

[Transcript] The Daily / The Sunday Read: 'Who Hired the Hitmen to Silence Zitácuaro?'

My name is Nick Casey. I'm a writer for The New York Times magazine. Mexico is in the middle of a war against drug traffickers. But there's a second conflict there that you might not know about. It's a war to silence Mexico's free press. Last year, Mexico was one of the deadliest places in the world for journalists to work. Only do Ukraine. Mexican journalists have faced phone hacks, death threats, beatings, torture, and in one case, a pair of grenades launched at their newsroom. Because no one has figured out how to protect journalists where they work, Mexico is resorted to the extreme step of hiding reporters in safe houses across the country. What's behind these threats is pretty simple. Many of the reporters under threat were investigating the government that was supposed to protect them. And many in the government, for years, have been on the payroll of Mexico's drug cartels. Now, imagine you're a reporter in Mexico. How do you do your job when you can't distinguish between the crime fighters and the criminals? Is this prosecutor I'm speaking to involved with the crime that I'm reporting? And what will he do to me for writing about it? It's a hall of mirrors. In Mexico, you're on your own. This week's Sunday read is my story about a local newsroom in Mexico called the Michoacan Monitor. The monitor was a small news outlet, just one editor and a few of his friends, and they decided to investigate corruption in their city government. Soon they started getting threats. And as you'll hear in this story, some of these threats became real. But these did not deter Armando Linares, the editor-in-chief of the monitor. And so, even after the photographer of the monitor was murdered outside the newsroom by two masked assailants, Linares took to Facebook Live to address the killing. In the broadcast, a visibly shaken lead that is, sits alone in front of a microphone. His phone, a pen, and a reporter's notebook sit on the table. The Michoacan Monitor team has been suffering a series of death threats. Today, these threats were carried out and one of our members was murdered today. A few minutes ago, they made an attempt on his life. He lost his life a few minutes ago. That's the way it is at the Michoacan Monitor. I can't talk much. I can't say much. All I can do is tell our colleagues family that we are not going to lead things like this. We are going to take things to the bitter end. We're not armed. We don't have weapons. Our only defense is a pen, a pencil, and a notebook. The Facebook Live continues and Linares says that he knows who was behind the killing. He goes on to say that he's going to continue to report on corruption despite someone being killed in his newsroom. It's a spectacular decision. This wasn't the first small newsroom to be attacked this way in Mexico. Usually, this means the end. Everyone goes into hiding. But with Linares, you have the case of someone who was just so grounded in what he did and what he believed in the power of journalism to change things in a democracy that he decided he wasn't going to leave and he wasn't going to give up. And in the end, at the Monitor, you're talking about ordinary reporters with little money or protection, people who thought they could make a contribution by exposing corruption in their town. But what they came up against was something much bigger and much more armed than they were. So here's my article. Who Hired the Hitman to Silence Sitaquaro? Read by Anthony Ray Perez. On October 19, 2021, Armando Linares López was writing up notes from an interview when his cell

phone buzzed with an unknown number. Linares, 49, in stocky with black hair that was just starting to show gray streaks, ran an online news site in a small Mexican city called Sitaquaro. He knew his beats so intimately that calls from unfamiliar phone numbers were rare. But the man on the other

end spoke in a way that was instantly familiar. Linares had come to know that pitched menacing tone from years of run-ins with every kind of Mexican gangster. This is Commander Eagle, the voice said. I'm from the Jalisco New Generation Cartel.

Sitaquaro, in the hills of the state of Michoacán, had for years mostly been known for its fertile avocado orchards and the pine oak forest where tourists came to see the annual arrival of the monarch butterflies. But its central location had made it increasingly attractive to the drug trade. Farmers grew marijuana and opium poppy, the source of heroin, and nearby mountains. And in recent

years international drug cartels had been using Michoacán as a way station for methamphetamine and fentanyl shipments. Linares' rise as a journalist coincided with the drug boom and he watched its devastating effects on Sitaquaro. Severed heads dumped in front of a car dealership, business owners kidnapped for ransom, and a government that seemed unwilling or unable to do anything about it. If Mexico ever hoped to escape the violence that was devouring it, Linares often said the press would need to pursue the politicians who enabled the crime. And so in 2019 he and a few friends founded a news site called Monitor Michoacán, publishing it downstairs from a law office. As the city's main and perhaps only, Muckraker, Linares quickly came to dominate the local conversation, typically publishing big reports on Monday or Tuesday, contract fraud, bribes and police shakedowns, and spending the rest of the week posting supporting documents on Twitter and Facebook. On Fridays he would retreat to a little studio at the back of the newsroom to talk live with his sources for his weekly webcast. The big story in 2021 was Juan Antonio Ixtláhuaco Riuella, Sitaquaro's boyish and popular mayor, who 12 years earlier was arrested by federal agents after his name appeared on the

