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Africa - South Sudan

Sad anniversary

Media freedom on hold in South Sudan because of civil war

11 July 2014

On the third anniversary of South Sudan's independence, Reporters Without Borders has assessed the current state of freedom of information and its dashed aspirations in the world's youngest state, which has been riven by civil war since mid-December 2013.

The anniversary, on 9 July, was a sad one. Despite all the obstacles, South Sudan had initially seemed to embody a new hope of stability and democracy in the region. But it soon relapsed into the divisive conflicts that had undermined this land and its peoples before independence.

The toll so far from the civil war that began on 15 December is thousands of dead and more than a million displaced, according to the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

After visiting South Sudan in July 2013, [Reporters Without Borders wrote a report](#) about the challenges it faced, including censorship and the need to train journalists. Rising to the challenges had seemed possible then in this young state, where the security forces and journalists met regularly and engaged in a healthy dialogue, and a progressive media law was in the process of being approved.

But this fragile progress has been shattered by the extreme violence that has gripped South Sudan for the past six months.

Newspapers – first victims of the crisis

The net was closing on the media in the capital, Juba, even before fighting broke out on 15 December.

The latest issue of the Arabic-language daily *Almasier* was confiscated on 7 December after it reported statements critical of President Salva Kiir at a news conference by members of the ruling Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) opposed to Kiir. At the same time, *Almasier's* editor and CEO were summoned for questioning by the National Security Services (NSS).

Nhial Bol, the editor of the independent English-language daily *The Citizen*, was arrested on 10 December and copies of its latest issue were seized during a raid by the security forces the next day. Both *The Citizen* and *Almasier* had been the targets of similar acts of intimidation in the past, while *Almasier's* English language version had been banned since 2011.

Worse outside Juba

The violence against the media is very real in the areas that came under the control of the "opposition SPLA," the rebels led by former Vice-President Riek Machar. For the most part, journalists can no longer work there, having fled into exile or ended up in camps for displaced persons. The equipment of many radio stations has been systematically destroyed.

In some cases where radio stations have been spared, they have been requisitioned to broadcast rebel messages. In Bentiu, in Unity State, rebel broadcasters have even resorted to hate speech. Calls were made on *Radio Bentiu FM* for the removal of certain ethnic groups and the rape of their women. Hundreds died in the ensuing massacre in April 2014, according to the UN.

Even when journalists are still working, little is reported. Some journalists with access to rebel-controlled areas have preferred not to use the interviews they have conducted for fear of endangering the interviewees or themselves.

As the political conflict has followed ethnic lines, journalists who are members of Machar's Nuer

tribe are automatically regarded as opposition supporters, while those who belong to President Kiir's ethnic group, the Dinka, cannot work in rebel-held territory.

"Patriotic" journalism

The range of subjects that are off-limits has expanded steadily throughout the country. South Sudanese officials like "patriotic" journalism and are sensitive about their reputation.

Information minister Michael Makuei told journalists in Juba in March that they risked being arrested or expelled for "hostile propaganda" if they interviewed members of the opposition. The media should take "a neutral position that does not agitate against the government," he said.

A few days later, President Kiir banned journalists from covering his private life, claiming that this was a "clear violation of our constitution."

Newspaper publishers recently wrote to the government requesting an explanation for the verbal threats received from security officials, who had ordered them not to publish any articles about governance issues or federalism.

Denying the existence of any such orders in a letter on 2 July, the information minister said: "The government has not and will never issue any directive, verbal or written (...) censoring debate or publication of articles on federalism or any other issues of public interest."

Speaking on 2 July, presidential spokesman Ateny Wek Ateny said: "The debate about federalism or any system of governance is enshrined under the freedom of expression under article 24 of the constitution, so we cannot curtail anybody's freedom of speech, about any system of governance they might want to discuss."

Censorship and self-censorship

Nonetheless, 15,000 copies of *Juba Monitor's* latest issue were seized the same day after it published an article about federalism. Previous issues were confiscated on 18 March and 10 April for referring to a rebel advance and for interviewing a former minister who joined the opposition.

When 3,000 copies of *The Citizen* were seized in a raid on 7 July, an official told the *Sudan Tribune* that the motive was "security concerns" rather than any attempt to gag journalists.

The *Citizen* publisher **Nhial Bol Aken** said the seizures are causing major losses that are jeopardizing the newspaper's economic future. Is South Sudan trying to use economic methods to throttle or pressure its media, like its northern neighbour? Earlier this year, it was firmly suggested to *Citizen TV*, which is owned by the same group, that it should give reports about the president more prominence and put them at the start of its news programmes.

According to Oliver Modi, the head of the Union of Journalists of South Sudan (UJOSS), there have been at least five cases of journalists being summoned for interrogation or arrested in Juba and more than 10 other cases in other parts of the country since the start of the conflict in December. It is way of keeping media personnel under pressure.

Self-censorship, which journalists and media observers say was already a problem in South Sudan before the crisis, has now reached alarming proportions.

"The media can no longer play their early-warning, watchdog role," one media observer said. "A certain level of self-censorship has always been present but if you want to continue living and working as a journalist in Juba nowadays, you have to avoid controversial questions, which means anything to do with security."

Even the staff of UN-run *Radio Miraya*, which used to be more outspoken, have been threatened and temporarily evacuated. Some accuse the station of now broadcasting nothing but reports unlikely to cause any offence.

Legislative reforms on hold

Finally, the media law that should have been voted in December 2013 has been postponed indefinitely to the dismay of journalists, who would like to be free as soon as possible of information ministry control, to which they are subject in the absence of any media legislation. This often results in abuses, such as journalists having to register with the minister in order to work.

While not perfect, the proposed media law adheres to international standards, guaranteeing respect for the public interest, the creation of a regulatory body under parliamentary supervision and civil society involvement in the appointment of the head of the public broadcaster, journalists say.

When a delegation of journalists went to parliament on 20 June to enquire about the proposed media law's status, they were told: "The media law is not the priority, security and

peace are the priority.”

Reporters Without Borders urges the government not to make the mistake of sacrificing respect for civil liberties to security. Created in reaction to the violence and arbitrary rule that its population suffered at the hands of its northern neighbour, South Sudan must keep trying to guarantee a free and independent press. This requires adoption of the media law and an end to newspaper seizures and harassment of journalists.

Only in this way will it be possible to avoid mortgaging the future of this young country, which has fallen steadily in the [Reporters Without Borders press freedom index](#) since its creation and is now ranked 119th out of 180 countries.

(photo slideshow : President Salva Kiir, Goran Tomasevic, Reuters)

(photo logo : Michael Makuei, Information minister)

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