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## Attacks on the Press 2010 - Nigeria

### Top Developments

- Two journalists murdered, another assaulted in ethnic violence.
- Secrecy surrounds death of President Yar'Adua.

### Key Statistic

- **7:** Journalists kidnapped in restive southern region. All are freed.

Official secrecy surrounded the heart ailment that eventually claimed the life of President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua, sparking a debate over what constituted public information. Nigeria celebrated 50 years of nationhood, but its celebration was marred by a deadly bombing for which a Niger Delta militant group claimed responsibility. Amid a climate of ethnic and political violence, exacerbated by widespread impunity, at least two journalists were killed in direct relation to their work, while a third was slain under unclear circumstances. Another seven journalists and a media support worker were briefly kidnapped in two separate cases in the volatile oil-rich southern region.

The withdrawal from public view of the first-term president, Yar'Adua, after returning from hospitalization in Saudi Arabia in late 2009, fueled uncertainty about his ability to perform his constitutional duties. By February, the National Assembly designated Vice President Goodluck Jonathan as acting head of state, but the administration remained reluctant to disclose information about Yar'Adua's health.

In March, the Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project, a local nongovernmental organization, filed a petition with the Federal High Court that sought to compel Yar'Adua's personal physician to disclose the president's medical condition. In its petition, the group argued that "given the public nature of his duties," the doctor was obligated to provide any information that would allow citizens "to decide whether [Yar'Adua] is capable of continuing to perform his public trust and constitutional responsibility as president." The complaint was pending in late year, although the president's death rendered the case largely moot. While journalists had also pursued information about Yar'Adua's condition, many said they were chilled by the president's 2008 defamation lawsuit against the newspaper *Leadership* concerning its reporting on his health.

On May 5, in the midst of much speculation, presidential spokesperson Segun Adeniyi announced Yar'Adua had died of heart disease at age 58. His successor, Jonathan, appeared to take a different public approach than Yar'Adua, who was known for being inaccessible to the press and keeping a low public profile. After assuming the

presidency, Jonathan created a public account on the social networking site Facebook in June. "I have created a Facebook fan page to interact with Nigerians," his first post read. "Through this medium I want Nigerians to give me the privilege of relating with them without the trappings of office."

Jonathan, from southern Nigeria, soon announced on Facebook that he would seek election in his own right in January 2011. But he faced a challenge in late year from two northerners, former military ruler Ibrahim Babangida and former Vice President Atiku Abubakar, as the ruling People's Democratic Party sought to balance constituencies in the mainly Muslim north and the mostly Christian south.

Social networking became a popular means for debating national issues and reporting events firsthand. Using Twitter, citizen reporters in the capital, Abuja, shared their accounts of car bomb explosions that ripped through an October military parade marking Nigeria's 50th anniversary of independence, killing a dozen people. Journalists made use of Twitter as well, both to disseminate and collect information. Associated Press Bureau Chief Jon Gambrell tweeted updates from the parade, which continued despite the bombing, while CNN editor Faith Karimi sought out witnesses through her account. The militant Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta claimed responsibility for the attack, testing the leadership of Jonathan, a native of the Niger Delta. Following the bombings, Jonathan used his Facebook page to express his belief in the innocence of the militants, who have demanded that profits from oil extraction be reinvested in the impoverished Niger Delta. He was roundly criticized by indignant commentators in both new and traditional media.

Nigerians at home and abroad increasingly went online for news and information, visiting social networking sites such as Nigerian Village Square and news sites such as the U.S.-based *Sahara Reporters*. Professional journalists told CPJ they often leaked sensitive information to *Sahara Reporters* that they could not publish in Nigeria.

Journalists worked amid unpredictable and deadly violence. Three journalists were murdered in two unrelated attacks on a single day, April 24.

Editor Nathan S. Dabak, 36, and reporter Sunday Gyang Bwede, 39, of *The Light Bearer*, a monthly newspaper of the Church of Christ in Nigeria, were casualties of decades-long conflict in Nigeria's troubled central belt, which straddles a north that is predominantly Hausa-Fulani and Muslim and a south that is overwhelmingly Yoruba and Igbo Christians. The two were driving through Jos, Plateau state, when they were intercepted and stabbed by Muslim youths reacting to the reported discovery of a Muslim murder victim, said Katdapba Gobum, a local official with the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ). Dabak and Bwede had been on their way to interview national parliamentarian Bitrus Kaze about recent outbreaks of deadly violence between Muslims and Christians in the area, said Gyarta Pofi, editor-in-chief of the *Light Bearer*. No arrests were reported by late year.

