

AFRICA

Journalists prey to violence, political crises and instability

Madagascar and Gabon fall, Horn sinks deeper, Zimbabwe improves

The Horn was again the African region with the most press freedom violations. Eritrea (175th), where no independent media is tolerated and 30 journalists are in prison (as many as in China or Iran but with a much smaller population), was ranked last in the world for the third year running. Somalia (164th), which is steadily being emptied of its journalists, was the world's deadliest country for the media, with six journalists killed between 1 January and 4 July.

This year confirmed that, in some African countries, democracy rests on solid foundations and respect for freedoms is guaranteed. But in other countries, political crises and instability dealt harsh blows to the work of journalists and news media.

In Madagascar (134th), which plummeted 40 places, the media were caught in a confrontation between ousted president Marc Ravalomanana and the president of the High Transition Authority, Andry Rajoelina. Censorship, violent attacks on media premises, disinformation and a young journalist's death while covering a demonstration were the reasons for the island's sharp fall in the index. In Gabon (129th), the media's work was undermined by the news blackout about President Omar Bongo's health which the authorities imposed in the run-up to his death and the poisonous climate during the presidential election in August.

Congo (116th) fell 24 places in the index, mainly because of the mystery surrounding opposition journalist Bruno Jacquet Ossébi's death and the harassment of several foreign reporters during the 12 July presidential election. The situation seemed relatively calm this year in Guinea (100th), but the 28 September bloodshed in Conakry and the open threats against journalists currently being voiced by the military are a source of deep concern.

Some transitions were less damaging for press freedom. Gen. Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz's election as president in Mauritania (100th) went ahead without any significant problem for the press even if a website editor's imprisonment hurt the country's image. In Guinea-Bissau (92nd), the assassinations in quick succession of the armed forces chief of staff and President Joao Bernardo Vieira caused the temporary suspension of some media and prompted some worried journalists to flee the country, but the lasting impact was limited.

The countries with rampant violence continue to languish in the bottom third of the rankings. In Nigeria (135th) and Democratic Republic of Congo (146th), the practice of journalism is punctuated by physical attacks and arbitrary arrests. Two radio journalists were murdered in Bukavu, the capital of DRC's eastern province of Sud-Kivu.

Rwanda (157th) continued to fall as the authorities reinforced news control in the run-up to the 2010 elections, temporarily suspending local and international news media and sentencing journalists to jail terms. It is now almost on a par with the “African Kuwait,” Equatorial Guinea (158th), where the foreign media’s only local correspondent has been jailed since June as a result of a defamation action.

Niger’s President Mamadou Tandja was in a close-run race with his Gambian counterpart, Yahya Jammeh, for West Africa’s worst ranking. It was taken in the end by Niger (139th), which fell nine places, two below Gambia (137th), which was again the victim of its president’s intolerance towards the media. This year, Jammeh sent six of the country’s most respected journalists to prison and then made insulting and provocative comments about them in public

In Zimbabwe (136th), the press seems to be in the process of freeing itself from the regime’s vice-like grip. The situation was marred by former journalist Jestina Mukoko’s abduction and then imprisonment for many weeks. But hopes have been buoyed by the new government of national unity’s announcement in the summer that the *BBC* and *CNN* would be allowed to return and that the independent *Daily News* would be able to resume publishing.

The same group of countries lead the pack as in 2008. Ghana (27th), Mali (30th), South Africa (33rd), Namibia (35th) and Cape Verde (44th) are all among the world’s top 50. Boosted by yet another democratic election in January 2009, in which opposition candidate John Atta-Mills defeated the ruling party’s would-be successor to President John Kufuor, Ghana took Africa’s top position from Namibia, where a South African journalist spend a night in police custody before being freed on payment of two lots of bail.