

02 May 2009

PREDATORS OF PRESS FREEDOM

Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan

1 - Islamist armed groups

The Taliban have repeatedly attacked the press. Mullah Omar's men have abducted five journalists, threatened dozens of others and attacked telecommunications installations since they were deposed in Afghanistan. A Danish journalist was killed in a suicide bombing in Kabul. And the Taliban destroy satellite dishes in the regions they control.

But it is in Pakistan that the Jihadists have launched the most brutal attacks on journalists, including kidnappings, death threats and bombings of media installations. Journalists in the Tribal Areas, already threatened by the security forces, bear the full brunt of this violence. Three journalists have been murdered and two others have lost their lives in Balochistan, another region where the Taliban are active.

In Iraq, even if the number of murders has noticeably fallen, Sunni and Shiite armed groups continue to kill journalists accused of supporting foreign troops or rival political or religious movements. Islamist death squads killed around a dozen journalists who displeased them during 2008.

AFRICA

Eritrea

2 - Issaias Afeworki, President

This young country's president makes no bones about his totalitarian tendencies. He believes a price must be paid for Eritrea's independence. Basic freedoms were officially "suspended" in 2001 after ruling party dissidents started to suggest that democracy was long overdue. Every hint of opposition is portrayed as duplicity or treason. The privately-owned media have all been shut down while the content of the state media is worthy of the Soviet era.

In just a few years, this small Red Sea country has been turned into a vast open prison, ruled with an iron hand by an ultra-nationalist clique centred on Afeworki. At least 16 journalists have vanished into Eritrea's 314 prison camps and detention centres. Four of them, including the distinguished playwright Fessehaye ("Joshua") Yohannes, have died in the extremely harsh conditions of these prisons. The government initially portrayed the journalists as common-law prisoners, then as spies and finally simply denied their existence. When an *Al-Jazeera* journalist asked Afeworki about the imprisoned journalists in May 2008, he replied: "There were never any. There aren't any. You have been misinformed."

Gambia

3 - Yahya Jammeh, President

A 29-year-old army sergeant when he seized power in 1994, Yahya Jammeh boasts of his contempt for journalists. His palace guard and intelligence services enforce repressive policies. His first few years as president were marked by extraordinary aggressiveness towards those who questioned his style of government. Arrests, threats and bomb attacks were all used to silence the media in this small English-speaking country that is an enclave within Senegal. Grouped in a trade union, journalists resisted until Deyda Hydara, the editor of the newspaper *The Point* and former head of the union, was gunned down on 16 December 2004. The country's media has been cowed since then and nothing has been done to arrest those responsible for Hydara's murder.

Journalists are illegally arrested on the slightest pretext if the president or his aides so determine. One journalist, Chief Ebrima Manneh, is even believed to have died in prison although the government denies ever arresting him. The president usually takes full responsibility for the behaviour of his security services although Gambia is the headquarters of the African Commission on Human and People's Rights. He continues to insist that: "If I want to shut down a newspaper, I will."

Equatorial Guinea

4 - Teodoro Obiang Nguema, President

Everything is fine in President Obiang Nguema's "Kuwait of Africa," where the state radio calls him the country's "god." He is regularly elected with just short of 100 per cent of the vote and has absolute control over this small oil-rich country in the Gulf of Guinea. No privately-owned media are allowed except for a semi-clandestine opposition newsletter that is regularly harassed by the regime.

The stranglehold which the president and his family maintain over the economy is accompanied by an overwhelming personality cult. The few independent journalists working for the foreign press are closely watched. The authorities nonetheless continue to blame the lack of media diversity on "poverty" and not a refusal to tolerate anyone who dares to question the president's power "to kill someone without being punished or going to hell," as the state radio puts it.

Nigeria

5 - State Security Service (SSS), special police force

This fearsome organisation takes its orders directly from the president and does the government's dirty work. Its speciality is ransacking news media, making illegal arrests and holding people incommunicado. It often denies holding journalists whose arrests have been seen by many witnesses.

The successor to the Nigerian Security Organisation (NSO), the secret police of the military dictatorships in the 1970s and 1980s, the SSS was set up in 1986 soon after Gen. Ibrahim Babangida seized power in a coup. Civilian rule was restored in 1999 but the SSS continues to blindly obey the president's orders. The media are bold and vigorous but the SSS is sometimes sent to rein journalists in by means of raids and beatings.

Several American journalists and their Nigerian fixers were arrested by the SSS in 2008 while covering oil production in the Niger delta. Thanks to an international campaign, they were freed after several days of heavy-handed interrogation.

