Reporters Without Borders

Middle East & North Africa - Middle East & North Africa

"Go!"

Overview of media freedom violations of past few days

8 March 2011

Reporters Without Borders presents an overview of the acts of violence against journalists and other media freedom violations that have taken place in the pasts few days in Northern Africa and the Middle East. The countries concerned are Libya, Algeria, three Gulf states (Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Qatar), Yemen, Iraq (including Iraqi Kurdistan) and Syria.

LIBYA

Jean-Marie Lemaire, a French journalist working for the 24-hour TV news station *France 24*, sustained a gunshot wound to the calf on 6 March while covering clashes between rebels and pro-Gaddafi forces in Ben Jawad (less than 100 km east of Sirte). He is being treated in a hospital in Benghazi.

A *France 24* representative told Reporters Without Borders that two shots hit Lemaire's camera and a third hit his calf. "T*he fibula was hit but the wound has been stabilized*," he said. "*We are in the process of organizing his repatriation.*"

The Gaddafi regime continues to block Internet access in Libya, violating the right to information and imposing a news blackout on its alleged atrocities against the civilian population.

The Internet has been disconnected since the evening of 3 March after suffering a great deal of disruption for several weeks (http://www.ecrans.fr/La-Libye-est-deconnectee-du-Net,12172.html). The leading Internet Service Provider presumably cooperated because its owner is none other than Mohamed Gaddafi, one of Muammar Gaddafi's sons.

ALGERIA

Half an hour before the scheduled start of a demonstration called by the National Coordination for Change and Democracy (CNCD) in Oran (430 km west of Algiers) on 5 March, the police arrested around 100 people including a dozen journalists, although they showed their press cards. They were taken to different police stations and then freed after about half an hour. The journalists concerned worked for *Soir d'Algérie*, *Liberté*, *Le Quotidien d'Oran*, *El Watan*, *L'Expression*, *La Tribune* and *La Voix de l'Oranie*.

The authorities also prevented a march from taking place the same day in Batna (425 km southeast of the capital). Several dozen protesters had gathered, shouting slogans demanding political change. Around 10 were briefly arrested and police confiscated Rachid Hamatou's camera.

These violations of the right of assembly and media freedom occurred regardless of the government's announcement on 24 February that the state of emergency introduced in 1992 was being lifted throughout the country except the capital.

BAHRAIN, SAUDI ARABIA AND QATAR

In Bahrain, the authorities have been using indirect censorship methods with foreign news media in order to keep live coverage of the demonstrations rocking the country since med-February to the minimum.

A *France 24* journalist told Reporters Without Borders:

"*We arrived at 1 a.m. on 19 February. We were forced to spend the night at the airport and could not get out until the next afternoon. Our transmission equipment was confiscated. This was not the case with all the journalists. Some had no problems. We were lucky inasmuch as we were given a visa for two weeks. The next ones only got 72-hour visas. That was the case for the* France 2 *crew.*

"*On our arrival, we saw a* BBC journalist *being taken away and his equipment being confiscated. Despite the promises made by the authorities, our equipment was never returned to us. As we could not do live reports, we sent our reports via the Internet.*"

Fearing the spread of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, the authorities in Saudi Arabia and Qatar have blocked more websites.

In Saudi Arabia, the government agency in charge of communication and information, which is also the main Internet Service Provider, has blocked two new websites calling for political reform in Saudi Arabia – [Dawlaty](#) and [Saudi Reform](#) – which were created after the start of the protest movements in Tunisia and Egypt.

The "Revolutionary Nostalgia" Facebook page, which includes calls for reform in Saudi Arabia, has also been blocked.

Dr. **Khalid Al-Majid**, a law professor at Riyadh's Imam University, was meanwhile arrested on 23 February as a result of an article he wrote for the magazine Royaah entitled "*And if the Saudis said the people want to overthrow the regime?*" (read the article in Arabic: http://www.royaah2.net/detail.php?id=1022).

In Qatar, blogger and human rights activist Sultan Khulaifi was arrested on 1 March and was taken to an unknown place of detention. Reporters Without Borders has been told he was arrested because of what he had written in his blog (http://binkhaleefa.blogspot.com) about human rights and democracy in Qatar.