payroll of a local drug cartel. The case against the mayor fell apart and he stayed in politics, heading off to various federal jobs. He had recently made a successful bid to take back the mayor's office, this time with men toting high power rifles, their faces covered in ski masks, standing watch at campaign events. Linares's sources said the men were from the Jalisco New Generation Cartel. And now, a commander of that cartel was on the other end of his cell phone, wanting to speak. Linares put two fingers over the receiver and gestured to another reporter in the newsroom to come over quickly. He needed him to tape the call.

Linares grabbed a notebook and pen, putting the phone on speaker.

Who's this? He said. The caller got straight to his point. Monitor Michoacán needed to stop taking shots at the local government and the prosecutor's office. Linares interrupted. He said the outlet didn't take sides. His job was to document events, nothing more. But the caller did not want to debate the role of journalism in a democracy. He said Linares would hear from him again and then hung up. Two weeks later, Linares was at home when his phone buzzed, this time with a much more direct message on WhatsApp.

You were told to stop trashing the government. The text said,

I'm trying to be your friend, but if I can't, you're going to have problems with us.

Stop trashing the prosecutor. Linares stared at the message on his phone,

unsure of what to do next. The monitor was investigating claims that the city government was overpaying crony contractors for municipal lighting projects, and had also done reporting that showed ties between the Jalisco cartel and the prosecutor's office. He knew that the threat was serious and that the promised problems almost certainly meant death. As another local reporter told me, killing a journalist is very easy and very cheap. Linares also knew the government was likely to do little to protect him and his colleagues. Attacks on reporters in Mexico were almost never solved by investigators, who were often themselves either terrified of or in league with the killers. The journalists were on their own. There was a phrase the editor had long repeated in the newsroom. We have only our pens to defend ourselves. He set his phone aside.

The monitor would keep publishing, just as it always had.

Who's who in lies? The world has become an increasingly dangerous place for reporters, but outside the war in Ukraine, no place is more deadly for them than Mexico.

Since the central government began its brutal and chaotic war on drugs in 2006, at least 128 reporters have been killed there, according to the committee to protect journalists, 13 of them last year alone. A chilling record. Mexican journalists have faced phone hacks, death threats, beatings, torture, and in one case, grenade attacks on their newsroom. They face these perils in part because the authorities whose job it is to protect them have in many instances long been infiltrated by the cartels.

Hernando García Luna, Mexico's former Secretary of Public Security, for example, was convicted in the United States this year for taking millions of dollars in bribes from the Sinaloa Cartel in the early 2000s when he was head of the Mexican equivalent of the FBI. And in 2014, police officers in the rural city Iguala kidnapped 43 students on buses headed for a march in Mexico City and handed them over to a drug cartel that mistakenly assumed they were part of an attack from a rival. This year, a trove of text messages showed that nearly every branch of government in the region, including soldiers, the police, and a local mayor, were communicating with the cartel, which killed the students and incinerated some of them in a crematory.

Unable to protect journalists where they work, Mexico resorted to hiding them in safe houses across the country. After years of increasing entanglement with criminal groups, the Mexican government is in some sense in a battle with itself, with case after case in which the government is or at least appears to be as involved in the crime as in the punishment. Sometimes the connection is clear. In 2017, Miroslava Brech Verducea, a journalist in Mexico's northern state, Chihuahua, was shot dead by a drug gang after years of reporting on corruption and criminal groups.

A former mayor Brech had reported on, Hugo Amed Schultz Alcaraz, later admitted to passing along recordings of the journalist to members of the gang that killed her and was sentenced to eight years in prison for his role in her death. But concerns about government complicity often fall on deaf ears. In 2014, Rubén Espinoza, a 31-year-old photographer, began receiving threats

after the news magazine Proceso published a picture he took of Javier Duarte de Ochoa, then governor of the state of Veracruz, in an article declaring it a lawless state.

