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Attacks on the Press 2010 - Cameroon

Top Developments

- Authorities unleash reprisals when journalists question oil company deal.
- Nation mourns the death of pioneering journalist Pius Njawé.

Key Statistic

- **4:** Journalists jailed for leaked document. One dies in custody, a second alleges he was tortured.

When four newspaper journalists jointly sent questions to a top presidential adviser in late 2009, they hoped to learn more about alleged misuse of state oil company funds. Instead, they set off virulent government reprisals beginning in February that left one editor dead, another alleging he was tortured in state custody, and two others imprisoned for nine months. The case, the worst press freedom abuse in Cameroon in at least a decade, highlighted the brutal intimidation meted out by powerful public figures against journalists scrutinizing their activities.

The case began when the journalists sent a series of questions to Laurent Eso, secretary-general of the presidency and chairman of the state-run oil company SNH, along with a copy of a document that had been leaked to them. Their questions centered on whether 1.3 billion CFA francs (US\$2.6 million) had been improperly paid to three SNH managers as "commissions" in the purchase of an offshore service ship, according to news reports and CPJ interviews. The accompanying document purported to be a June 2008 confidential memorandum signed by Eso that described the payments. (Eso has not publicly commented on the allegations, and did not respond to CPJ's requests for a response.)

The newspapers never got a chance to publish the story; ironically, details of the allegations emerged instead from coverage of the journalists' arrests.

On February 5, intelligence agents arrested editors Germain Cyrille Ngota Ngota of the bimonthly *Cameroon Express*, Harrys Robert Mintya of the weekly *Le Devoir*, Serge Sabouang of the bimonthly *La Nation*, and reporter Simon Hervé Nko'o of the weekly *Bebela*. Agents with the Directorate-General of External Intelligence pressed the journalists for the source of the 2008 memo, holding them each for several days, they later told colleagues. By February 25, news reports said, judicial police charged the journalists with falsifying a government document. Nko'o had gone into hiding by that time, but the others were rearrested and placed at Kondengui Prison in the capital, Yaoundé.

On April 22, while in pretrial detention, Ngota died in his cell. The 38-year-old died from "abandonment, improper care," and the authorities' "failure to render assistance," according to a prison doctor's initial death certificate, which his family shared with local journalists. A 15-year veteran of the press, Ngota was the first journalist to lose his life in the line of duty in Cameroon since CPJ began documenting media casualties in 1992.

CPJ and other groups immediately called for an independent investigation into the death. President Paul Biya did order a judicial police probe "independent of the executive," but appeared to immediately predetermine its result. Biya asserted the case was "not a matter of restriction of freedom of the press," according to news reports, and said that Ngota had died of poor health. The ensuing government inquiry was riddled with irregularities.

Just two days after Biya's announcement, Communication Minister Issa Tchiroma Bakary said Ngota had tested positive for HIV and died from its complications – a claim disputed by the journalist's widow. Tchiroma said the findings were based on a second medical examination of Ngota's body, which he said was held in the presence of the journalist's family – a claim denied by Ngota's brother, Bruno Ntede, according to Agence France-Presse. Félix Cyriaque Ebolé Bola, a local journalist invited by the government to be an independent witness at the examination, told CPJ that he was given the wrong address and didn't make it to the exam.

In September, Justice Minister Amadou Ali presented the findings of his agency's inquiry into the death, which absolved authorities of any responsibility. The National Union of Cameroonian Journalists and Ngota's family criticized the investigation as opaque – relatives were never consulted or apprised of its progress – and inherently conflicted because the same judicial police conducting the probe were involved in the initial arrests of the four journalists. The report found no mistreatment.

But Nko'o, the fellow journalist who went into hiding, told CPJ that he was tortured during his brief time in prison. A doctor who examined Nko'o said in a signed statement on February 22 that he found bruises on the soles of the journalist's feet. The statement, obtained by CPJ, also outlined Nko'o's claims of being subjected to waterboarding, sleep deprivation, and exposure to cold as state agents tried to force him to reveal his sources for the memo.

Local and international groups, including CPJ, decried the lack of independence in the investigation, and said the government bore responsibility for the detainees in its custody.

