

12 April 2010

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Language: **English**

**Human Rights Council – Universal Periodic Review
Ninth session – 2010**

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

Overview of press freedom situation

The country is settling down after five years of sometimes difficult switches between military and civilian governments. Media laws are the best in the sub-region and press freedom is satisfactory, but the recent imprisonment of an online journalist badly damaged this good reputation.

The August 2005 military coup, for once with an army takeover, radically improved media freedom. Censorship and bureaucratic obstacles to newspaper publication ended and the relay of *Radio France Internationale* was again permitted. Since then, the country has successfully held a constitutional referendum, honest local and parliamentary elections and in 2007 a clean presidential poll that the media reported on in a balanced way.

Media freedom became a reality but much work remains to be done and the situation is still very fragile, as shown by the June 2009 imprisonment of **Hanevy Ould Dehah**, editor of the website *Taqadoumy* for supposedly “undermining good morals.” He was arbitrarily kept in prison after serving his six-month sentence, then retried and convicted again before being pardoned by the president after being held for eight months in all. The case showed the urgency of incorporating reference to the Internet in the press law to fill the legal gap that strikes at new media.

Since the fall of the dictatorship of Maaouiya Ould Taya in 2005, the media’s problems have become both fewer and more complicated. Under the old regime, issues of newspapers were regularly seized and journalists thrown in prison under article 11 of the 1991 press law as soon as they mentioned taboo subjects such as slavery in Mauritania. With the new democratic laws, newspapers have flourished and

now freely cover sensitive topics. The press remains divided and sensationalist newspapers (called "peshmergas") now dominate the media.

Apart from the legal changes needed to take account of the Internet, the government needs to tidy up the media environment, open up broadcasting and help the press survive the tough economic times.

Recommendations

Reporters Without Borders believes the Mauritanian government should take a series of measures that would result in a lasting improvement in the press freedom situation. Paradoxically, Mauritania has media legislation that is among the most favourable in the region but broadcast media diversity is virtually non-existent and the legal void continues as far as new media are concerned.

- Promulgate a decree implementing the law on broadcasting : The promulgation of this decree is essential in order to begin opening up the air waves to the private sector. The cost of broadcast frequencies should be low enough to make it possible for the more modest kind of radio and TV stations, including community stations, to exist.

- Overhaul Internet legislation : The imprisonment of Hanevy Ould Dehah, the editor of the Taqadoumy news website, from June 2009 to February 2010, highlighted the problems arising from the legal void surrounding the online media. We recommend that a chapter on new media be added to the media law, so that online journalists are treated like other kinds of journalists and are thereby shielded from the criminal code's harsher provisions.

- Reform the print media : The Mauritanian government's initiatives aimed at helping to fund the printing of privately-owned newspapers and magazines are praiseworthy. To encourage proper publications and limit the influence of scandal rags known as "peshmergas," the authorities should ensure respect for simple, standard criteria for the registration of print media (including an office and an address) and the accreditation of journalists.

The information in this report was gathered and checked by Reporters Without Borders, which has a network of correspondents in 130 countries and partner organisations in about 20.

There are countries where journalists can spend years in prison because of a word or a photo that offends. Reporters Without Borders has been working tirelessly to defend press freedom since 1985 because it believes that imprisoning or killing a journalist eliminates a vital witness and threatens everyone's right to be kept informed.