In 2015, after fleeing Veracruz, Espinoza was shot to death with four others in an apartment in Mexico City. At least 17 reporters from Veracruz were killed while Duarte held office, a gruesome

record. The former governor is now in prison on organized crime charges, but he has never been indicted in connection with any of the killings. Of 105 investigations of killings of journalists in Mexico since 2010, only six resulted in homicide sentences, according to Human Rights Watch. Far from defending journalists, some of the country's most prominent officials have turned on them. In 2021, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador added a new weekly segment to his

morning press briefing called Who's Who in Lies. In December, he took aim at three reporters including Ciro Gómez Leyva, a prominent television anchor, saying that, if you listen to them too much, you could even get a brain tumor. The next day, Gómez Leyva was driving home from his broadcast

when two men on a motorcycle opened fire on his car. The anchor survived only because the car was equipped with bullet-resistant glass windows. Armando Linares knew that investigating the local government could be risky on many levels. At his last news outlet, a daily broadsheet called El Despertar, he had spent months looking into connections between the state prosecutor's office and the drug gangs it was supposedly pursuing. His colleagues had warned him that the newspaper was dependent on ads from the local government. Soon enough, the state attorney general called a meeting with the newspaper's owner seeking to shut down the reports. When Linares heard about the

meeting, he confronted the owner and soon left the paper. Several of his colleagues told me, though it was unclear if he had been fired or resigned out of protest. One former colleague described Linares to me as the kind of street reporter who was so plugged in that he sometimes showed up at crime scenes before the police. But he also had had drinking problems and years before went to rehab for drug addiction. He was married, but hadn't lived in the same house as his wife and three children in years. Joel Vera Terrazas, his colleague at monitor Michoacán, told me that reporting is what saved Armando from Armando, from his demons.

When Vera, a prominent attorney in Zitácuaro, spotted Linares at a traditional Mexican sweat lodge on the outskirts of town after he parted ways with el despertar, he said he could see the toll the last months had taken on his friend. And so Vera made Linares a proposal. He would bankroll a new outlet in town with Linares at the helm. On a Monday morning in 2019, the staff of monitor Michoacán gathered in its newsroom, a small office downstairs from Vera's law firm.

Among those there was Roberto Toleda Barrera, a former bus driver who signed up to work as the outlet's cameraman and photographer. Wilber Sebastian Hoeng, a lawyer in Vera's office, was hired as a part-time researcher. Vera would take care of the business ends and write his own weekly column, and Linares, as Vera had promised, was now the outlet's editor and lead writer. Vera eventually bought a suit and matching shoes for Linares and insisted that he wear them to interviews. But other than that, Vera told Linares he wouldn't interfere with his work. Linares now had a type of freedom he hadn't felt before, something few journalists in Mexico have ever enjoyed. He was in charge of his own outlet and was editorially independent.

No vendas tu pluma, he told the newsroom. Don't sell your pen.

I fear for my life. In the two years that monitor Michoacán had been publishing, over the course of dozens of investigations, Linares had never received such a direct threat as the ones leveled by the mysterious call and WhatsApp message. Vera decided to seek help from the authorities, but no one in the newsroom trusted officials in Zitácuaro.

Instead, Vera traveled with Linares to Mexico City, where they met officials from the Federal

Prosecutor's Office devoted to crimes against free speech. The unit sits under Mexico's Attorney General's office, which has broad powers to help protect journalists, including offering referrals for extraction into the government's safe houses. For an hour, Vera explained to an official the work the monitor had been doing and the threats they had received. He provided a list of nine politicians, among them Sitácuaro's mayor and local prosecutor, who the newsroom believed could have been behind the threat. But the official Vera told me seemed unmoved by the story, saying such threats happened often and the matter would probably blow over. Vera and Linares left the office empty-handed, no referral for extraction or any other protective measure. Linares told no one else in Sitácuaro about the threat, not even his wife. He continued his investigations, publishing stories about the inflated municipal lighting contracts and a detective who, Linares' sources claimed, was charging crime victims up to 10,000 pesos, roughly \$480 at the time, to investigate. If there's no money, there are no investigations, he wrote. Soon the situation with the eagle escalated. The cartel boss called again to demand a little support payment to the group, and then again and again. The requested amount varied with each call, but the eagle eventually settled on the sum of 500,000 pesos, roughly \$24,000. Linares and Vera realized that they were now trapped in the same kind of extortion scheme that they had spent years reporting on. They stalled for time, and Vera called an acquaintance who was a martial arts instructor for some security advice. The instructor suggested installing video cameras, as well as a second door at the entrance of the newsroom, which could be opened by a buzzer only after arrivals passed through the first. The doors would be made of steel, reinforced with stand bullets. Even if intruders made it past the first door, they would find a locked door between themselves and the newsroom. Vera knew the payment couldn't be avoided if he wanted the newsroom to remain safe. He and his wife withdrew money from their savings, and some of the staff set up a collection from friends. In mid-December, Linares settled on a date to make the handoff, but the location of the rendezvous was unusual. The Eagle wanted to meet at the Blasa in front of the mayor's office. The wads of money didn't fit into an envelope, and so Linares found a paper bag to stuff 500,000 pesos in two. At 10 am, Toledo arrived with a bag of cash as Linares watched from a corner and Sebastian from a parked car. Two men from the cartel arrived, parking in slots reserved for government employees. Their faces were covered, and it was impossible to tell whether the Eagle had come or sent two of his lieutenants. Whatever the payment achieved, it did not prevent the arrival of another, far more menacing, threat. A fake Facebook account posted Linares' WhatsApp profile picture which showed him standing with a woman. That was somewhat worrying. Even more worrying was that the post claimed that the woman in the photo was related to a leader of Carteles Unidos, a rival of the Eagle's cartel, and that Linares was in league with them. The danger was immediately clear to everyone in the newsroom. In the past, before deadly hits against journalists, mysterious messages often surfaced linking reporters to cartel groups. Sometimes Mexican officials even played up the supposed connections with little evidence. This allowed the killing to look like another hit among cartel members and offered an easy excuse to avoid an investigation. Vera sat with the other members of the newsroom for a moment, deliberating about what to do. Linares headed to the transmission room. Toledo followed him in, flipping on the switches of the camera as the two prepared a Facebook Live broadcast. Linares was wearing a yellow puffer jacket and a face mask, which he pulled off before he began to speak.

