



Attacks on the Press 2009: Gambia

Top Developments

- Hydara murder unsolved; secrecy surrounds Manneh detention.
- Domestic, international pressure prompts Jammeh to halt crackdown.

Key Statistic

6: Journalists jailed for sedition after saying president's remarks on Hydara case were insensitive.

Authorities jailed six journalists after their publications said President Yahya Jammeh had been insensitive in televised remarks about the unsolved 2004 murder of prominent Gambian editor Deyda Hydara. The six, convicted in August on baseless charges of sedition, were sentenced to two years in prison but were freed in September after Jammeh, facing considerable domestic and international pressure, issued pardons.

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The detainees included some of the nation's leading journalists. Four were from Hydara's paper, the private daily *The Point*: Managing Editor Pap Saine, News Editor Ebrima Sawaneh, and reporters Sarata Jabbi-Dibba and Pa Modou Faal. Also jailed were Sam Saar, editor of the private weekly *Foroyaa*, and one of the paper's reporters, Emil Touray.

The crackdown followed Jammeh's June 8 interview on state-run Gambia Radio and Television Service. Appearing on the program "One on One," the president denied government involvement in the Hydara murder and went as far as suggesting, without providing evidence, that the journalist had been having an extramarital affair, according to media reports. Noting that a news Web site had carried a headline asking "Who Killed Deyda Hydara?" Jammeh retorted, "Let them go and ask Deyda Hydara who killed him."

Astonished by the president's remarks, the Gambia Press Union issued a statement that criticized the president for insensitivity and called for a renewed investigation into Hydara's slaying. Both *The Point* and *Foroyaa* republished the union's statement about the case, which has generated no convictions and no apparent leads. A gunman in a passing taxicab shot Hydara, a regular critic of the government, as he was driving on the outskirts of Banjul in December 2004, according to two witnesses. Journalists have suspected a government connection in the slaying.

The union's statement and the papers' coverage triggered a series of retaliatory acts. As the six journalists

were being rounded up, National Intelligence Agency (NIA) officers shut *The Point*'s printing press for an edition and went hunting for other reporters and editors. Press union leader Buya Jammeh, *Foroyaa* journalist Fabakary Ceesay, and *Point* reporter Baboucarr Senghore were forced into hiding for a time after agents descended on their offices and homes, local journalists told CPJ. Two other journalists were briefly detained simply for covering the crackdown. Abubakr Saidykahn, a *Foroyaa* reporter, was arrested for trying to take photographs of agents arresting his editor, Saar. And *Point* reporter Augustine Kanja was detained for two days after he tried to film a scene outside court.

As the crackdown reached its height, President Jammeh threatened the six detained journalists in another state television appearance, according to media reports. "So they think they can hide behind so-called press freedom and violate the law and get away with it? They got it wrong this time," he was quoted as saying in the July interview. "We are going to prosecute them to the letter." He also referred to independent journalists as "rat pieces."

But Jammeh's government encountered a strong domestic and international response.

The press union, unbowed by the government's crackdown, condemned the president's remarks and noted that they illustrated the president's apparent control over the judiciary. Musa Saidykahn, an exiled Gambian journalist, wrote on the CPJ Blog that Jammeh "has overstepped his bounds by passing judgment on journalists. He has also proven the partiality of our already weakened judicial system in which judges defend the president's interests."

International press freedom groups, including CPJ, mounted vigorous campaigns to free the six detained journalists. Ndey Sosseh, president of the Gambian Press Union, said the eventual release of the journalists was "100 percent due to public pressure." She credited pressure from the international community as well, particularly efforts undertaken by the U.S. and British governments. Perhaps most remarkable, *Foroyaa* columnist Halifa Sallah said, was the strong support shown by the Gambian public. "People came in droves to the court sessions, offered financial support," he said. "It was an unprecedented demonstration of solidarity."

If the Hydara slaying is a touchstone for journalists in the struggle for press freedom, so too is the 2006 disappearance of *Daily Observer* reporter "Chief" Ebrima Manneh. In July 2006, colleagues at the newspaper office said they witnessed two plainclothes NIA officers whisk Manneh away. He has been seen but a few times since. A fellow journalist reported seeing him on the grounds of Fatoto Prison in late 2006. The next year, witnesses told the Ghana-based press freedom group Media Foundation of West Africa that Manneh was being treated for high blood pressure at the Royal Victorian Teaching Hospital in Banjul.

Despite repeated calls by international groups, the government has refused to disclose Manneh's whereabouts, health, or legal status. It was uncertain whether Manneh even remained alive in 2009. Yet the case galvanized a variety of forces to press Gambian leaders for an explanation. In November, the U.N. Working Group on Arbitrary Detention found Manneh's imprisonment unlawful and called on authorities to free him immediately. In April, U.S. Sen. Richard Durbin led a group of six colleagues in calling for Manneh's release. And in 2008, the Community Court of Justice of the Economic Community of West African States ordered the government to release Manneh and compensate his family for an illegal detention.

For the first time, a government official was forced to publicly address questions about the Manneh case.

Responding to questions from parliament in April, Attorney General and Justice Minister Marie Saine Firdaus said that to “the best of our knowledge, information, and belief, Chief Ebrima is not in our custody,”

The reason for Manneh’s detention has never been made clear. Former *Daily Observer* reporter Pa Ousman Darboe, who witnessed Manneh’s 2006 arrest, said his colleague was initially picked up because he had tried to republish a BBC story critical of Jammeh. Demba Jawo, a former president of the Gambian Press Union, said Manneh may have been further targeted for his reporting on the 2005 killing of Ghanaian immigrants in the Gambia.

Consistent government harassment has forced a steady stream of journalists into exile. CPJ research indicates that about 40 Gambian journalists have fled the country since Jammeh came to power in a military coup in 1994.

Among those targeted throughout 2009 was Saine, a veteran Reuters correspondent in addition to being managing editor of *The Point*. Interrogated by police twice in February, he faced a series of accusations, from publishing “false” information to having false citizenship. The charges were not pursued.

Security agents detained Abdul Hamid Adiamoh, publisher and managing editor of the private daily *Today*, on June 10 for running a story that incorrectly reported the dismissal of two cabinet ministers, Adiamoh told CPJ. The paper apologized and retracted the story the following day. Nonetheless, police detained Adiamoh for five days on charges of “false” publication. He was eventually fined.

Even sports commentators faced harassment. On April 16, police in Serrekunda City questioned and briefly detained Limit FM commentators Moses Ndene and Kebba Yorro for criticizing the government’s handling of the country’s soccer league, the Media Foundation for West Africa reported.

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