On May 3, World Press Freedom Day, armed troops broke up a sit-in protest being held in front of Prime Minister Philémon Yunji Yang's office in Yaoundé by hundreds of journalists demanding justice for Ngota and the release of the other jailed journalists, according to news reports. Biya finally ordered the release of Mintya and Sabouang in November, but the criminal charges against them were still pending. Mintya's condition suffered in prison: He was hospitalized in August after he was assaulted in his cell, according to news reports.

In a May report, the U.N. Committee Against Torture expressed concern for "the high number of journalists and human rights defenders in detention and allegations of torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment." The committee also said it was deeply concerned by the number of pretrial detainees and "the deplorable living conditions" in detention centers. It cited overcrowding, inmate violence, lack of hygiene and adequate food, and the absence of suitable medical care.

One other journalist, Lewis Medjo of the now-defunct *La Détente Libre*, was imprisoned in ill health during the year. Medjo was finally freed in May after serving 20 months in New Bell Prison on charges of publishing "false news," according to local journalists and news reports. While in detention, the journalist suffered heart ailments and a severe ear infection, according to CPJ research. He was first detained in September 2008 in connection with a column speculating, incorrectly as it turned out, that Biya had fired the Supreme Court president, according to the same sources.

At least eight other journalists worked under pending criminal charges related to their reporting on public officials, CPJ research showed. The highest-profile case involved four leading journalists who appeared on a June 2008 television debate program to offer critical commentary on Operation Sparrowhawk, the government's controversial corruption investigation. Spectrum TV Editor-in-Chief Thierry Ngogang, reporter Anani Rabier Bindzi of Canal 2 International, and journalist union executives Alex Gustave Azebaze and Jean-Marc Soboth continued to face charges of "biased commentary" and

"unauthorized disclosure of a confidential document." During the program, Bindzi had displayed a document he described as a deposition.

Soboth fled into exile in January after receiving death threats from people he believed were state agents. Operation Sparrowhawk, which was in its seventh year in 2010, has been widely criticized for being biased and politicized.

Cameroon, which has Central Africa's largest economy, was among the 35 worst nations worldwide on Transparency International's 2010 Corruption Perception Index, which ranks nations on government integrity, and was in the bottom 40 on the 2010 U.N. Human Development Index, which gauges such things as life expectancy, education, and standard of living. Biya, in power since 1982, was expected to stand for re-election in 2011 after pushing through the ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement-dominated parliament in 2008 a constitutional amendment scrapping term limits. In March, amid opposition protests, the chamber passed a law transferring oversight of the polls from an independent electoral body to the government's Ministry of Territorial Administration, according to Reuters. In a report released in May, the International Crisis Group, an independent think tank, warned of the risk of political unrest due to a combination of persistent corruption, widespread poverty despite energy and mining wealth, and disenchantment with the pace of reforms.

Biya's administration has kept a tight rein on independent broadcasting through a combination of exorbitant fees and a de facto policy called "administrative tolerance," which allows stations to operate pending the payment of fees. The Ministry of Communication cracked down on critical reporting on at least five politically sensitive occasions since 2008 by suddenly invoking nonpayment of licensing fees to suspend broadcasters, according to CPJ research. As a result, a handful of independent broadcasters operated under significant self-censorship, according to local journalists.

More than 400 private newspapers were registered in Cameroon, according to government data, but with scant advertising the overwhelming majority struggled to publish regularly, according to local journalists. Print journalists often went unpaid for up to 10 months at a time, according to a September 2009 Union of Journalists Workers in Cameroon survey. The significant financial and political pressures left journalists vulnerable to bribes and unethical practices that undermined freedom of the press, according to CPJ research.

The press corps also mourned the death of an icon during the year. Pius Njawé, 53, founder of the leading independent daily *Le Messager* and a 1991 recipient of CPJ's International Press Freedom Award, died in a traffic accident in the U.S. state of Virginia on July 12. Njawé had launched the Jane & Justice Foundation for Human

Development dedicated to improving traffic safety following the September 2002 death of his wife, Jane, in a car accident in Cameroon. Although the Biya administration had repeatedly jailed and harassed Njawé, it issued a public statement calling Njawé "one of the pioneers of the opinion press" in Cameroon. "He has contributed, in his manner, to the liveliness of the national political and media landscape," declared Communication Minister Tchiroma, who read the presidential statement on state television.

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