Good evening, friends of Monitor Michoacán. He began. He explained the mysterious Facebook post and said the woman had nothing to do with any criminal group. The fake online profiles were meant to spread disinformation and distract from the actual news that they were publishing.

Using the usual logic, we know these attacks come directly from our public officials.

Linares continued,

In the last days and weeks, there have been killings of journalists who have exposed corrupt governments. He said,

The same thing could happen here in Zitácuaro. He added,

Today I can tell you this. I fear for my life and I will be seeking federal protection.

Mexico has very strict gun laws, but many people do carry them illegally.

That fall, Vera had gotten a pistol from a friend. First, he tried to give the gun to

Linares, who turned him down. He approached Toledo next.

Take it, Roberto. Vera said, You carry it. You're the one on the streets.

But Toledo declined too. He shot photos, he reasoned. Not bullets.

No boss. You keep it. He said, handing the gun back to Vera. If they come, then I will take the bullet for you.

We're here from City Hall. Toledo started the morning of January 31st,

2022, with a stop at the prosecutor's office. The monitor had a running tally of surprise visits it made to various municipal buildings to see if workers were present during their posted office hours. As usual, there wasn't much to see, so Toledo took a photo of the empty desks.

His cell phone rang, and it was Vera on the line with a request.

Could Toledo bring a couple of bottles of coke back to the office? The photographer stopped at a corner store, then headed back in the direction of the newsroom. At the same time, several men on motorcycles approached monitor Michoacán and parked on a side street with a view of the entrance.

Two of the men walked up to the building as Toledo coaxed in hand,

rang the buzzer. Speaking through the intercom, Vera asked the strangers why they were there.

We're here from City Hall, one of the men said, but this looked nothing like an official visit.

One of the men wore a gray hoodie with the hood pulled down low,

and the other was in a baseball cap. Only their eyes could be seen above their face masks.

Vera buzzed Toledo through the first door, and the two men came in behind him.

Sebastian cracked open the second door, then shut it immediately when he saw guns.

Called the man in the hoodie, do it. Gunfire rang out, Toledo raised his arms out of instinct as though he could block the bullets. They tore through his forearms and pierced his torso.

Vera watched all this, petrified through the closed circuit video cameras.

Then he shook himself and grabbed his gun from his desk, heading to the front of the newsroom.

He crouched down, taking a firing position with his finger on the trigger.

Another volley of bullets rang out, hitting the door several times. The door held. There were more words outside than the sound of a motorcycle speeding away. Finally, Vera put down his gun.

Someone called an ambulance. Sebastian rushed outside. For a second Toledo still seemed very much himself. His black running shoes still on his feet, his cigarettes and big pens still in his pocket. Yet he was in a pool of blood. There were three bullet holes in his stomach, and others in his arms, his sternum, and his shoulder.

The bullet fragments were lodged in his heart, liver, and intestines. He was saying something, but no one could hear him. Vera drew closer.

They got me, was all they heard. They got me.

Paramedics rushed Toledo to the hospital. For a moment, there was only silence in the newsroom.

Linares walked in the door, having rushed back from an interview in another part of town.

