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Africa - Burkina Faso

Transition

Will light now be shed on journalist Norbert Zongo's 1998 murder?

26 November 2014

As Burkina Faso's new authorities have pledged to end impunity and corruption, Reporters Without Borders urges them to reopen the investigation into the death of journalist Norbert Zongo, whose killers have never been identified in the nearly 16 years since his murder.

Speaking with all the determination of someone starting a new era, interim President Michel Kafando said at his inauguration on 21 November: "This revolution is just the outcome of society's exasperation with flagrant injustice, nepotism, impunity and corruption. The people's message is clear and we have heard it: no more injustice ever (...) Everything therefore leads us to assume our responsibilities and answer this call."

Of all the many cases of corruption, injustice and impunity that marked the [newly resigned Blaise Compaoré's 27 years as president](#), the [murder of Norbert Zongo](#), the editor of a weekly called *L'Indépendant*, was one that most shocked the people. His remains were found along with those of three other people on 13 December 1998 in a car that had been torched, in Sapouy, 100 kilometres south of Ouagadougou.

At the time of his death, he had been investigating the death of David Ouédraogo, who worked as a driver for François Compaoré, the president's brother and adviser.

The finger of suspicion for Zongo's death quickly pointed at François Compaoré and the presidential guard, namely Marcel Kafando, one of its members. Public pressure forced the government to appoint an independent commission of enquiry in which Reporters Without Borders participated. In 2001, [Reporters Without Borders also filed a complaint against Blaise Compaoré](#) when the Burkinabe president visited France.

Nonetheless, political pressure on the judicial authorities proved effective and the government managed to keep the lid on the case for 16 years. In July 2006, charges were dismissed against the main suspect and the investigation was closed. Zongo's murderers were never arrested.

"We welcome the interim president's statements," said Cléa Kahn-Sriber, the head of the Reporters Without Borders Africa desk. "They now remain to be put into effect. A line must be drawn once and for all under the political practices of the past. We ask the new authorities to reopen the Zongo case and identify those responsible for this appalling murder."

The inadequacies of the judicial investigation, criticized at the time by many human rights and media freedom organizations including [Reporters Without Borders](#), recently received fresh [condemnation from the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights](#) (ACHPR).

The ACHPR issued a long ruling on 28 March about the many flaws in the investigation including its length (nearly eight years), the delays in questioning witnesses and, most extraordinarily of all, the fact that the case was dropped in 2006 without any perpetrator being identified. The commission also noted that this denial of justice generally put pressure on the media.

In the judicial decision issued on 19 July 2006, the case against Marcel Kafando and person unknown was dismissed. Although the case was dropped against the person regarded until then as the main suspect, the judicial investigation should have continued with the aim of identifying both the perpetrators and masterminds of Zongo's murder.

But the judicial authorities brought the entire investigation to an end and refused to reopen it, despite [appeals filed by the Zongo family](#) and [new evidence produced by Reporters Without Borders](#).

The fact that the Zongo case continues to be an open wound in Burkina Faso was seen yet again when the new interim president came under fire from civil society after appointing Adama Sagnon, the former prosecutor in charge of the Zongo case, to the culture ministry. Sagnon resigned on 25 November, barely 48 hours after being appointed.

Burkina Faso is ranked 52nd out of 180 countries in the 2014 [Reporters Without Borders press freedom index](#).

[More information on the Norbert Zongo case.](#)

(Photo logo : Norbert Zongo)

(Photo slideshow: Poster for the 14th anniversary of Norbert Zongo's death, in 2012 - AFP/ AHMED OUOBA)

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