

1 September 2008

Reporters Without Borders
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Language: **English**

**Human Rights Council – Universal Periodic Review
Fourth session – February 2009**

Contribution of Reporters Without Borders (a non-governmental organisation in special consultative status) about press freedom in NIGERIA

Introduction: Overview of press freedom situation

A complex jigsaw on the scale of a continent, the federal state of Nigeria is often a violent place for the press. They suffer frequent beatings, unfair arrests, police raids and seizures both in the provinces and in Abuja. But, paradoxically, the 36 states and its federal district are also a boom area for scores of privately-owned newspapers, radio and television stations, which take delight in revealing the immorality of a corrupt and capricious political class. And as a result run the risks of Nigerians the government considers to be too disrespectful.

The federal government often relies on the feared internal intelligence, the State Security Service (SSS). Provider of the government's brutal shock tactics, the SSS was once again this year condemned by Reporters Without Borders as a "press freedom predator", a designation which it has held since 2005.

The SSS which preys on the media is not the only group perpetrating almost daily brutality against Nigerian journalists. Over-excited groups of political militants, the many uniformed corps in the country and governors' private militias also represent a threat to the world of the press, from publication directors down to news vendors, particularly in the provinces.

The West African giant rejoices in a privately-owned, plentiful and irreverent press, eager to expose the intrigues of an often corrupt political class. But the authorities have a number of means of slapping down journalists who are too curious or too annoying, among them the dreaded internal intelligence services which pose a constant threat.

Reporters Without Borders learned with sadness and dismay the murder of Paul Abayomi Ogundeji, a reporter for the privately-owned daily Thisday and a member of its editorial board. He was gunned down in Lagos on 17 August, less than two years after Godwin Agbroko, the chairman of its editorial board, was killed in similar circumstances. The press

freedom organisation wrote to police commissioner Ali Amadu of the Special Investigation Unit, who is in charge of the case, asking him to ensure that the investigation is “credible and transparent” and that all leads are followed up, including information provided to the inspector general of police by Thisday managing director Eniola Bello indicating the possible involvement of police officers.

Ogundeji had worked for a range of Nigerian newspapers including The Guardian, The Punch, The Comet and The Week. He had just joined Thisday’s editorial board after stepping down as press spokesman for Femi Pedro, the former deputy governor of Lagos state, who was the opposition Labour Party’s candidate in last year’s general elections.

1. Online freedom

Reporters Without Borders has not observed any special problems with the free flow of news online in Nigeria.

2. Government steps to improve the situation

Nigeria's Senate has passed in 2006 a Freedom of Information (FOI) bill granting the media and the general public the right to request information on government business from government agencies or from private bodies performing public functions.

The bill provides for the declassification of and public right of access to information, lifting a cloak of secrecy that has up until now surrounded most public functions.

But in August 2008, the bill hadn’t yet been approved by the Assembly.

3. Working with non-governmental organisations (NGO)

Reporters Without Borders deplores the lack of political will from the government to cooperate on the reform of the press law, for example, or to show more transparency and openness to proposals made by local or international NGOs whenever a journalist is arrested.

4. Recommendations

- The government of Nigeria should scrap the existing press law and adopt a new legislation adapted to democratic standards, eliminating prison terms for press offenses and providing a credible regulation tool for the media.
- The armed forces (police and army, and especially the SSS) should receive training on human rights and press freedom, while mechanisms of sanctions should be put in place in order to tackle the impunity benefiting some elements of law enforcement whenever the attack or wrongfully detain journalists.
- Credible investigations have to be led on the two recent killings of journalists and a real program of fight against impunity should be initiated by the federal authorities against civil servants, officials, policemen responsible for the frequent attacks on the Nigerian journalists.

The data in this report has been gathered and verified by Reporters Without Borders, which has a network of correspondents in 130 countries and partner organisations in a score of countries.

In some countries, a journalist can be imprisoned for several years just for a word or a photo someone does not like. Reporters Without Borders, founded in 1985, works daily to support press freedom because imprisoning or killing a journalist removes a key witness and threatens the right of all of us to be kept informed of the news.

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