

VENEZUELANAS WATCH NEWS BULLETINS ACTED LIVE ON BUS

CARACAS: Short of newspapers, Venezuelans are getting updates about their country's deadly political crisis live - acted out by reporters on the bus to work. Maria Gabriela Fernandez and Dereck Blanco stand on board inside a black frame. "El Bus TV," reads a sign over their heads. "Good morning everyone. First, the news." It's less comfortable than a TV studio - they have to hold onto the rail with one hand to stop themselves from falling when the dilapidated bus brakes.

But it's one way of escaping government censorship. "The idea came from the need to break away from the news circus in this country," the group's creative editor Claudia Lizardo told AFP. "To bring people truthful news through a mass transport system: the bus."

Crisis in three minutes

In three minutes, Fernandez and Blanco deliver news on health, safety, sports, entertainment and, naturally, economics and politics in a country stricken by food shortages and deadly riots. Clashes at daily protests by demonstrators calling for President Nicolas Maduro to quit have left 66 people dead since April 1, prosecutors say. Police fire tear gas and water cannons at protesters who hurl rocks and petrol bombs. The Bus TV team digs

out original angles to bring home the drama of the protests, which are not broadcast on state television.

"Each tear gas canister costs \$40. At the black market exchange rate, that is 200,000 bolivars, or a whole month's salary," Blanco tells the audience of passengers. "Economic news now: a kilo of chicken wings costs 9,700 bolivars. A Venezuelan on a minimum wage must work a day and a half to buy it."

Opening people's eyes

Blanco is a presenter on a national television channel but also does Bus TV out of frustration at being under official "pressure" not to cover certain subjects on air. "It is a challenge," he says. "Journalists have to reinvent themselves so that the news can reach the people." The team hop on and off buses around Caracas, with the permission of the drivers who often let them on without paying a fare. Bus TV is spreading, says Laura Castillo, the show's producer. There is a team working in the western industrial city of Valencia and another in Puerto La Cruz in the east. "It is a marvelous idea. I like it when things are said clearly, without aggression," said passenger Glenda Guerrero, a 68-year-old housewife. "I think it is important for them to report to us what it is happening, to open our eyes."

State censorship

The six-member Bus TV group of journalists and performing artists started its shows on May 28 - the 10th anniversary of a dark day for Venezuela's independent media. On that day in 2007, Maduro's late predecessor Hugo Chavez shut down the country's oldest broadcaster, Radio Caracas Television, for its critical coverage of him. Like Chavez before him, Maduro - himself a former bus driver - accuses the private media of being part of a capitalist conspiracy against his socialist leadership.

The Venezuelan media rights group Espacio Publico and the National Journalists' Union accuse the government of censoring media that carry coverage critical of it. The government took the Spanish-language edition of CNN television news off air this year. The groups say scores of newspapers have shut down because the authorities are denying them paper to print on. The country's leading newspaper El Nacional and prominent news website La Patilla have been sued. Others have been bought up by businesses loyal to the government, Espacio Publico says. "The government has won the arm-wrestle over controlling the media," says Castillo. "You can get news on social media, but not everyone has access to those and a lot of what you find there is just rumors."

Attacks on reporters

Media rights group Reporters Without Borders ranks Venezuela a dismal 137th out of 180 countries for press freedom. The journalists' union has counted more than 200 attacks against reporters during the past two and a half months of protests. Maduro has fanned

the protests by proposing to reform the constitution, "without consulting Venezuelans in a referendum," Blanco and Fernandez report, wrapping up their bulletin. Passengers applaud as the presenters sign off. "Meanwhile, the bakeries still have no bread. Thank you for watching, this is Bus TV." —AFP



CARACAS: Laura Castillo (left), Maria Gabriela Fernandez (center) and Dereck Blanco (right) give a presentation of Bus TV news on June 6, 2017. —AFP



CHILPANCINGO, Mexico: A Mexican photojournalist works during a protest by police officers in Guerrero state on May 31, 2017. —AFP

JOURNALISTS BEAR INVISIBLE SCARS OF MEXICO DRUG WAR

CHILPANCINGO, Mexico: After drug cartel thugs kidnapped him and threatened to burn him alive, Mexican journalist Jorge Martinez was so traumatized he couldn't leave the house. He and six colleagues were returning home after covering a police operation in the violent southern state of Guerrero on May 13 when some 100 masked gunmen from La Familia cartel hijacked their cars. The narcos ended up letting them go after about 15 minutes. But it took Martinez, 44, two weeks to go outside again.

"Maybe it's just nerves, but I feel like people are following me," he almost whispered into the phone at the time, afraid to come out for an interview. Two days after the kidnapping, another journalist - noted crime reporter and AFP contributor Javier Valdez - was shot dead in broad daylight in the state of Sinaloa, scene of some of Mexico's most brutal drug violence. It was one of the highest-profile attacks targeting journalists in Mexico - a country where the phenomenon has become almost banal.

