

Christian radio in Haiti under economic and political pressure

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Quito, Ecuador--Church-run radio stations in Haiti are feeling both economic and political pressure.

"In a country with a literacy rate of no more than 20 per cent, it is radio which remains the most important means of communication," wrote Philip Wearne in a special report for the International Press Institute. Yet, according to the report, many radio workers who fled Haiti in the face of death threats returned to find their equipment was stolen or destroyed and the staff gone.

Father Brunet Cherisol of Radio Bois Caiman, a community radio station in Mare Rouge, said "The military snapped off the antenna to shut us up.". He says it will be months until the village can afford to broadcast and train personnel.

Meanwhile, evangelical radio station 4VEH in Cap Haitian has suffered from shortages of oil to invasion of their transmitter site by people wanting to claim it for housing. U.S. troops have facilitated the restoration of power lines to the station which had been dependent on a diesel generator to stay on the air. 4VEH is operated by the evangelical mission society OMS in Greenwood, Indiana.

Other media in Haiti are also experiencing pressures according to the Wearne report. The newspaper "Libete" has seen a drop in circulation from 20,000 to 6,000 copies a week, primarily due to paper shortages and depressed advertising.

The United States Agency for International Development is providing funds for the repairing of some stations destroyed during the dictatorship of Raul Cedras.

Wearne said other groups are working on training programs for Haitian journalists.

"Censorship and the lack of equipment mean that Haitian radio journalists often do little more newsgathering than to read international agency reports over the air," writes Wearne.

The problems experienced by the Haitian church-run radio stations follow a series of similar, but unrelated problems in other parts of Latin America over the past year.

In June, 1994, the Ecuadorian government shut-down three church-related radio stations during a limited state of emergency proclaimed in the face of wide Indigenous protests. Those stations were Roman Catholic operated Radio Latacunga and Radio Escuelas Radiofonicas de Ecuador, and a Norwegian Lutheran station, Radio Ingipirca.

Ecuadorian soldiers took over the stations, and in the case of Radio Latacunga, arrested Sister Alma Montoya, a Colombian nun who was serving as station manager. Radio Latacunga has gained a

reputation for representing indigenous viewpoints not often aired on other radio stations.

Authorities said the stations had been inciting the indigenous population, and creating chaos in the country.

In October, 1994, Bolivian authorities shut down Radio Pio XII (Pius XII) as it was leading a campaign against mineral waste dumping in Bolivia.

Radio Pio XII is one of a number of stations operating in Bolivia which were placed on the air with Roman Catholic backing to represent the interests of mining groups.

On March 23 of this year, Mexican authorities shut down Catholic-related Radio Huayacocotla in Mexico, allegedly for technical violations. Station authorities said the reasons were political, and that the government has refused to assign the station an AM frequency, although such an operation has been approved by Mexico's radio regulation commission.

Radio Huayacocotla operates only on shortwave and serves a large audience of indigenous potato farmers.

Most recent reports indicate that the Mexican station is still off the air. The other stations were allowed to return to the air after a short period of time.

On the other side of the scale, Cuban authorities announced this past Christmas that they would give Protestant churches regular access to state-owned radio stations. The Cuban Council of Churches, which represents 24 Protestant denominations will be able to broadcast six to seven programs a year.

The surge of recent conflicts between church stations and governments should not be seen as an increasing or coordinated trend in Latin America according to Jose' Ignacio Lopez Vigil, Latin American Coordinator for the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC). AMARC's Latin American region office is in Quito, Ecuador.

Lopez told NNI that each of the incidents were isolated and happened in response to "distinct events in each country."

"Some radio stations operate very responsibly, and others irresponsibly," Lopez said. He indicated that the governments in each situation needed to respond to what they thought were threatening situations. AMARC represents community operated radio stations throughout the world. Its world-wide headquarters are in Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

Lopez said his organization's role is to help train community radio operators in Latin America, and to work with them to convince governments, such as Argentina, that such low-power, community-based stations should be legalized.

Lopez said there are many Catholic and Protestant groups throughout Latin America which operate small, community radio stations.

Lopez is the author of "Una Mina de Coraje", a book about the history of Radio Pio XII.

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