Except for him and Toledo, everyone was at their desks when the gunmen arrived.

Vera's pistol would have been no match for them. Vera thought that they had broken through the entire newsroom would have been dead. It was the only hopeful thought that Vera could muster at that moment. But even that bit of solace was shattered when the phone rang.

Toledo had died on his way to the hospital.

Then came another blow. Detectives from the prosecutor's office, the very people Linares had made his career denouncing as corrupt, were now setting up crime scene tape and collecting shells.

The officials asked for a statement, and Linares refused, saying he didn't trust them.

Then he went into his office, cried, collected himself, and finally approached Vera.

We can do a broadcast, he said in a low voice. Vera looked at Linares, announcing the shooting online felt like a terrible idea.

No, leave it be, he said. They finished us. They finished us, oh man, no broadcast.

This will only bring us problems. But Linares didn't care. He went into the transmission room and started flipping on the switches to the computers and microphones.

They came so naturally to him. A process so wrought that for a moment he forgot that his camera operator was dead. The light to Roberto. He calmed down before he realized his mistake.

My friends were going to broadcast now, and it will be brief, he said into the camera.

Today, a member of our team has been assassinated. His website had investigated the city's political elite and had received death threats in return. He said, now the newsroom had paid the price, but they would not stop work, he said. They had a list of names of those behind the attack, and soon he warned, information will be flowing. We're not armed. We don't carry weapons.

Our only defense is a pen, a pencil, and a notebook. He said, raising the spiral pad that sat next to him. I regret this is how things are. That there are attempts to destroy freedom of expression and the right to true and timely information. I have pointed the finger at some people and some politicians, and today I will say it again. I will keep reporting. I will keep after these people. Then he added, we will take this to the bitter end.

The people will protect me.

Leonardo's broadcast had barely begun to circulate on social media when another report emerged. Investigators on the scene had found two notes, written on colorful poster board, left beside Toledo's body. One of them, signed by the Jalisco New Generation Cartel, said, this is what happens to lawyers who take on the cases of La Familia Michoacana, a rival cartel. Vera found himself suddenly on the defensive. Many lawyers throughout Mexico had worked with drug traffickers at times legally by defending members in court against charges, but sometimes illegally by setting up shell companies to launder drug proceeds, for example. Vera had represented a number of business interests in Sitaquaro over the years, including one of its bus companies, but never, he said, anything affiliated with organized crime. If there had been any links, he told me, it would have been apparent to the journalists at the monitor, their newsroom shared an office with his firm. It became clear to Vera that the notes were part of a broader campaign that evening, when Ixláhuac himself gave an interview to reporters on Milenio

Televisión, a national cable news network. I'd like to first make some clarifications,

the mayor said of the killing. The preliminary information that we have is that this wasn't a journalist. As the mayor spoke, he repeated several times that the attack had occurred at a legal office, and he never mentioned the monitor by name. Héctor Zamarrón, one of the reporters, looked skeptical, saying that Toledo had worked at the monitor. The mayor replied that he hadn't found Toledo's name registered with the journalist's guilt. The other reporter, Paula Parquette, pointed out that Toledo had received death threats from the work he had done.

I don't know if he got threats or not, the mayor replied.

Reporters from Mexico City began to call Vera for comment. Had Toledo not been a journalist after all, what did Vera make of the messages that seemed to have been left for him by the cartel?

The questions angered him. If these journalists in the capital had covered Sitácuaro before this, they would have seen Toledo at work when he was alive. But the monitor had been one of the few outlets on the ground, and the only one investigating the mayor's office. If Ixtláhuac and his city officials had in fact ordered the attack to stop the negative coverage, then claiming Toledo wasn't a journalist was simply a means to obscure the motive. Vera thought about the messages left by the attackers. Crime scene evidence in Mexico was typically confidential before a trial, yet many reporters now seem to know about the notes claiming that Vera was working with a drug cartel. Vera suspected it was the prosecutor's office that was leaking the information to discredit them. The monitor, rudderless in the hours since the attack on its newsroom, was no longer in control

of the news cycle in Sitácuaro. The government was, and the narrative was this, the attack on the newsroom had nothing to do with its journalism. The stories seemed to be solidifying at the highest

level. That afternoon, Jesús Ramírez Cuevas, the spokesman for López Obrador, had condemned the assassination of the journalist Roberto Toledo in a statement from the president's office.

But that evening, he issued a new statement. According to judicial investigations, the citizen Roberto Toledo, who was assassinated today, worked as an assistant in a lawyer's office, not as a journalist. Vera decided that he would have to leave the task of correcting the record for another day. So long as he and his team were in Sitácuaro, their lives remained in danger. He called Linares and said they needed to leave town immediately.

