

Reporters Without Borders

<http://www.rsf.org/trinidad-and-tobago-government-obtains-newspaper-18-10-2012,43559.html>

Americas - Trinidad and Tobago

Spying and smears

Government obtains newspaper reporter's phone records

18 October 2012

Reporters Without Borders calls for the creation of an independent commission of enquiry into revelations that *Trinidad Guardian* reporter **Anika Gumbs-Sandiford**'s confidential phone records were illegally passed to a government agency.

The media freedom organization is also concerned about the effect of a smear operation against certain journalists and the government's desire to force the privately-owned broadcast media to carry official announcements free of charge as in some Latin America countries, where they are called "cadenas."

"An attempt was clearly made to violate the confidentiality of Anika Gumbs-Sandiford's sources, although this is one of the cornerstones of freedom of information," Reporters Without Borders said. "The case recalls the one at the start of the year involving *Newsday*'s [Andre Bagoo](#), who was also investigating a conflict within a state institution.

"In the present case, the authorities seem to have resorted to domestic espionage, which is all the more outrageous as Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar's government publicly undertook [to end such practices](#) in 2010, leading to parliament's adoption of the Interception of Communications Act.

"How, under these circumstances, is a minimal degree of trust to be restored between the government and the media? The creation of an independent commission of enquiry is imperative."

According to the information obtained by Reporters Without Borders, the Chaguaramas Development Authority (CDA), a state development agency, obtained Gumbs-Sandiford's phone records from the state-owned Telecommunications Services of Trinidad and Tobago (TSTT) in an apparent bid to trace her source for an article published on 9 September.

The [story](#) revealed that, in an unprecedented move, planning and development Bhoë Tewarie had overturned the CDA board's decision to dispense with a law firm's services for being too expensive, and that he was now trying to disband the board.

Bans and rumours

This attempt to trace a journalist's sources comes at a time of new tension between the government and many journalists critical of national security minister Jack Warner's decision to deny the media any access to government's crime figures.

Warner is meanwhile alleged to have recently pushed through legislation that protects two of the ruling United National Congress party's donors, Ishwar Galbaransingh and Steve Ferguson, from prosecution for money laundering, for which the United States has requested their extradition.

After Warner's actions were revealed by **Denyse Renne** of the *Trinidad Guardian* and **Asha Javeed** of the *Trinidad Express*, anonymous emails containing allegations about their private lives began to circulate in what was seen as a government-backed smear campaign.

Against this backdrop, Reporters Without Borders regards the announcement that communication minister Jamal Mohammed made at the start of October as punitive. The minister said all privately-owned broadcasters would be required to carry up to five minutes of government messages every hour between 6 a.m. and 6 p.m. for no compensation.

"Such a measure is not in accordance with the requirements of pluralism," Reporters Without Borders said. "Its implementation would create the conditions for a media war and there is still time to stop this."

Reporters Without Borders does however welcome Prime Minister Persad-Bissessar's announcement at the International Press Institute's latest world congress in June that Trinidad will soon decriminalize defamation.

Defamation is still punishable by imprisonment in 12 of the Caribbean's 13 independent states. Grenada showed the way by decriminalizing defamation last July.

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