

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	142
Land:	Burundi
Kilde:	Reporters Without Borders
Titel:	World Report – Burundi
Udgivet:	Oktober 2012
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	11. december 2012

Title	World Report - Burundi
Publisher	Reporters Without Borders
Country	Burundi
Publication Date	October 2012
Cite as	Reporters Without Borders, <i>World Report - Burundi</i> , October 2012, available at: http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/509235e12.html [accessed 6 December 2012]
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World Report - Burundi

- Area: 27,834 sq km
- Population: 9.8 million (2010)
- Language: French, Kirundi
- Head of state: Pierre Nkurunziza since 2005

Burundi spoiled the 50th anniversary of its independence in the summer of 2012 by sentencing a journalist to life imprisonment after months of tension caused by the government's harassment of the privately-owned media.

President Pierre Nkurunziza's proclamation of support for media freedom after his election in 2005 were empty words. His installation began a period of threats and uncertainty for Burundi's journalists. Some have been jailed. Others have fled the country to avoid being caught in a security service trap for journalists regarded as "trouble-makers." Nkurunziza was reelected in 2010 in an election boycotted by the opposition and in a hostile climate for journalists, who were harassed, attacked and beaten.

Resolute, mutually supportive and determined not to be discouraged by the ordeals to which they are subjected by the government, journalists who work for Burundi's privately-owned media are often sued, prosecuted or simply summoned to appear before a court.

Radio is Burundi's most influential medium of communication and it is radio stations such as *Radio Publique Africaine* (RPA), *Bonesha FM* and *Radio Isanganiro* that the

government usually has in its sights. Privately-owned media that support the government such as *Rema FM* meanwhile use hate speech against its critics.

The authorities are extremely sensitive about security issues and are quick to silence media that criticize the armed forces or report the activities of rebel movements, accusing them of "sowing confusion" or "disturbing public order."

Jean-Claude Kavumbagu, the editor of the online newspaper *Net Press*, was held for more than 10 months in 2010 and 2011 for an editorial questioning the ability of the Burundian armed forces to deal with a threat of a terrorist attack by the Somali Islamist militia Al-Shabaab. The prosecutor's office requested a life sentence for his alleged "treason" but a Bujumbura court finally released him after dismissing the treason charge and giving him an eight-month sentence for a "press offence".

In September 2011, the authorities suspended all live broadcasts of a political nature for a month and banned the media from covering an investigation into a massacre in Gatumba. In the latest case, **Hassan Ruvakuki**, a reporter for *Bonesha FM* and *Radio France Internationale's* Swahili service, was sentenced to life imprisonment in June 2012 on charge of "participating in terrorist activity" because he interviewed Burundian rebels based in Tanzania. His appeal hearing began in October 2012.

The government submitted a media bill to parliament in the summer of 2012, portraying it as a step forward. But the proposed law would not eliminate jail sentences for journalists (because many offences would still be tried under the criminal code), it would increase fines and would reinforce the power of the National Communication Council (CNC), a regulatory body whose independence leaves much to be desired.

Updated in October 2012