We would be letting them win, Linares said. By then, the federal government had offered Linares the possibility of extraction into a safe house, but putting himself in the hands of one branch of government to protect himself from another seemed not just absurd, but like a potentially deadly gamble. Vera was insistent. Whoever attacked the newsroom had already won.

Monitor Michoacán could no longer safely publish, he said. No story was worth their lives.

But Linares argued that his life wasn't in danger.

Don't be a fool, Vera replied. He was yelling now.

What would I do? Linares asked. How would I make my living? Vera, realizing that his friend would be crushed if he lost his work, backed down.

Linares lived alone with two dogs. On some days, his sources were his only human contact. Vera and Sebastian left Sitácuaro, deciding they would try to persuade Linares to join them later.

Linares, acting on his vow to take this to the bitter end, had spent the afternoon lining up a long series of television and radio interviews in which he linked the local government to the killing. In one, Linares repeated his claim that the mayor's office had been behind the threats, adding that just a half hour before, his phone rang with another one. He did not hide the

fact that he had decided to remain in Zitácuaro. Some people of our team decided to leave today, but some of us have to stay to continue this battle, he said.

As the days passed, Vera persuaded Linares to make a statement to the federal authorities in Mexico City. They would be to the same federal officials who sent them back empty-handed after the previous threat, but Linares realized there were few other options. For about an hour, he gave his statement to investigators at the Free Speech Crimes Unit, offering a list of officials in Zitácuaro who he said were behind the threatening messages. He noted that the cartel had been clear in every call that the threat had come because the monitor was screwing the government, and Toledo, he said

again, was a journalist. I want to state that I am scared, that I fear that they will come and attack me, he concluded. That's all I wish to add. The authorities again seemed unmoved. Linares was offered a referral to leave Zitácuaro, but when he turned it down, he was not given other measures. Like a government bodyguard or a panic button, typically provided to journalists who choose to stay in their hometowns. The officials thanked him for his testimony and said they would be in touch if they had more questions. After the interview, Linares and Vera, who had come along to support him, went to a coffee shop near the prosecutor's office. Vera tried one more time to persuade him to leave Zitácuaro. Linares said he would make it where he was. He had a following there, especially in the indigenous community. The people will protect me, he said.

Later that month, investigators released Toledo's remains from custody and Vera paid the expenses for them to be returned to his home state, Morelos, about a four-hour drive from Zitácuaro.

Vera, in hiding, watched over his zoom call as a mariachi band played. Toledo's son lifted his phone so Vera could see the coffin of his friend, lowered into the ground.

Alone in the newsroom, Linares tried to create a semblance of normalcy. He did a broadcast from the central plaza in the nearby town Ocampo to interview the mayor about remodeling the roof of the town hall. He drove to the north of Zitácuaro to report from the crime scene of a night-time shooting. But he remained scared and Vera remained frightened for him. Finally, in March, her friend managed to change Linares' mind. It would take just a few days to put together the money and then he would flee. No one will thank you. On March 15th, two men on a motorcycle began to

prowl the area around Linares' home. It was just before lunchtime and a nearby food vendor was hawking tacos and corn. The motorcycle headed one direction, slowly, along north Dr. Emilio got a sea street, and then a minute later doubled back. The man riding on the back stepped off. He was looking for Linares, he said to one of the neighbors. He was a soccer fan and wanted to publish something and monitor Michoacán. Someone must have pointed to Linares' door. At around 6pm, Linares posted an article about a motorcycle accident, then headed home. As he approached his door, a man walked toward him wearing a black suit and a red tie. The man greeted Linares, who looked up and greeted him back. They shook hands and spoke for a moment before heading inside Linares' apartment. About 5 minutes later, the man in the suit was seen running from the building. We'll never know what the two men discussed. We'll never know exactly when the man in the red tie drew the gun he was hiding and fired at Linares. The police found his body riddled with eight rounds. It was 43 days after Dolezos' murder. Now in hiding, Vera felt helpless. He had been told by the police not to speak out about the monitor to avoid attracting attention from criminal groups, yet he needed somewhere to put his anger. So many times he and Linares had discussed the importance of reporting done in the public interest. They once called themselves

soldiers of journalism and civil rights. They thought there had been an understanding that should the monitor come under threat, those whom they had stood up for would come to their defense.