IRAQ

The authorities yesterday banned live coverage of the demonstrations being held in Baghdad's Liberation Square. Around 400 people gathered in the centre of Baghdad to protest against the lack of public services and demand the resignation the provincial assembly's president and members.

Two journalists employed by the newspaper *Al-Sabah*, **Ahmed Abdel Hossein** and **Ali Al-Sumeri**, were arrested as they were returning to the newspaper after the demonstration. They were released an hour later after being threatened and insulted.

These incidents took place although the Journalistic Freedoms Observatory had obtained an undertaking from the Baghdad military command on 1 March that the TV stations would be allowed to come to demonstrations with their satellite uplink trucks.

Many journalists were physically attacked by police on 4 March in Basra, 495 km south of Baghdad, while covering a demonstration by about 300 people who had gathered outside the provincial government's headquarters in Abdel Karim Qassem Square to protest against cuts in the

local water and power supply.

Despite government undertakings to respect the media's work, several of the journalists were injured by the electroshock batons used by anti-riot police to disperse the protesters.

A local newspaper, *Sumariya News*, named five journalists who were the victims of physical or verbal violence by the police while covering the demonstration: *Associated Press* photographer **Nabil Al-Jourani**, *Al-Alam TV* cameraman **Mohamed Al-Rased**, *Al Mustaqbal* reporter **Muntazer Al-Amer**, *Baghdad News Agency* reporter **Shehab Ahmed** and **Haydar Al-Mansouri**, the head of the local branch of the Union of Journalists.

Mansouri, who interceded in an attempt to defuse the tension, told *Sumariya News* that three of the journalists were taken to Al-Sadr Hospital: Jourani, who lost consciousness for while, Ahmed, who suffered concussion, and Rased, who sustained a head injury. One of Amer's arms was also broken.

Accusing the anti-riot police of deliberately attacking the journalists, Mansouri said he feared the incident would have a very negative impact on media freedom in the province. Questioned by *Sumariya News*, Basra police chief Hassan Ali Mali acknowledged that his men were ordered to attack journalists during the demonstration but insisted that it was not "premeditated."

Basra's journalists reacted by announcing their refusal to cover any police activities until those responsible for the violence are punished. They called for the creation of a mixed commission of enquiry – consisting of members of the army, police, local government and journalists' organizations – and threatened to stage a sit-in if their demands were not met quickly.

Many journalists were the victims of violence during the "Day of Rage" demonstrations in Baghdad and other cities on 25 February (http://en.rsf.org/iraq-action-call-after-black-day-for-01-03-2011,39646.html).

IRAQI KURDISTAN

The premises of radio *Dang (Voice)* in Kalar, a town 160 km south of Sulaymaniyah, were ransacked and badly damaged by soldiers at dawn on 6 March. The station had received threats, owner **Jaza Muhammad** told Reporters Without Borders.

"*But we thought these threats were just designed to silence us, so that we would not refer to the situation in the Kurdistan autonomous region and to the demonstrations in Sulaymaniyah and Kalar*," Muhammad said. "*We never imagined that we could be the victims of so much violence. The equipment was either seized or vandalized.*"

Muhammad added: "*Our premises are located right next door to the police station and the office of the* Asayesh [intelligence services], *so we never thought of giving the station more protection. We had just one security guard, who was kidnapped while the gunmen were demolishing everything inside.*"

Created in 2009, *Dang* was Kalar's only independent radio station. The owner has filed a complaint and the town's mayor has demanded an investigation.

The attack on *Dang* was preceded by a criminal raid on *Naliya Radio and Television (NRT)*, a satellite TV station, on 20 February in Sulaymaniyah and an arson attack on the building that houses *KNN*, another TV station, on 17 February in Erbil (see the open letter to Massoud Barzani, the president of the Kurdistan Regional Government).

Shaswar Mama, an *NRT* reporter in Raniya, received death threats on 6 March. "*Someone called me on my mobile phone and told me to stop covering the demonstrations or else I would have to start being scared of my own shadow*," he told Reporters Without Borders.

Demonstrators used violence yesterday to prevent *Kurdsat* TV journalists from filming a protest in Sulaymaniyah's Freedom Square, accusing the station of biased coverage of their demonstrations. Kurdsat is operated by the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), one of the two parties that control the Kurdistan Regional Government.

