

Reporters Without Borders

<http://www.rsf.org/gambia-month-of-censorship-harassment-and-28-09-2012,43459.html>

Africa - Gambia

Predator's backyard

Month of censorship, harassment and threats for media from Jammeh

28 September 2012

Gambia was in the headlines last month when President [Yahya Jammeh](#), a former army lieutenant who seized power in a 1994 coup, announced that 47 prisoners under sentence to death would be executed in September. In response to the ensuing outcry and international protests, and after nine people were actually executed, he backed down on 14 September and announced a moratorium on executions.

But the authorities cracked down hard on journalists who dared to criticize the announced executions or talk freely on the subject. Both local and foreign media that reported the outcry were targeted. Reporters Without Borders supports the Gambia Press Union (GPU), which condemned a "decline in media freedom" on 26 September.

"It may seem surprising in a country where media freedom was already very limited, but the situation has worsened considerably in the past month," Reporters Without Borders said.

"Journalists who dare to criticize and have the courage to cover sensitive developments such as human rights violations are constantly attacked by the authorities. When will President Jammeh understand that, by discussing issues and exchanging ideas, the media contribute to a country's social and political development?"

Forcible closure of media

Acting on the president's direct orders, members of the National Intelligence Agency (NIA) raided two independent newspapers, *The Standard* and *Daily News*, on 15 September and ordered their closure. They said they did not know the reason for the closure orders or how long they would remain in effect.

Sources said their arbitrary closure seemed to be the result of their having published letters, petitions and other content critical of the president's decision that executions should be carried out in Gambia for the first time since 1981.

A month before that, NIA officials ordered the closure of *Teranga FM*, a commercial radio station based in the western town of Sinchu Alhagie, for refusing to stop broadcasting a daily review of the main stories in the leading Gambian newspapers.

This very popular press review had allowed the mainly illiterate population to follow current events in their local languages (Mandinka, Fula and Wolof). The station was previously closed down in January 2011 for the same reason.

Some observers also saw the station's closure as a punishment for the outspoken style of a weekly talkshow in which opposition representatives slammed the president's appalling human rights record.

Charged for calling for a peaceful demonstration

Two journalists who had asked the interior ministry for permission to hold a peaceful demonstration against the proposed executions – GPU vice-president **Baboucarr Ceesay**, who works for the *Daily News*, and freelancer **Abubaccar Saidykhan** – were arrested on 7 September on charges of conspiracy and inciting violence, and then released on bail.

A separate charge of "seditious publication" was also brought against Ceesay on 19 September in connection with an article in the *Africa Review* that he denies writing.

Foreign journalists personae non gratae

Pape Alé Niang, a Senegalese journalist with the privately-owned Senegalese TV station 2STV, incurred President Jammeh's wrath when he said on *Radio Liberté* that "Gambians need to deal with their problems." Jammeh threatened Niang with death if he ever tried to do any reporting in Gambia.

Two weeks before that, **Thomas Fessy**, a French journalist working for the *BBC*, was detained for nearly five hours on arrival at Banjul airport and was then deported, although he had a visa and had told the information ministry he was coming.

The fact that he was a journalist seems to have been the sole reason for the deportation order, which he was unable to reverse despite his attempts to persuade the president's office and the foreign ministry. Fessy had flown to Gambia after the authorities revealed that they had carried out nine executions.

Playing for time or real promises?

The day after US civil rights activist Jesse Jackson visited Gambia to plead for those facing execution, President Jammeh gave the United Nations permission to investigate the 2004 murder of *The Point* editor **Deyda Hydera** and the 2006 disappearance of *Daily Observer* reporter **Chief Ebrima Manneh**.

"These two cases are symptomatic of the impunity for media freedom violations that reigns in Gambia," Reporters Without Borders said. "No progress has been seen in the investigations into these crimes in the years since they took place."

"If the United Nations really is allowed to conduct enquiries, it should use independent international investigators, who must be able to count on full cooperation from the Gambian security services."

Gambia's most respected journalist and the Banjul correspondent of *Agence France-Presse* and Reporters Without Borders as well as *The Point's* co-founder and editor, Hydera was shot dead at the wheel of his car on the night of 16 December 2004. According to [a Reporters Without Borders report](#) in May 2005, he was under close NIA surveillance at the time of his death, which was never properly investigated.

Manneh disappeared after being arrested on 7 July 2006 by men assumed to be NIA officers. Claiming that he was dead or that he had moved to the United States without offering any evidence of either claim, the authorities have constantly demonstrated a determination to accept no responsibility for his disappearance.

Ranked 147th out of 179 countries in the 2011-2012 Reporters Without Borders press freedom index, Gambia has repeatedly been condemned for its president's paranoid and irrational excesses.

Picture : President Yahya Jammeh (AFP/Seyllou)

You can download those documents on our website :

- , (JPEG - 32.5 kb)
-