There would be marches, signs hung at the mayor's office. There would be something, they thought. And yet, at his moment of need, Linares died alone and scared, himself accused of ties to drug traffickers. You can write an article and give your life, and no one will thank you, Vera told me. Is it worth publishing if it puts your life at risk?

I'm still thinking about that question. We said, let's do it. Let's go.

But now I wonder, was this worth two dead colleagues?

The day after Linares' death, Vera decided to close Monitor Mitruakan. There would be no more visits to Town Hall and no more broadcasts from the transmission room. There would be no website beyond a Facebook page. The years of investigations in Sitakweru would disappear from the internet. Those who had attacked them, and won. News was spreading about the murder of Linares. Another local journalist began to hear rumors that more reporters would be killed.

After seeing motorcycles circling the neighborhood, the journalist fled. Soon afterward, another local journalist did the same. The press corps in Sitakweru was dwindling.

Linares' funeral was held the day after his killing, at a funeral home a few blocks from the municipal cemetery. It was a hot day for March, and the scent of roses and lilies hung in the air. Most of the seats in the chapel were empty. Vera sent a wreath. He and Sebastian, once again, watched a live stream from their government safehouses.

Linares' wife, Rosa Elena Pedraza, attended along with her children.

When a cameraman from a national news station approached her for an interview, she said she would talk, just not on camera. He knew that his life was in danger, but his passion for speaking the truth pushed him never to shut up. She said, the few people who had arrived didn't remain long, filing out to allow Linares' family one last moment with his coffin.

They too left, leaving a handful of reporters who had come to cover the funeral.

Minutes later, four unknown men arrived at the funeral. One wore a leather jacket and a ski mask to cover his face. Holding a gun, he approached the reporters and said, if you don't get out of here in two minutes, you're going to be sorry.

He didn't fire. The journalist left the funeral home.

I was not the mastermind. In February, just after the anniversary of Toledo's death, I met Vera in Mexico City. I had been talking to him for several months. We would meet over Zoom after he had breakfast and talk for an hour or two before making plans to speak again.

We sent each other Christmas greetings, asked after each other's families, but when I asked him if we could meet at his safe house, he said he preferred to travel to the capital. Vera wanted his location to remain unknown, even to me. The buzzer rang at the office where we had agreed to meet, and Vera walked in, holding a large stack of legal documents.

In the years since he fled Sitácuaro, he had become a kind of private investigator, trying to gather what information he could about the deaths of Linares and Toledo.

He was forced to live in the shadow of incredible uncertainty. On one hand, he said, he believed it was Sitácuaro's local government officials who orchestrated the killings of his colleagues. On the other hand, the federal government was running the safe house that he was living in now. Vera insisted that neither could be trusted to solve the murder cases.

There had been no arrests and little sign of investigation.

I want to show you whose side the government is on, Vera said.

He pulled out a document, sliding it across the table, a judicial decision about a wiretap that federal investigators asked for before Linares's death. But the authorities hadn't only asked to listen to the phones of the cartel man who had threatened them.

They wanted to tap the phones of Vera and Linares. A judge rejected the request, saying the victims of a crime shouldn't be surveilled this way.

Vera was convinced the investigators were trying to gather dirt on him and Linares.

They would undermine them somehow. We've been victimized twice now.

First, directly by the attack. The deaths, everything.

And then the state is trying to cast doubt on us. He said,

they should be investigating these politicians, not Armando and me.

The next morning, I took a bus to the special prosecutor's unit in charge of crimes against free speech. The same office where Vera and Linares filed their original complaints.

Much had changed since their initial visit when they returned to Zitácuaro empty-handed, with two journalists killed at the same outlet. The monitor's case had become one of the most notorious to reach the office in years. Ricardo Sanchez Pérez del Pozo,

the young prosecutor who heads the office, greeted me formally and offered a description of the inner workings of his unit. The department had been charged with, among other tasks, taking over investigations of attacks on journalists when local investigators or elected officials might themselves be complicit. He said that in this particular case,

a group of experts had reviewed the work of monitor Michoacán,

the threats and the evidence from the crime scene. What came next took me by surprise.

We determined that we are not taking on the case, he said of Toledo's death.

Our analysis determined that nothing he published wrote or gave an opinion on as a journalist was linked to the circumstances of his homicide. It was the same for Linares.

I stopped the prosecutor for a moment. I told him I had a copy of the state prosecutor's case file and it contained page upon page of threats from an alleged cartel commander saying the monitor needed to stop criticizing the government or there would be consequences.