Rwanda

6 - Paul Kagame, President

The fact that respect for press freedom is enshrined in the constitution does not mean it is a reality. President Paul Kagame knows all about that. He tolerates no embarrassing questions at press conferences, frequently insults independent journalists and brands all critical media outlets as new versions of “Radio Mille Collines,” the radio station that encouraged the 1994 genocide.

The government cannot deny the obvious – it is tough being an independent journalist in Kigali. The authorities target any journalist, local or foreign, who puts out news they do not like or who violates the taboos of the society rebuilt by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (FPR), which came to power after overthrowing the genocidal Hutu regime and ending its massacres.

In 2008, a Ugandan journalist was declared persona non grata, a Tanzanian journalist was deported and three other journalists were forcibly expelled from a ceremony marking World Press Freedom Day. Every year several Rwandan journalists decide to go into exile because they find the atmosphere unbearable in their home country. This does not worry President Kagame, who refers to journalists as “mercenaries” or “bums”.

Somalia

7 - Mohamed Warsame Darwish, intelligence chief

As head of the intelligence services, Mohamed Warsame Darwish is in charge of security in Somalia but what does he do to protect journalists in what is one of the most dangerous countries in the world? Absolutely nothing. On the contrary, he is one of the leading instigators of the many heavy-handed raids, arbitrary arrests and deliberately shootings used to harass the few journalists still operating in this country in the Horn of Africa, especially when they expose abuses by the military or interview government opponents.

Darwish often exceeds the orders he gets from a civilian government that proclaims its commitment to press freedom but has little power. As he has carte blanche to combat the Islamist rebels, he sees press freedom as a danger. And he is free to ignore the law. With at least 10 journalists killed since 2007, Somalia is the deadliest country in Africa for the news media.

Somalia

8 - Al-Shabaab, Islamist armed militia

Initially an armed wing of the Islamic Courts, which were ousted from Mogadishu by government troops and the Ethiopian army in December 2006, this group of “young combatants” has gradually emerged as the most fearsome subversive machine operating in Somalia. Rejecting the “politicking” of the Islamist leaders exiled in Eritrea, it has broken away and organises murderous attacks on the transitional government and its allies.

It also supervises a campaign of terror and targeted murders against leading members of Somali civil society who are, it says, guilty of serving the interests of the “Crusaders.” Dozens of teachers, academics, doctors and at least three journalists have been killed by these “Young Mujahideen,” who often use innocent-looking teenagers as hit-men.

Bisharo Mohammed Waey, the last woman to openly work as a journalist in the northern autonomous territory of Puntland, was the target of a murder attempt by these young fanatics in May 2008 because of her independent stance and the fact that she does not wear a headscarf when she appears on TV.

Swaziland

9 - Mswati III, King

Swaziland is Africa's last absolute monarchy and King Mswati III, who has reigned since 1986, controls everything. Political parties are banned and freedom of expression is heavily restricted. The state-owned media only carry reports that have been checked and approved by the information minister and are favourable to the king, who is regarded as demigod.

Independent newspapers find it extremely hard to get access to official information. Self-censorship is standard practice and criticising the king is inconceivable. The authorities often remind journalists how to behave. In November 2008, the justice minister warned that journalists who criticised the government could find themselves "accused of supporting terrorism and arrested." A journalist working for the *Times of Swaziland*, the only privately-owned newspaper, had to apologise publicly to the king in January 2009 after writing a series of irreverent articles.

Zimbabwe

10 - Robert Mugabe, President

One of world's longest-serving rulers, Mugabe was hailed as a "liberator" comparable to Nelson Mandela when he came to power but these days he spends his time mocking his critics. A 2002 law that introduced strict surveillance and control of the media was regarded by Mugabe as a way of combating foreign subversion. The prohibition of the *Daily News*, the country's most widely-read newspaper, in 2003 was just an administrative measure in Mugabe's eyes.

Mugabe has no problem with the frequent arrests of local and foreign journalists on charges of spying or failing to comply with the draconian media regulations, or with the use of Kafkaesque legal harassment and threats against the media. The use of Chinese equipment to jam exile radio stations has completed Zimbabwe's transformation from former "breadbasket" of southern Africa into one of the continent's most repressive countries.

Following his government's electoral setbacks in 2008, Mugabe has ratcheted up the pressure even further. Editors have been placed under electronic surveillance to check their loyalty to the party, while opposition activists have been abducted and tried for "terrorist plots" in grotesque trials.

