

Speech delivered by Sebastian Rotella, Senior Reporter for ProPublica and panellist at the Special High-Level Meeting of the United Nations General Assembly on Transnational Organized Crime

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Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is an honor to be here. Based on my experience reporting around the world, I will talk about transnational mafias and the Palermo Convention. And I will talk about the role of journalists in the fight against what former Secretary General Kofi Annan has called the “un-civil society” of organized crime.

In the 1990s I covered the US-Mexico border. I saw the misery and cruelty produced by smuggling industries. I met Asian migrants who paid \$30,000 each for squalid odysseys in smuggling boats. My recent trips to the border have showed me that the line is tougher to cross, but global mafias still thrive. Chinese migrants arriving in Arizona now pay up to \$70,000. Corruption speeds their journeys by air and land. Drug mafias are muscling into the human smuggling business. And movement of high-priced migrants from East Africa and other hotspots raises fears of infiltration by Islamic extremists.

I heard echoes of the border last year on the Italian island of Lampedusa, a gateway for maritime smuggling from Africa. Migrants described systematic abuse by smugglers and officials during treks to the coasts of Libya, where they embarked on primitive vessels for Lampedusa. Italy and Libya have since shut down that corridor. The lessons at the borders of Europe and the US are similar: Although nations fortify defenses, it is hard to track down and punish the smuggling bosses and their corrupt partners.

Another disturbing trend: the repercussions of the cocaine pipeline from South America through Africa to Europe. The trans-Atlantic flow has enriched old mafias and spawned new ones. It creates destabilizing alliances. Militant groups such as the FARC of Colombia and al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb allegedly profit from African drug corridors. The dangers of the convergence of drugs and extremism were demonstrated by the Madrid train bombings of 2004: the North African terror cell was led by radicalized drug dealers.

International security relationships have evolved along with the threats. Since I first covered the Mexican border, the landscape has transformed in some ways. Despite talk of a border out of control, the reality is that stronger defenses and cooperation, combined with

economic crisis, have cut illegal crossing. And the partnership between the US and Mexico has come far from the strife of the past. Mexico has made a historic, dramatic decision to take on the cartels. The US has accepted responsibility for reducing drug use and southbound gun-running. Nonetheless, violence rages. History shows it takes time to defeat mafias.

I've reported about innovative cross-border teamwork from Sarajevo to Rabat to Lima. In France, a program of embedding magistrates and police from Italy and other nations in ministries in Paris serves as a hub for the real-time pursuit of gangsters and terrorists all over Europe. Two US agencies, the FBI and DEA, have built bridges worldwide. A landmark case ended in New York this year with the sentencing of the arms trafficker Monzer al-Kassar. His career was a vortex of crime. He eluded justice for years. Al-Kassar finally fell in a DEA sting using a narco-terror law that goes after kingpins with the help of foreign allies.

The longtime impunity of figures such as Al-Kassar, however, reflects lingering barriers. Although the Sept. 11 attacks improved cooperation against terror, progress lags on other fronts. An occasional problem is the clash between the missions of law enforcement and intelligence. And as Italy's chief anti-mafia prosecutor, Pietro Grasso, has warned, obstacles persist in the vital area of financial crime and money laundering.

I have told the stories of quite a few front-line investigators over the years. Sometimes, I have told the stories of their deaths. Surrounded by bodyguards, speeding in armored vehicles to fortified offices, these endangered crusaders endure what is known in Spanish and Italian as *The Armored Life*.

Many journalists live the *Armored Life* too. Despite its flaws, the media serves as a bulwark against mafias and against what Giovanni Falcone, the great Sicilian magistrate, called the "third level" of the mafia: its allies in ruling elites. One case of courage among many: The newsweekly *Zeta* of Tijuana, Mexico. *Zeta* has lost two editors in assassinations. Its late founder, Jesus Blancornelas, was gravely wounded in an ambush. He spent his last years in *The Armored Life*, reporting his exposes guarded by a squad of soldiers. *Zeta's* quarter-century fight shows how journalists in developing nations are thrust into the role of crime-fighters and why they often earn more public trust than their colleagues in the West.

Chronicling global criminality requires the resources that the Western media can best deploy. Sadly, the first decade of the Palermo Convention has coincided with a crisis in the industry.

Investigative and foreign reporting have suffered greatly. The press struggle to survive as watchdogs at home, let alone abroad. In a high-tech, 24-hour media culture full of aggressive ideology and shrill opinions, complex stories such as human smuggling are seen as a luxury. This neglect contributes to zones of silence and impunity.

So, what to do? How to reinforce the media, in the spirit of Palermo, as a leader of public awareness? For one thing, governments must do more to protect journalists. This year, 31 journalists have been killed. Last year, 71 were killed. Most are local journalists writing about crime, corruption and politics. Most murders go unpunished. It's often a matter of official will. For example, after years of impunity, Brazil has made an exemplary effort to bring the killers to justice. Governments must also fortify freedom of the press and of public information.

Meanwhile, media owners and executives should reaffirm a commitment to serious journalism. It has happened before. After the Sept. 11 attacks, many news outlets beefed up foreign and investigative coverage for a while. The threats targeted by the Palermo Convention require sustained scrutiny, not just frenetic reaction to traumatic events. Contact between journalists in developed and developing regions should be intensified for mutual benefit. Universities and newsrooms should stress an international approach to investigative reporting. Traditionally, the mission of the police reporter has been local. But the challenges, and the best stories, of today call for police reporters who see the world as their beat.

Let me close on what I think is a hopeful note. My employer, Pro Publica, is a new model. This non-profit, non-ideological newsroom was founded two years ago by the philanthropists Herbert and Marion Sandler. Pro Publica is dedicated exclusively to investigative journalism in the public interest. Stories are published with media such as the New York Times and National Public Radio. We have written about transnational crime, and more projects are underway. Pro Publica has won a Pulitzer Prize and other awards. Similar non-profit ventures are becoming part of an emerging culture of collaborative, in-depth journalism. We are trying to fill a dangerous void.

Thank you very much.