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Africa - Mali

Gagged media

Dim prospects for media freedom in north after French journalists' murder

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The murder of *Radio France Internationale* journalists **Ghislaine Dupont** and **Claude Verlon** on the outskirts of Kidal, a town in the Ifoghas massif, on 2 November has highlighted the extent of the threats to freedom of information in this part of northern Mali.

Their double murder follows a decline in security in the far north of the country, which – despite France's Operation Serval and the deployment of a UN peacekeeping mission, MINUSMA – has still not been brought under the Malian government's control.

Their death brings to the three the number of *RFI* journalists killed in the course of their work in the past decade. **Jean Hélène**, *RFI's* Côte d'Ivoire correspondent, was fatally shot in the head by Police Sergeant Théodore Seri Dago near the country's national police headquarters on 21 October 2003 (LINK). The Ivorian government gave Hélène a posthumous award two weeks ago.

Mali is ranked 99th out of 179 countries in [the 2013 Reporters Without Borders press freedom index](#), a fall of 74 places from its position in 2012.

Anarchy in Kidal

The improvement in the security situation in Kidal that was supposed to follow the June 2013 accord has not materialized. A governor has been named but the rebel National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNL) still occupies the governor's building.

A 200-member Malian army detachment is back in Kidal but is camped on the outskirts of the town and does not control the situation. The MINUSMA peacekeepers are supposed to be securing Kidal but they are limited by the terms of their UN mandate.

There are some French troops currently in Kidal as part of Operation Serval, but they are few in number and are concentrating mainly on anti-Jihadi operations in the desert.

The role played by Islamist Tuareg chief Iyad Ag Ghaly in the recent release of French hostages has restored some legitimacy to his group, Ansar Dine. His men returned a few weeks ago to Kidal, where they are now circulating with impunity.

Tension is growing in this unstable region in the run-up to parliamentary elections scheduled for 24 November. There were clashes between rebels and Malian soldiers in late September. Shells were fired at the northern city of Gao from Islamist bases on 30 October.

Media blackout in the north

Freedom of information has been one of the leading victims of the war between the various rebel armed groups on the one hand and the international and Malian forces on the other.

The presence of the large international force that was deployed in northern Mali could have guaranteed better access to information for journalists, but in practice the media were prevented from covering events. Security was used as a pretext for keeping reporters at distance, in what was a clear violation of freedom of information.

The Malian authorities expelled French journalist **Dorothee Thienot** from Gao on 16 April 2013 after she criticized the Malian army's mistreatment of civilians in the northern town of Sévaré.

The French army evacuated more than 50 journalists from Gao on 10 February 2013, after a

sudden resumption of clashes with the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO). The limited photos and video footage obtained by these journalists were among the first to illustrate the war in Mali.

Journalists were unable to cover the French military operations in January 2013 because they were kept 100 km from the front line. Only crews with the French state-owned TV stations were able to get near the fighting. But they had to be "embedded" with French army units.

When the various Islamist armed groups controlled the north, they censored the radio stations operating there, usually by closing them. **Malick Aliou Maïga**, a programme host on *Radio Aadar-Koïma*, the only station then still operating in Gao, was badly beaten by MUJAO members on 6 August 2012.

Around 30 uniformed men stormed into *Africable TV's* Bamako headquarters on 12 June 2012 and prevented the station from broadcasting journalist **Abdoulaye Barry's** exclusive interview with MNLA secretary-general Mohamed Lemine Ould Ahmed.

Liseron Boudoul, a reporter with French commercial TV channel *TF1*, was detained during the weekend of 9-10 June 2012, in order to prevent her visiting the north of the country for "security reasons." She was then escorted back to Bamako in order to fly back to France.

The Malian population has on several occasions expressed its opposition to the mistreatment of journalists. When it was reported on 19 January in Gao that the journalist **Kader Touré** had been murdered for working for foreign radio stations, residents lynched the city's Islamist police chief. Sources confirmed a few days later that Touré was in fact still alive.

Media gagged after March 2012 coup

A military coup in March 2012 dealt the first major blow to Mali's media.

Saouti Haidara, the publisher of the privately-owned daily *L'Indépendant*, was kidnapped and beaten in July 2012, 11 days after *L'Aurore* editor **Abdrahmane Keita** was lured to a meeting and ambushed by five gunmen who gave him a severe beating and dumped him near Bamako-Senou airport.

On the night of 28 March 2012, visiting French journalist **Omar Ouahmane** of *France Culture* was attacked by pro-coup soldiers, who left him tied to a tree all night. The next day, a *BBC* reporter and two Malian journalists were arrested while trying to interview newly ousted President Amadou Toumani Touré and were briefly held at Kati military barracks.

The latest victim of this media blackout is a special programme that *RFI* had planned to broadcast from Mali on 7 November. *RFI* announced on 2 November that it had been cancelled.

Photo : AFP/Rebecca Blackwell