Journalists face harrowing risks to cover the bloody wars between Mexico's rival cartels and the army, which have left a trail of tens of thousands of mangled bodies and hundreds of mass graves in their wake. Reporters take their lives in their hands when they write anything that could be perceived as threatening, or even unflattering, by narcos or the corrupt government officials in bed with them. Watchdog group Reporters Without Borders ranks Mexico as the most dangerous country in the world for journalists after Syria and Afghanistan.

Since 2006, when the government first sent the military to fight the cartels, nearly 100 journalists have been killed, more than 20 have disappeared and more than 200 have been assaulted by drug traffickers. For survivors, the scars are not always visible. Many Mexican crime reporters suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD. For some, it is because

they have been victims of the violence. For others, it is the impact of bearing daily witness to it. A study last year involving 246 journalists found that 41 percent had PTSD symptoms. Seventy-seven percent had symptoms of anxiety, and 42 percent of depression.

Flawed protection program

Alejandro Ortiz is a 26-year-old reporter for W Radio in Chilpancingo, the capital of Guerrero and a hot spot in Mexico's war on drugs. Dark and muscular, he smiles nervously as he tells stories about the four times he has been attacked by cartel thugs. He's been kidnapped, tied up, beaten and had a gun put to his head. He suffers recurring nightmares and anxiety. But he says he's determined not to let the narcos win. "We all know being a journalist is a high-risk profession in Mexico. Being one in Guerrero is that much worse," he told AFP. Reporters here earn as little as \$150 a month.

Eric Chavelas, the leader of a local journalists' association, estimates 30 percent of his colleagues suffer from PTSD. "We've been sounding the alarm for years. We don't know where to turn" for psychological help, he said. Experts say most journalists with PTSD do not get treatment. Ezequiel Flores, a 40-year-old correspondent for the newsweekly Proceso, had to stop reporting on the ground after being roughed up and receiving death threats.

He used to cover the region around Iguala, where 43 students were abducted in 2014 by corrupt police who are accused of handing them over to drug gang thugs who allegedly massacred them. "Every day you document tragedy after tragedy after tragedy, and you can't or don't know how to evacuate all this stuff that you accumulate," he said. The government has created a protection program for threatened journalists, but it has failed to stop the violence. Five journalists have been killed this year.

VENEZUELA ATTORNEY GENERAL SAYS OFFICIALS THREATENED HER FAMILY

OPPOSITION LEADERS CALLING FOR RETURN TO STREETS

CARACAS: Venezuela's attorney general on Monday said intelligence officials had threatened and harassed her family after she openly challenged President Nicolas Maduro over the country's political crisis. A staunch figure of the ruling party, Attorney General Luisa Ortega has been branded a traitor for becoming the highest public official to break ranks with Maduro. She has accused him and his allies of acting unconstitutionally in their standoff against the opposition in recent months of deadly anti-government protests.

Last week, she filed a challenge against his effort to rewrite the constitution, branding it undemocratic. The court dismissed the appeal on Monday. Ortega said members of her family had received threatening telephone calls and had been harassed and pursued. "I hold the executive responsible for any injury or attack that my family might suffer," she said in an interview with Union Radio. "This is a matter that must be resolved with me, not with my family," she said. "They are being pursued by patrols that appear to be from SEBIN," she added about the state intelligence service. "They are sending them messages directly from SEBIN, which answers to the government." Although Ortega, 59, said she herself had not received threats, some government officials have said on television that she should be imprisoned.

Constitutional struggle

Maduro is accused of controlling the Supreme Court, which has fended off numerous legal and legislative moves against him over the past year and a half. Clashes at daily protests by demonstrators calling for Maduro to quit have left 67 people dead since April 1, prosecutors say. The latest casualty was a 49-year-old man who died Monday night in the Caribbean city of La Guaira, prosecutors said, without clarifying the circumstances. The opposition deputy Jose Manuel Olivares

said he died after being suffocated by tear gas.

Violent riots also occurred in the afternoon in Caracas, where hooded protesters partially set off an administrative building of the TSJ. Protesters blame Maduro for an economic crisis that has caused desperate shortages of food and medicine in the oil-rich country. Maduro says the crisis is a US-backed conspiracy. He has launched moves to set up an elected assembly to reform the constitution in response to the protests, but his opponents say

the court on Monday rejected her appeal as "incompetent". That ruling "removes any doubt about the absence of judicial remedies" for the political crisis, said constitutional law expert Jose Ignacio Hernandez. "It is a clear attempt to discredit the attorney general."

Ortega responded to the ruling by upping the ante - and the political tension. She presented a further legal challenge aiming to fire 13 of the court's judges, who she argued were named without her approval.

"socialist revolution" of his late predecessor Hugo Chavez. Opponents of Maduro had gone to the court earlier to try to add their names to the list of plaintiffs in Ortega's lawsuit, but were kept away by military police. Anti- and pro-government activists exchanged blows outside the court in the latest in more than two months of street unrest.

