

Press freedom fading in Latin countries

WASHINGTON The delegates to the 25th annual assembly of the Inter American Press Association were told there is less free press in the Americas today than there was in 1950. They were also told, however, that in the United States 1969 has been a year of diminishing threats to press freedom.

Some 500 representatives of Western Hemisphere newspapers were present at the meeting of the Committee on Freedom of The Press, the first session on the program. They heard Tom S. Harris of *El Mundo*, San Juan, Puerto Rico, proclaim:

"Eight nations and more than half the population of Latin America are now under some form of military government and press freedom has disappeared in each in varying degrees from a total blackout to spasmodic censorship."

More than one out of every two citizens of Latin America, Harris said, has been denied the right to read news and comment about their government. Since the IAPA met in Buenos Aires a year ago, Harris said, the Association has filed 37 protests to violations of freedom of the press, "an all time high record for this committee."

Fourteen of these protests went to the president or the ruling military junta of Brazil; three to Peru, three to Paraguay, four to Argentina, five to Panama, two to Uruguay, and one each to St. Kitts, Barbados, the Bahamas, Mexico, El Salvador and Curacao.

Status of press freedom

The opening session heard reports on the status of press freedom in each of the Western Hemisphere countries.

The report on the United States was given by George Beebe of the *Miami Herald*. He said that while editors expressed gratification over the diminishing threats to press freedom, some publishers "voiced alarm over what they consider increasing governmental challenges of their business practices."

Among the "challenges" Beebe cited were the statements of Kenneth A. Cox of the Federal Communications Commission that newspapers should be forced to give politicians "equal time" or space in the news columns.

"Thus a federal agency would be designated to supervise the press and make certain that

anyone with a dissent to express, no matter how wild or irresponsible, would have to be given space," Beebe said.

He also cited government actions against newspapers that "are forced to pool their production and commercial operations to save a second paper from going out of business," noting that Congress was still trying to decide whether these agreements would be exempted from the antitrust laws, an exemption favored by President Nixon.

Beebe reported that there had been a "definite improvement" in the credibility gap in the Nixon Administration over that of President Johnson, but said there had been frustration in newsgathering in several government areas, particularly the Pentagon.

Constant challenge

"So there is a constant challenge in a year when the horizon is brighter, at least temporarily," Beebe said. One hopeful sign he noted was that in the emotional debate over coverage of crime news, a truce has been achieved, indicating that "the long conflict" between the press, the American Bar Association and some judges and prosecutors appeared to be giving way to "calmness and a sense of reason."

A detailed report on the situation in Argentina was given by John T. O'Rourke, retired Scripps-Howard editor, who went to Buenos Aires at the request of Robert U. Brown, executive chairman of the IAPA, to interview President Juan Carlos Ongania regarding the closing of several Argentine magazines. The magazines were closed by decree under a state of seige declared by the government during violence and labor strife in Rosario, Cordoba and elsewhere.

President Ongania said he had closed the magazines because they were subversive, because they printed what was not true. When O'Rourke pointed out that a report could be false and yet not subversive, Ongania insisted that what the magazines had printed disrupted and disturbed the government and that anything that tended to disturb the stability of the government could only benefit the Communists and whatever did that was subversive.

No direct action

Ongania responded negatively to O'Rourke's suggestion that he lift the state of seige and

permit the magazines to resume publication.

Argentine newspapers, *La Prensa* and *La Nacion*, print editorials critical of the government and there has been no direct action against them. O'Rourke told the president that whether or not there was a free press in Argentina was "debatable," citing a resolution by ADEPA (Argentine Publishers' Association) which asserted there was no free press in Argentina now. Ongania replied that there was a free press in Argentina and said the fact that ADEPA's resolution was widely publicized proved it, but whether or not there was a free press, he was not going to permit subversion.

