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Critical situation

Burundian government urged to guarantee journalists' safety

20 May 2015

Reporters Without Borders calls on the Burundian authorities to guarantee the safety of all journalists and the restoration of media pluralism so that news and information can resume circulating in this troubled country.

The situation has become increasingly critical since the failure of last week's coup attempt. Freely and independently reported news coverage is no longer available as Bujumbura is rocked by demonstrations for the fourth week running amid continuing violence.

[Already the victims of closures by the authorities in recent weeks](#), privately-owned media outlets were attacked and looted during the coup and are not currently functioning.

Eighty percent of the production and broadcast equipment at *Radio Publique Africaine (RPA)*, *Radio Isanganiro*, *Bonesha FM* and *Radio Télé Renaissance*, including machinery and cars, is damaged. Fire has destroyed much of the headquarters of *RPA*, Burundi's leading independent radio station. Only the national radio and TV broadcaster, *RTNB*, is still functioning, broadcasting mostly music.

The government is largely responsible for this situation because it was policemen and ruling party militiamen who attacked the privately-owned radio stations on 14 May, accusing them of broadcasting the statements of coup supporters.

The head of the Burundian Union of Journalists (UBJ), Alexandre Niyungeko, told Reporters Without Borders that the government "*can no longer continue to blame these grave abuses on clashes between coup supporters and government loyalists.*"

Rampant violence

Niyungeko mocked a statement by Willy Nyamitwe, the president's main media adviser, who said on 17 May that the privately-owned media are allowed to reopen. "*Everything is screwed,*" Niyungeko said. "*How can you reopen if everything has been destroyed? And then there is the issue of journalists' safety.*"

Heavily-armed men in uniforms have been positioned outside radio stations since 15 May. Many of those wearing police uniforms are suspected of being militiamen and many journalists have received threats.

A journalist with *Radio Isanganiro*, which was accused of supporting the coup, said the station's journalists had received messages warning them not to go to the station and that any journalist could be arrested or worse.

But when the police broke down the front gate at *Radio Isanganiro* on 14 May to get it to stop broadcasting, it was broadcasting only music and its staff had taken refuge in a nearby hotel.

Iwacu, Burundi's main independent newspaper, has resumed operating on 19 May after ceasing to publish as a result of serious threats.

"*We call on the Burundian authorities to defuse the situation and to provide tangible guarantees of protection for journalists, who cannot continue to live in fear,*" Reporters Without Borders secretary-general Christophe Deloire said.

"*The government must take responsibility for the major damage wrongly suffered by the privately-owned media. The restoration of freely-reported, pluralistic media coverage is urgently needed in the current crisis. If the elections do take place, it is vital that the media should be able to resume*

operating and that journalists should again be able to freely inform the public.”

Many journalists agree that there is an urgent need for the media to resume operating and provide news coverage but they insist that the current climate does not allow this. Relations between the state and journalists with privately-owned media are badly damaged.

Journalists *“need a real commitment from the government in order to be able to go back to work and feel protected,”* Niyungeko said.

Many journalists are urging the international community to intercede on behalf of Burundi’s journalists and media in distress. They say the international community should press the government to help journalists and to do everything possible to help ransacked media outlets to rebuild.

In the current climate of fear, many journalists have gone into hiding or have fled to neighbouring countries. The most exposed journalists are those who head privately-owned media outlets and those who were hosting programmes at the time of the coup attempt and who, in some case, interviewed coup supporters.

They include *RPA* director **Bob Rugurika**, who has often been targeted by the authorities in the past. Rugurika has had to flee the country.

Burundi is ranked 145th out of 180 countries in the [2015 Reporters Without Borders press freedom index](#).

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