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Africa - Madagascar

Defamation charges

A return to previous levels of censorship feared

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Two newspaper journalists have been held on defamation charges since yesterday for publishing a reader's letter accusing government ministers of involvement in the trafficking of rosewood. Their arrest comes just weeks after a disturbing comments about media freedom by the president.

The journalists are **Jean-Luc Rahaga**, publisher and editor-in-chief of the *Madagascar Matin* daily newspaper, and **Didier Randriambinintsoa**, one of his editors, who uses the names of Solo Rabefiringa and Didier Ramanoelina.

Currently held in Antananarivo's notorious Antanimora prison, they are due to appear in court at 1 p.m. tomorrow.

"Putting two journalists in prison for defamation is disproportionate," said Clea Kahn-Sriber, the head of the Reporters Without Borders Africa desk. *"How can you justify depriving them of their freedom just for publishing a letter? What threat to society do they pose?"*

Kahn-Sriber added: *"Such severity raises questions about a politically-motivated decision to jail them. It is disturbing to see Madagascar return to censorship's darkest hours. We call for the immediate release of these two journalists, who have no place in prison."*

Rahaga was summoned to the national gendarmerie's criminal investigation department at 7:30 a.m. yesterday and was interrogated for several hours without interruption. "I haven't eaten or drunk anything for the past seven hours," he told Reporters Without Borders at one point yesterday.

Randriambinintsoa was summoned "for reasons concerning him" a few hours after Rahaga. The case was transferred in the afternoon to the prosecutor's office, which issued an order at around 6 p.m. for the two journalists' arrest. Such speed is rare in the Madagascan judicial system and suggests political pressure to handle the case quickly.

Their arrests are the result of a defamation complaint by several persons, including Rivo Rakotovoao, the minister responsible for land infrastructure and planning, in connection with a reader's letter published on 12 July accusing him, environment minister Anthelme Ramparany and trade minister Narson Rafidimanana of involvement in the trafficking of rosewood.

The arrests seem to confirm that the climate for freedom of information has deteriorated since Héry Rajaonarimampianina's election as president last December after a four-year political crisis.

Earlier this month, the president said there were "limits" to press freedom and warned journalists to "be on their guard," while the prime minister asked journalists to stop putting "difficult questions" to the president.

Madagascar is ranked 81st out of 180 countries in the [2014 Reporters Without Borders press freedom index](#).

(photo : Jean-Luc Rahaga and Solo Rabefiringa intering in Antanimora prison)