There were screenshots of Linares' phone with the WhatsApp messages. Sanchez seemed surprised that I had the documents and warned that they were confidential. He said again that there was little evidence the crime had to do with journalism and no need for him to take over the case. Michoacán's state prosecutor was handling the case instead. That appeared to conclude the conversation. But as he packed up to head to a hearing, I reminded Sanchez that the threats against the monitor were sent to stop the corruption investigations of the same prosecutor's office that was now assigned to solve their killings. The office investigating the case had repeatedly been named as one of the suspects in the attacks by Linares. Could they really be trusted to solve a crime that the newspaper had accused them of being behind? Sanchez said he was only following the law. I can't change what's in the Constitution. He told me on his way out.

The state prosecutor's office never replied to my request for an interview.

But Ixtláhuac, the mayor, agreed to answer my written questions about Linares' accusations that he had ordered the attacks. I was not the mastermind or the man behind the threats against monitor Michoacán or any other media outlet. And for that matter, I have no relationship with any person who calls himself the Eagle. Ixtláhuac wrote. In fact, he wrote,

no investigator had ever questioned him in the case. Ixtláhuac offered his condolences to the victims and said monitor Michoacán's criticism of the local government had on occasion pointed to legitimate problems he tried to fix as mayor. His office later sent a statement calling most of the claims made by the outlet a lie. As for the armed cartel gunmen who were seen at events during his campaign, Ixtláhuac wrote, the election had been a fair one. And if such an assertion about links to armed groups carried any weight, the election would have gone the other way.

He had long been a target of dirty politics by his opponents, he wrote, including during his initial arrest for supposedly working with a cartel in 2009.

The former secretary of public security who spearheaded his arrest was now being detained in the United States for his collaboration with cartel groups, the mayor wrote, referring to the case of Gennaro García Luna while he himself remained a free man.

I knew the mayor's statement was true in at least one regard. Mexico's government had been corrupted at almost nearly every level. Mexico is a hall of mayors to any journalist.

It is so hard to tell who is telling the truth, because the line between crime fighter and criminal has become so blurred it often ceases to exist.

The people who were supposed to clarify that line were the local reporters that monitored Michoacán. But of course, they too were gone. Zitácuaro is a zone of silence.

The recent months have only left more cases piling up. On July 8th, the body of Luis Martín Sanchez in Gies, a correspondence for the newspaper La Jornada, was found dead with signs of violence, according to authorities in the state of Nayarit. A week later, Nelson Matus Beña, a photographer and editor in Acapulco, was shot dead in his car.

I knew Matus from when he shot photos for an article I wrote about drug gang hits in 2011.

One afternoon in August, I was scanning the local papers in Mexico when I came across a headline. The police had captured a suspect and he noticed his killing. It appeared to have happened somewhat

by accident. He was caught with two other gang members when their truck was seen speeding in front of a police station. When the police ran his name, Carlos Gerardo Sanchez Mendoza, to the system, they found an arrest warrant from the Michoacán prosecutor's office seeking him in connection with the murder. The authorities said he had gone by the alias O2 as a member of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel. Not long afterward, I received a message from Sebastián, the researcher at Monitor Michoacán, who was on the other side of the door when Roberto Toledo was shot. We had been in communication several times during my reporting and I wanted to know if the news had given him any sense of calm. It hadn't. Maybe Sanchez had pulled the trigger, he said, but if he was the hitman, then who ordered the attack?

The arrest wasn't the only reason Sebastián had asked to speak that evening.

He wanted to tell me that the government agency in charge of the safe house that he was staying in had notified him that he would no longer need their protection. The decision had happened before Sanchez's arrest, so it was far from clear how the government concluded that the threat was gone. Sebastián paused on the other end of the line as though the news needed to sink in for him as well. He had been in hiding for the better part of two years, and his wife and three-year-old son were leading the same precarious life with him. He had felt a higher calling to be a journalist, but that vanished long ago, replaced now by a simple desire for survival. In many ways, it was the same in Zitácuaro itself now. A few reporters had stepped in to fill the vacuum left

by those who fled, and someone had even started posting regularly again on Mornito Dmitrakan's Facebook page. But the tone was different. The pigeons of Cedácuaro also form part of the image of our city was what ran over a series of photos of birds in the city's main square.

There were no signs of the muck raking the outlet was known for.

Cedácuaro is his own of silence now, Sebastián said.

Sebastián was no longer a reporter, but he retained the gallows' humor that has become so common among journalists in Mexico. He would challenge the decision to end most of his protection, he said, but even if he lost his safe house, he would still have his government-issued panic button. When the hitman comes and wants to kill me again, I'll tell him, just give me a minute, please, hitman. Let me press my panic button.

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