AMERICAS

Colombia

11 - "Black Eagles," paramilitary group

The extreme right-wing militias called the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC), which were created to help the army fight the extreme left-wing guerrillas, are far from being disarmed. According to official figures, a major programme for dismantling the AUC

resulted in the demobilisation of 30,000 of its fighters in exchange for a broad amnesty. Most of them have turned to contract killing and drug trafficking, but between 5,000 and 8,000 reportedly regrouped in about 20 bands that resumed paramilitary activities in 12 departments. The most feared of these armed groups, the “Black Eagles,” continues to impose a reign of terror, sometimes killing journalists and forcing others to censor themselves or flee the country. This armed group has been responsible for many cases of intimidation and violence against the press in the Caribbean coastal region since late 2006. Death threats received by journalists, in many cases after they had been criticised by President Alvaro Uribe’s government, are often signed “the Black Eagles.”

Colombia

12 - FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia)

A guerrilla group founded in 1964, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) reportedly controls about 30 per cent of the country’s territory. Now reduced to about 8,000 fighters, the organisation has long given more priority to criminal activities than ideological struggle. It lost two of its historic leaders in 2008 – Raúl Reyes, who was killed by the army in Ecuadorean territory on 1 March, and Manuel Marulanda, also known as “Tirofijo” (Sure-Shot), who died a few weeks later, apparently of natural causes. Specialising in racketeering, drug trafficking and kidnapping (45 people were executed in 2006 because ransom was not paid), the FARC also tries to control or influence the news media. It has kidnapped about 50 journalists since 1997 and makes it almost impossible for the media to work in guerrilla-controlled areas. It has also carried out several sabotage campaigns against the transmitters of radio and TV stations considered hostile.

Mexico

13 - Drug cartels

Four main cartels – in Tijuana, Sinaloa, Ciudad Juárez and the Gulf region – have fought each other relentlessly since the late 1990s for control of drug trafficking in the areas bordering the United States. Sometimes working independently of the main cartels, the traffickers buy off politicians to get their way. Journalists in northern and coastal states are often the primary targets of gang reprisals. The National Commission for Human Rights estimates that 46 journalists have been murdered in Mexico since 2000, and eight have disappeared since 2003. More than half of the victims were investigating drug trafficking or related criminal activity. Since 2006, when nine journalists were killed and two disappeared, Mexico has been ranked as the world’s second deadliest country for the news media (after Iraq). No one has ever been arrested and tried for ordering a journalist’s murder or kidnapping.

Cuba

14 - Raúl Castro, President of the Council of State and Council of Ministers

Fidel Castro passed the reins of power to his younger brother Raúl, the defence minister, five days after falling ill on 26 July 2006 and undergoing a major operation. Formally confirmed as President of the Council of State on 24 February 2008, Raúl has not behaved much better than his brother as regards human rights, despite a few cautious hints of a possible opening. The so-called transition period saw continued harassment of independent journalists including police brutality, summonses and searches by State Security (the political police) and detention for short periods. Nineteen of the journalists arrested during the March 2003 “Black Spring” continue to serve jail terms ranging from 14 to 27 years in appalling prison conditions. A 20th journalist has been held without trial since 2005. Three others have been imprisoned since Raúl took over on charges of “pre-

crime social dangerousness.” With a total of 23 journalists detained, Cuba is the world’s second biggest prison for the media, after China.

ASIA

Burma

15 - Than Shwe, head of military junta

Gen. Than Shwe, the head of the military government, organised an unprecedented wave of trials at the end of 2008 to punish those who dared to defy him. Compliant judges handed down sentences totalling 3,601 years in prison to 215 prisoners of opinion, including journalists, bloggers, lawyers, monks and opposition activists. Comedian and blogger Zarganar was sentenced to 59 years in prison for mocking the general who has been in power since 1992. The notoriously paranoid Than Shwe then ordered that most of them should be moved to insalubrious jails far from their homes.

The general can rely on the army to impose order through fear. His henchmen continue to hunt down journalists suspected of sending news abroad on the disastrous state of the country. Now holed up in the new capital, Naypyidaw, he began his military career in psychological warfare, which gave him a strong taste for controlling the media. He is bolstered by a censorship bureau which checks the content of all newspapers, books and films before they appear. He delivers militaristic speeches full of hate towards the democratic opposition and expresses a special loathing for Nobel peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, whom he has kept under house arrest since May 2003.

