when Bangladesh finally submitted its long-overdue report to the UN Convention Against Torture, of which it has been a member since 1998. With this, the government made known its official ‘zero-tolerance’ policy towards crime, torture and punishment, perhaps in part a response to the report produced by an independent human-rights group that records 466 extra-judicial killings having taken place in the country in 2018. ●

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WHO ARE THE FACES TARGETED FOR ASSASSINATION?

The number of people who have been assassinated by criminal groups worldwide in the 21st century is difficult to establish with certainty, but the figure is in the tens of thousands. And it is a phenomenon that is growing.

This book commemorates the lives of men and women worldwide who were murdered because they opposed the forces of organized crime in their lives and through their work. Some are well known; others less so, but all were courageous champions in the stand they took against crime, injustice or corruption.

The profiles documented here are real personal accounts, but they are also emblematic, in that they provide a broader representation of the kinds of groups of people who are targeted for assassination because they confront and challenge criminal interests.

This publication marks the launch of the *Faces of Assassination* project, an initiative that aims to increase public awareness of the assassination of civil-society figures worldwide and seeks to bring to account the perpetrators. It is the outcome of years spent bearing witness to the harmful impact of targeted killings in developed and developing countries alike.

By focusing on the 'faces of assassination', the book and the project aim to provide an understanding of organized crime by highlighting the very real impact it has on countries, communities and families.

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