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<http://www.rsf.org/cameroon-disproportionate-penalties-for-18-12-2014,47401.html>

Africa - Cameroon

Terrorism and freedom

Disproportionate penalties for media in Cameroon's anti-terrorism law

18 December 2014

Reporters Without Borders urges Cameroon's President Paul Biya to reject an anti-terrorism law with provisions that would have a disastrous impact on freedom of information if implemented in a heavy-handed manner.

The Cameroonian authorities recently stepped up pressure on the media and the anti-terrorism law could make it even harder for journalists to operate. Its problems include an extremely vague definition of terrorism, disproportionate penalties and provision for only military courts to try terrorism cases.

"We ask President Biya not to ratify this law, which is crudely formulated and applies disproportionate penalties that risk stifling freedom of the press," said Cléa Kahn-Sriber, the head of the Reporters Without Borders Africa desk.

The law seems to have been drafted ignoring the recommendations of many international conventions that make it possible to reconcile combatting terrorism with respect for freedoms. It expresses a series of intentions and means, without ever relating them to a clear definition of terrorism.

Although the government claims to have been inspired by international texts advocating "respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms," such as last September's UN Security Council Resolution 2178, the law does not respect the proportionality of sanctions.

This is the case with journalists, for whom "defending terrorism" in spoken or written word is punishable by 15 to 20 years in prison and/or a fine of 25 million to 50 million CFA francs (28,000 to 76,000 euros).

Laws that punish defending or condoning terrorism have been adopted in other countries including France (LINK), as the Cameroonian government has pointed out, but they have much milder penalties and are much more even-handed.

The decision to give military courts exclusive jurisdiction is also worrying because the use of military courts to try civilians should be the exception, not the rule. Furthermore, the defence minister has the power to appoint and assign military judges, which raises questions about their independence vis-à-vis the government.

In an interview for *Radio France Internationale* on 12 December, communication minister Issa Tchiroma Bakary brushed aside civil society's concerns about the law's impact on the media and free speech, insisting that *"there is no possibility of political demonstrations being confused with actions of a terrorist nature."*

Crackdown already under way

The authorities have not waited for the new law in order to take a tougher line with the media. Two newspaper journalists, **Félix Cyriaque Ebole Bola** of *Mutations* and **Rodrigue Tongue** of *Le Messenger*, have been the subject of proceedings before a military court since 28 October.

After contacting the police to check their sources for a story, they were accused of failing to report matters affecting state security to the authorities. They are no longer able to work as they have to

present themselves to the police every week and are forbidden to talk to the national or international press.

Two other journalists, **Amungwa Tanyi Nicodemus** and **Zacharie Ndiomo**, are currently detained in connection with their work. Nicodemus has been held for nearly nine months, Ndiomo for two months.

Cameroon is ranked 131st out of 180 countries in the [2014 Reporters Without Borders press freedom index](#).