YEMEN

Salah Al-Mansoub, a reporter for the *Al-Wahdawi Net* website, was attacked by unidentified assailants while taking photos of a demonstration in support of President Ali Abdullah Saleh in the town of Ad-Dali yesterday.

Men armed with traditional Jambiya swords attacked **Saber Al-Jabri**, a reporter for the Saudi TV news station *Al-Akhbariya Al-Saudiya*, and his cameraman, **Kamal Al-Samadi**, on 6 March in Sanaa as they were preparing a news report on the latest developments in Yemen. Passers-by came to the aid.

Adel Omar, a reporter for *Al-Wahdawi Net* and *Marebpress*, was injured by a stone thrown by government supporters when they invaded Al-Hurriya Square in Ibb, south of the capital, yesterday. His video camera was also seized. Reporters Without Borders was told that police were present but did not intervene.

Yemen Online, a news website with reports in English and Arabic, was the target of a cyber-attack yesterday in which unidentified hackers managed to change photos and text. Administrators said they wanted to move the site to servers abroad for better security. Owner **Jamal Al-Awadhi** said he had received several calls from ruling party members criticising the site's coverage of the current situation in Yemen.

Mohammed Al-Jaradi, a reporter for the independent newspaper *Al-Ahali*, was attacked by government supporters in Change Square in Sanaa on 4 March. He was insulted and one of his hands was broken.

The house of **Nasser Abdullah Aldibibi**, the editor of the newspaper *Al-Hurra*, was ransacked and torched on 2 March. Aldibibi had been getting many threats since publishing an issue on 23 February with the front-page headline: "Go!"

The authorities have been preventing the circulation of several newspapers in the southern city of Aden. Issues of *Hadith Al-Madina*, *Al-Diyar*, *Al-Masdar* and *Al-Thaury* have been seized despite attempts by the Union of Journalists to negotiate with the provincial security department.

Al-Masdar Online, a very popular website in Yemen, is still inaccessible. Government officials have not explained why it cannot be accessed. Yemen's sole Internet service provider, YemenNet Communications, has denied any responsibility.

SYRIA

The trial of Kurdish blogger **Kamal Hussein Sheikhou**, a student at Damascus University's faculty of literature, began yesterday. Sheikhou, 32, was arrested at the border on 23 June 2010 as he tried to enter Lebanon using his brother's passport.

The author of many articles on the All4syria website, Sheikhou is charged with "*publishing information defaming the nation.*" He began a hunger strike on 16 February in protest against conditions in Adra prison. Several Syrian human rights groups have reported that his health has deteriorated a great deal and that he had to be hospitalized for several days. The court adjourned the trial until 14 March.

Reporters Without Borders is concerned about Sheikhou's health and calls on the authorities to release him immediately on medical and humanitarian grounds.

The government news agency *SANA* reported yesterday that President Bashar al-Assad had pardoned 200 prisoners held for minor crimes as well as some elderly and ill detainees. The amnesty, which does not concern political prisoners, was announced on the eve of the anniversary of the start of Baath Party rule in Syria.

Thirteen imprisoned human rights activists, including the lawyers Haytham Maleh and Anwar Bunni, meanwhile announced yesterday that they had begun a hunger strike to demand the end of "oppression" in Syria.

Reporters Without Borders has meanwhile learned of the death **Kareem Arbaji**, a blogger who was arrested by military intelligence in July 2007 for helping to run the online forum Akhawia and was sentenced to three years in jail by a state security court in Damascus in September 2009 on a charge of "publishing mendacious information liable to weaken the nation's morale."

He was freed in January 2010, after representatives of the Christian church in Syria addressed a request to the president's office for his early release on the grounds that his father was in very poor health. The authorities had been harassing him again for some time and he suffered a stroke on 5 March while in Lebanon. He was 31.

JORDAN

Around 600 journalists demonstrated in Amman yesterday to demand "independent and free" news media and to express their opposition to any form of government censorship. "Direct and indirect government intervention in the press have killed journalists' dreams of having free media to report the truth," the demonstrators said in a statement, *AFP* reported.