Parliament was set to discuss procedures for appointing new judges to the Supreme Court yesterday, while opposition



CARACAS: Anti-government demonstrators attack the administration headquarters of the Supreme Court of Justice as part of protests against President Nicolas Maduro on Monday. —AFP

that is a ploy to cling to power. A survey by pollster Datanalisis indicated that 85 percent of Venezuelans opposed that plan. The president retains the public backing of the military.

Legal battles

Analysts said last week that Ortega's suit could build bridges between the opposition and disgruntled officials and widen divisions in Maduro's camp, making it harder for him to stay in power. But

Her motion challenges a controversial decision in 2015 to name the judges, whom the opposition says are biased in favor of Maduro. A dozen countries expressed "deep concern" about Ortega's "harassment", prosecutors said, including Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Portugal and Paraguay.

Scuffles outside court

The president is resisting calls for elections to replace him, vowing to continue the

leaders are calling for a return to the streets today. "They do not want the people to demonstrate against the constitutional assembly. Look at how many people reject it," said one young demonstrator, Maria Rodriguez. "Get away, the streets belong to the people, not to the bourgeoisie," yelled a rival supporter dressed in the traditional red of Chavez supporters and holding a copy of the constitution in his hand. "What there is here is revolution." —AFP

SECRET SERVICE DOESN'T HAVE WHITE HOUSE TAPES

WASHINGTON: The US Secret Service said Monday it does not have any audio recordings or transcripts of US President Donald Trump's White House conversations. After Trump again intimated last week that he could have recorded his controversial discussions with fired FBI director James Comey, it remained unclear if that claim was true. The issue could be crucial for the president amid allegations - though not formal accusations - that he has sought to obstruct the investigation into possible collusion by his advisors in Russian interference in last year's presidential election.

The Secret Service, which protects the president and his family, maintained a secret taping system for the White House in the eras of John F Kennedy and Richard Nixon. But in response to a Freedom of Information Act request from The Wall Street Journal, the agency said it did not have any such records for the Trump administration. "It appears, from a review of Secret Service's main indices, that there are not records pertaining to your request," the agency told the Journal in a letter.

On May 12, three days after he fired Comey, Trump suggest-

ed in a tweet that he had recorded their private discussions with Comey. The claim came in response to reports, since confirmed, that Comey himself had kept detailed notes on those discussions in which, he alleges, Trump demanded a pledge of loyalty and pressed the then-FBI director to pull off on an investigation into Trump's former national security advisor Michael Flynn. "James Comey better hope that there are no 'tapes' of our conversations before he starts leaking to the press!" Trump wrote.

On Friday, after explosive testimony from Comey in Congress repeated the claims that Trump pressured him over Flynn, Trump responded angrily, calling Comey a liar. Asked by reporters if he had tapes of their conversations to support his claim, Trump replied demurely, "I'll tell you about that maybe in the very near future." That left open the possibility that other White House staff, or Trump himself, could have been involved in recording their talks, if anyone. Members of Congressional committees investigating Russian meddling in the election have shown interest in whether Trump did tape his White House conversations with Comey or anyone else. —AFP

US COVFEFE ACT WOULD PRESERVE TRUMP TWEETS

WASHINGTON: From the incomprehensible "covfefe" to a post labeling fired FBI director James Comey a "leaker", President Donald Trump's tweets would be preserved as presidential records if a Democratic lawmaker's proposed COVFEFE Act becomes law. Representative Mike Quigley of Illinois introduced on Monday the "Communications Over Various Feeds Electronically For Engagement" Act that would amend the Presidential Records Act and require the National Archives to store presidential tweets and other social media interactions.

"If the president is going to take to social media to make sudden public policy proclamations, we must ensure that these statements are documented and preserved for future reference,"

Quigley, a member of the House intelligence committee, said in a statement. "Tweets are powerful, and the president must be held accountable for every post." The law would bar the prolifically tweeting president from deleting his posts, as he has sometimes done. This has inspired websites archiving his erased tweets.

White House spokesman Sean Spicer said last week that Trump's tweets "are considered official statements by the president of the United States." The White House did not immediately reply to a request for comment on the proposed legislation. Trump, who has more than 32 million followers on Twitter for his 8-year-old personal @realDonaldTrump profile, is known for messages on the social

media site that are sometimes riddled with spelling and grammar mistakes.

Trump famously sent a tweet at 12:06 a.m. ET (0406 GMT) on May 31 that said: "Despite the constant negative press covfefe." The message remained on the Internet for hours, spurring a wave of speculation about what Trump intended to say. The message was later deleted. Trump's next communication that day at 6:09 a.m. ET (1009 GMT) made light of the tweet, saying: "Who can figure out the true meaning of 'covfefe'??? Enjoy!" Spicer, asked at a news briefing at the time whether people should be concerned about the covfefe tweet, said, "no" and added, "I think the president and a small group of people know exactly what he meant." —Reuters