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## The true cost of media restrictions in Somalia

MOGADISHU, 10 March 2015 (IRIN) - The dangers and pressures journalists face in Somalia undermine coverage of not only sensitive political stories but also important humanitarian issues. Somalia is one of the most dangerous countries in the world to be a journalist, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. Fifty-six have been killed there since 1992, five of them in 2014.

"Journalists are routinely threatened (whether anonymously via mobile phone or in person) over their reporting by a variety of actors - mainly but not exclusively from the Al-Shabaab militants," said CPJ East Africa representative Tom Rhodes in an emailed response to questions.

"Media outlets are predominantly owned by non-journalists with their own political interests and that can jeopardize the safety of their staff. These factors contribute to a lack of genuinely independent media houses in the country, even in Mogadishu where a plethora of private radio stations and at least two newspapers exist."

"This wave of attacks on press freedom and a culture of impunity have forced journalists to impose self-censorship," said Mohamed Ibrahim, the secretary general of the National Union of Somali Journalists. "Unfortunately, there are some regions in Somalia such as Somaliland [a self-declared state] and the disputed regions in the north where there is no press freedom at all."

As well as the five journalists who were killed in Somalia last year, seven were injured, 47 were arrested and five media houses were attacked, according the Union's annual report.

According to Louise Tunbridge, programme manager for Radio Ergo, which broadcasts humanitarian news in Somali to Somalia, conditions for the station's contributors are "hugely restricting," even if they avoid the risks faced by political or generalist reporters.

"Travelling is dangerous, often impossible; getting people to talk is hard; communications are cut off or unreliable in many places; manoeuvring between the powers-that-be demands resilience; we often find ourselves amazed by the fact that our stringers [freelance contributors] manage to get anything to us at all!" she told IRIN.

Reporting the humanitarian impact of Al-Shabaab's draconian rule in areas under its control is especially difficult. The Islamist insurgency uses its own radio station, Andalus, and various websites to spread its propaganda messages. Few other journalists are able safely to operate in these areas.

Radio Ergo producer Mohammed Hassan gave some examples: "last week I assigned our reporter in Baidoa, to do a report about the blockaded district of Qansadhere, which faces severe food shortages; health facilities are a problem; the price of food has doubled, women are dying in maternity as they have not got any treatment, and the local community started last week to cut trees to prepare an air strip which they think is the only way they can get aid to survive in this critical time. However, he said Al-Shabaab had closed the phone network totally. He is trying to get information out but he can't.

"Also last week, the same stringer was trying to report on lack of early childhood vaccination in Wajid causing five killer diseases to spread. He said people fear to speak us to at all."

Hassan explained that Ergo's reporter in Bardere, which is under Al Shabaab control, "has a certain freedom to report, [but he] restricts his calls and his movements and always has to be wary, and keeps as low a profile as he can."

Journalists trying to cover the government's military operations, backed by African Union forces, to counter Al Shabab is equally fraught.

"The Somali security forces are generally very strict with journalists. It is dangerous when they report something about them," said Abdikarim Hussein, a journalist and youth activist based in Mogadishu. "Therefore journalists tend to shy away from talking about key issues affecting the public for their own safety."

The government and its security apparatus have recently reacted heavy-handedly to critical reports. "Travelling is dangerous, often impossible; getting people to talk is hard; communications are cut off or unreliable in many places. We often find ourselves amazed by the fact that our freelancers manage to get anything to us at all!" On 1 March, a Mogadishu court ordered journalists from the privately owned Shabelle news network to pay fines of up to \$13,000 in addition to the 8 months they had already spent in jail without charge. They were arrested in August last year when intelligence and security forces raided Shabelle's offices, shut down its two radio stations and arrested 19 people whom they accused of spreading disharmony among Mogadishu's clans.

In February 2013, Abdiaziz Abdi Nur, a freelance journalist, was sentenced to one year in prison by a Mogadishu court for interviewing a woman who claimed to have been raped by a member of the security forces. The woman was also sentenced to one year in prison for making false accusations against a government security agency.

The case came at a time when reports were circulating of sexual violence committed by men in government uniforms against women living in camps for internally displaced people. In the aftermath of the arrest of Abdiaziz and the alleged rape victim such reports dried up. Abdiaziz was released after serving four months following pressure from the international community and human rights groups.

Pressure against journalists is spreading to different administrations. The Media Association of Puntland – a semi-autonomous region in the north- accuse the authorities there of blocking five websites last October. "These websites are still closed. They had been banned following an order from Puntland presidential palace's communication office without any court ruling," said association head Faisal Khalif Barre.

Aid agencies depend on a functioning press, according to Abdulhakim Shuriye, program manager with the Juba Development Organization.

"Our partnership with the local media is very vital during such critical times when the country is facing humanitarian crisis," said Abdulhakim Shuriye, program manager with the Juba Development Organization.

"They have direct relationship with the community and reach out to people we cannot reach," he said.

"Journalists have an important role to play as Somalis recover from decades of conflict and tackle an ambitious agenda of state and peace building," Aleem Siddique, spokesperson for the UN mission in Somalia, told IRIN.

"A free press gives people access to the information they need to make critical choices in their lives," he said. "It raises awareness of issues affecting them, their families and their communities and it helps people to hold authorities to account for their actions."

Photo: NUSOJ

We want justice: colleagues of journalist Abdisalan Sheikh Hassan, who was shot dead in 2011, want his killer to be brought to book.

Investigative reporting is becoming increasingly rare and that is having an impact on accountability of humanitarian operations, according to journalists in Mogadishu.

"We hear a lot of complaints from people whose aid was mishandled by government officials and security forces but we cannot report such stories since it involves people in power," said a local journalist in Mogadishu, who asked to be identified only as Mohamed.

"The harassment starts when you ask for comments from the concerned institution. It is therefore better to keep quiet for our safety," he said.

"Balanced coverage of these issues by the press represents one of the few means the Somali public can hold the government accountable," Mohamed said.

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