China

16 - Hu Jintao, President

On the eve of the Beijing Olympics, Hu Jintao, President and General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), received a handpicked group of foreign journalists (whose questions were selected in advance) and assured them of his commitment to press freedom. But at the same time, the propaganda department and the political police, bastions of the conservatives, were stepping up control of the liberal press and dissidents. Tibet, where Hu Jintao was head of the CCP in the 1980s, was closed to journalists and several dozen Tibetans were arrested for sending news abroad during and after the March 2008 protests there.

Hu Jintao’s determination to control the media cost the lives of children who fell ill after drinking milk that was contaminated with melamine because, ahead of the Olympics, the authorities had forbidden the media to cover such stories. Nor was there a word in the press about the imprisonment of two renowned dissidents, Hu Jia and Liu Xiaobo, for demanding greater democracy.

North Korea

17 - Kim Jong-il, secretary-general of ruling Workers Party

The tyrant of Pyongyang and his family continue to maintain North Koreans in a terrifying isolation although he suffered a stroke in 2008. The media never mentioned his health problems and, in order to refute reports on foreign-based radio stations run by North Korean dissidents, they were ordered to publish archive photos of the “Dear Leader” on an inspection tour as if they had just been taken.

The North Korean media are used primarily for a personality cult of Kim Jong-il and his late father and predecessor, Kim Il-sung, who are praised as “socialists heroes.” The paranoid and luxury-loving “Dear Leader” banned the media from mentioning the famine that killed millions of North Koreans during the 1990s. Each day his activities begin the TV news broadcasts and are front-page stories in the newspapers. The misspelling of his name suffices to send the culprit to one of the political re-education camps. And Kim Jong-il ordered the security forces to prevent foreign videos, magazines, telephones and CDs from entering the country.

There is no news of the military officer who managed to send video of a public execution out of the country in 2006. He was reportedly arrested by the political police and sent to a concentration camp. At least 150,000 people are held in such camps, in some cases just for listening to a radio station based abroad.

Laos

18 - Choummaly Sayasone, President

Choummaly Sayasone, who has been president since 2006, continues to block the emergence of a privately-owned press. He can count on the loyalty of those who run the state media, including the mouthpiece of the ruling People’s Revolutionary Party, the newspaper Paxaxon (People), which defines itself as “a revolutionary publication produced by and for the people”. The activities of the president and top party leaders are always the lead stories in the state media, which are the only media permitted in Laos. The president, who came from within the ranks of the army, has issued orders that, when referring to him, journalists should only use reports put out by the official news agency, Khaosan Pathet Lao.

He has also ordered the security forces to prevent foreign reporters from freely covering the plight of the Hmong minority, which is still persecuted by the regime. The president has refused to pardon two Hmongs who have been in prison since 2003 for working as guides for two European reporters.

Nepal

19 - Armed groups

Although rid of their tyrannical king, Nepalese journalists now face radicalised armed groups. The Maoists, who came to power through elections, have not be able to rein in the violence and in fact Maoist activists are involved in about third of the attacks on the press, including one in December 2008 against Himal Media, a press group based in Kathmandu. The assailants warned that: “Anything could happen if one of the newspapers publishes anti-Maoist reports again.” There were more than 200 cases of physical attacks, threats or censorship by political activists against the press in 2008. And two journalists were killed.

The violence is concentrated in the south, where armed gangs claim to defend the interests of the local population. Some areas have become a living hell for the correspondents of the national press. In many towns, the militants of Janatantrik Terai Mukti Morcha (JTMM) and Madhesi Tiger Nepal (MTN) post lists of “wanted” journalists together with offers of rewards.

Sri Lanka

20 - Velupillai Prabhakaran, Tamil Tiger leader

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), an armed separatist movement whose combatants have in recent months been driven into a small enclave by an unprecedented military offensive, has never tolerated criticism within the Tamil community. It is led with an iron hand by its supreme leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran, an advocate of blind terrorism and suspected instigator of a suicide bombing in October 2008 in which a TV reporter was killed. Other journalists have been killed in the past by the Tamil Tigers for allegedly supporting the army or allied paramilitary groups.

The pressure put on journalists by the LTTE is often more discreet than government pressure, but is no less effective. "We know that the LTTE's reactions can be dangerous to our staff, so we are very careful," a Tamil newspaper editor said. "You weigh each word when you talk about the LTTE and the army. And, of course, we never describe the Tigers as terrorists."