The same day, two gunmen killed court reporter Edo Sule Ugbagwu of the private daily *The Nation* in his home in Lagos. Ugbagwu, 42, had not been working on any sensitive stories leading up to his death, his colleague, Lawal Ogienagbon, told CPJ. No arrests were made by late year, and CPJ was investigating to determine whether the killing was work-related.

Impunity in anti-press violence was a particular concern for journalists. CPJ research shows that convictions have been won in only one journalist murder case out of eight documented by the organization since it began collecting detailed death records in 1992. But that record of impunity extends back much further, to the unsolved 1986 assassination of leading newspaper editor Dele Giwa. The case still resonates deeply with both journalists and those who seek to silence them. In April, for instance, four journalists received a text message reading: "We will deal with you soon. Remember Dele Giwa, Bayo Ohu, and Edo Ugbagwu?" The recipients – Yusuf Alli of *The Nation*, Olusola Fabiyi of *The Punch*, Chuks Okocha of *ThisDay*, and Gbenga Aruleba of Africa Independent Television – had covered the politically sensitive dismissal of the national

electoral commission chairman.

In March, amid another round of ethnic clashes, an angry crowd of mourners attending a mass funeral in central Dogo Nahawa assaulted and nearly lynched state radio reporter Murtala Sani. "He was inches from losing his life. They wanted to kill him and throw his body in the mass grave with the others," wrote *Wall Street Journal* reporter Will Connors, who was also covering the funeral. The service commemorated more than 40 Christians who were killed during attacks on four central Nigerian villages. The attacks were seen as reprisals for a January assault on Muslims. A local pastor demanded Sani hand over his identification card, then told nearby men that the reporter was an ethnic Hausa-Fulani, journalists told CPJ. One man struck Sani and enlisted the crowd to join the assault, but police fired in the air and dispersed the mob.

Journalists were vulnerable to rampant criminality, including at least two kidnappings in the southern region. On March 1, kidnappers in the southern city of Owerre seized three sports journalists who were returning from a soccer match, according to news reports. Commentator Bowie Attamah, cameraman Alexander Effiong, and sound engineer Nick Greyling of the South African satellite channel SuperSport were released after a few days. No injuries were reported; it was not clear whether a ransom was paid as the kidnappers had demanded. In July, gunmen ambushed a convoy carrying NUJ leaders near the southeastern city of Aba, according to news reports. The kidnappers demanded a ransom of 250 million naira (US\$1.7million) for NUJ Lagos state officials Wahab Oba and Sola Oyeyipo, journalists Adolphus Okonkwo of *Voice of Nigeria* and Sylvester Okereke of *Champion Newspapers*, and driver Azeez Yekini. They were released unhurt a week later, the union reported, but it was not clear what ransom may have been paid.

Nigerian journalists, who are threatened with imprisonment under a series of repressive laws dating from colonial and military rule, won an important ruling in February when a Federal High Court judge declared the government-dominated Nigerian Press Council unconstitutional. The council was empowered to monitor press activities, enforce registration of journalists, and impose penalties for noncompliance. Established by a 1992 decree during the military rule of Gen. Ibrahim Babangida, the council's constitutionality had been challenged in 1999 by a coalition of journalists, according to CPJ research. Authorities appealed the ruling.

The reliance of needy journalists on financial support from influential public figures – commonly referred to as "money bags" – undermined the independence of the press and accounted for low quality in news and information. Some journalists openly drew salaries from both news outlets and politicians. Veteran journalist Lanre Idowu noted the conflict while commenting on the February gubernatorial elections in Anambra state. "Media access remains largely determined by the size of the candidates' purse and not the richness of their ideas," Idowu wrote in a column in the private daily *Next*. "There has not been any robust interrogation of the candidates' positions on issues in a meaningful context to ensure that the agenda presented to the public is useful."

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