Manoel F. Do Nascimento Brito of *Journal do Brasil*, Rio de Janeiro, presented a report on Brazil. He said that although the press in Brazil had not suffered any perceptible modification of restrictions on press freedom in recent months, there was evidence of tendencies toward a gradual improvement. The press law enacted during the administration of President Castello Branco, is still in force and is extremely severe on "so-called crimes committed by the press" but there is no regime of prior censorship.

"Editors can make up their newspapers as they please," M. de Nascimento Brito said, "but the authorities sometimes consider the propriety of publishing certain pieces of news, particularly when the political crisis becomes more acute." The insecurity of an arbitrary regime under which elementary judicial remedies such as the habeas corpus do not exist obliges the newspapers to be very careful with regard to layout, newscasting and suppression of opinion to avoid seizure of editions.

The hopeful factor in the Brazilian situation, M. de Nascimento Brito said, was the statement of the new president of his intentions to fully restore Brazilian democracy, and reestablishing freedom of the press had "roused new hopes in journalistic circles." Although there is still no freedom of the press in Brazil, he said, "the skies are lightening."

Modification sought

Delegates from almost all of the Latin American nations expressed grave concern of arbitrary closures by military governments. As a rule these closures are cloaked in the

legality of press laws but nonetheless they constitute suppression of a free press.

A major project of the IAPA's Freedom of the Press Committee is to get these repressive press laws repealed or modified. Harris reported success in some instances, one being in the Bahamas where an objectionable part of the Powers and Privileges Act was taken out of the law. The publisher of a Bahaman newspaper told the delegates, however, that the government hampered his newspaper by using the immigration laws to exclude persons he desired to bring in as additions to his staff.

Harris reported that in Panama the military president had reopened the closed newspapers "but with a long string," which was that the government assumed the right to approve the editors. The situation in Panama is "still bleak," Harris said, and the IAPA is fighting a government plan to draft a press law which would be restrictive to a fully free press.

Harris reported that the situation in Cuba had further deteriorated when Fidel Castro closed down the offices of the Associated Press and United Press International so that now there was a total suppression of press freedom. In Haiti a complete blackout of press freedom has existed since Papa Doc Duvalier elected himself president for life.

The IAPA was disturbed by recent reports from Chile that the government had invoked internal security laws during a military disturbance, and had confiscated editions of *El Diario Ilustrado*, had arrested the editor of *La Segunda* of Santiago, and applied prior censorship to *El Mercurio* before releasing its editions. IAPA will urge President Frei and the Chilean Congress to revise the security law and omit provisions affecting press freedom.

Reporting on conditions in the Leeward Islands, Tom Sheridan of the *Daily Gleaner*, Kingston, Jamaica, said that there was freedom of the press in Bermuda, Jamaica, Surinam, Guiana and other areas, but his statements that the press was free in the Netherlands East Indies were disputed by G. J. Schouten, editor of *The News* on the Island of Aruba, and Harris stated in his report that this was an area to be watched.

There were some lively exchanges during reports on Cen-

tral American countries stated that there was freedom of the press in Mexico and in Guatemala and El Salvador but a publisher from Honduras said the military authorities had tried to censor his newspaper. There has been no trouble in Colombia, and in the Dominican Republic there are no restrictions on the press, it was stated, beyond the law on expression of opinion which is similar to libel laws in the United States.

When a delegate from Paraguay said that there was "relative freedom of the press" in that country, German E. Ornes of Santo Domingo asked how there could be any such thing as "relative" freedom. The Paraguayan replied that not all countries had reached the same level of appreciation of press freedom and it could be partial in some countries. Paraguay had enacted a press law after the disorders following the visit of Governor Nelson Rockefeller and this law limited press freedom but did not entirely abolish it.

Harris asserted that assaults on the free press, especially during the past year, had come from a "new breed of military dictatorship which believes that it alone can solve the social, economic and political problems that beset its people in a particular country." But they make the fatal error, he said, when they stifle the press. Even "today's sophisticated dictatorial governments have not learned," he said, that the solution of the country's problems cannot be achieved without the help of informed citizens.