Sri Lanka

21 - Gotabhaya Rajapakse, defence minister

The president's younger brother and secretary of defence, Gotabhaya Rajapakse is openly hostile to the media, denying journalists access to war zones and Tamil areas in general and urging the state media to attack independent journalists and civil society representatives. He has clearly put into effect what he said in 2008: "Journalists should not be allowed to write about military matters and strong action should be taken against those who do." Most defence correspondents have left the country or use bodyguards, for fear of being targeted by death squads. Two Tamil journalists have been jailed under an anti-terrorism law just for criticising the military offensive he launched.

The holder of a US passport, he has blocked all investigations into murders of journalists and physical attacks on news media by paramilitary groups that do the army's "dirty work." In late 2008, he got a judge to issue an injunction against Leader Publications, an independent media group whose editor was killed in Colombo in January, forbidding it to publish any report about him. He has publicly regretted that defamation has been decriminalised in Sri Lanka.

Vietnam

Nong Duc Manh, Communist Party general secretary

The Communist Party's chief since 2001, Nong Duc Manh heads the conservative faction that is preventing the emergence of independent media. He ordered the arrest of two investigative journalists who had exposed fraud within the government, and one of them was sentenced to two years in prison.

Nong Duc Manh has concentrated his offensive on dissident movements running clandestine publications and websites. Catholic priest Nguyen Van Ly is still in jail for launching the underground magazine Tu do Ngôn luận (Free Expression) in the central city of Hue, while dissident journalist Truong Minh Duc was given a five-year jail sentence in July 2008 for "taking advantage of democratic freedom to harm the interests of the state and of social and citizen organisations."

Online repression has also been tightened. Nong Duc Manh decreed at the end of 2008 that political comments were banned on blogs, while independent blogger Dieu Cay was sentenced to two and a half years in prison.

EUROPE AND FORMER USSR

Turkmenistan

23 - Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, President

In the two years since his election as president, Berdymukhamedov has not fulfilled the hopes of democratisation that his campaign statements had raised. It is too early to say if this is because of a lack of political will or the need to compromise with the government's most conservative elements. Former health minister and personal dentist to his capricious and sinister predecessor, President-for-Life Saparmurat Niyazov, he has often accused journalists and performers of not giving his policies enough attention. This has clearly not encouraged them to act with more autonomy.

He has introduced some symbolic reforms such as permitting opera again and removing the former president's image from television screens, but no independent press has been allowed. Internet access has been made easier but users are subject to increased surveillance by the national security department. Those trying to work as independent journalists have to do so clandestinely and they have reported increased harassment and difficulties.

Azerbaijan

24 - Ilham Aliev, President

Ilham Aliev was carefully prepared for the job of president of this oil-rich country – one courted by many foreign governments – by his father, Heydar Aliev, its ruler since 1969. He headed the ruling party's candidate list in the 1999 parliamentary elections and, after his father suffered a heart attack live on TV in April 2003, he was appointed prime minister. Finally, as his father's health continued to fail, he was named as the party's candidate for the October 2003 presidential election, which he won.

Initially seen as an amiable man unsuited to the harsh realities of politics, he proved himself to be a worthy heir of his father by cracking down hard on his opponents and targeting newspapers that support the opposition or criticise the widespread corruption. It is now common for journalists to be the targets of physical attacks or sentenced to long jail terms. Four journalists are currently in prison. They include the editor and one of the reporters of the leading opposition daily *Azadlig*.

The state-owned print and broadcast media gave Aliev a disproportionate amount of coverage – all favourable – during the campaign for the October 2008 president election, in which he was reelected with 89 per cent of the vote.

Belarus

25 - Alexander Lukashenko, President

The former state farm manager's record since being elected president in 1994 is grim. His re-election with more than 80 per cent of the vote in March 2006 illustrated the strength of his grip on the country. The independent press has been virtually eradicated. The state's monopoly of printing and distribution facilities makes it easy for the authorities to crush any sign of defiance by journalists. Sometimes their only option is to go underground,

returning to Soviet-era “samizdats” (forbidden material copied and distributed clandestinely). Monitoring of legislative elections in September 2008 highlighted the extent to which control of the media blocked the opposition and thwarted the possibilities of political debate.

Citing the example of Chinese control of the Internet, a state-run daily reported that the president was determined “to put an end to online anarchy.” This fuelled fears that the opportunities for free expression online would soon be curtailed. However, in December 2008, the government showed an unexpected readiness to negotiate, allowing renewed official distribution of two newspapers and undertaking to consult representatives of the media and civil society on the issue of Internet regulation. Nonetheless, the authorities continue to maintain a very high level of control over news and information and foreign news media are still hard put to obtain press accreditation, which forces them to operate illegally.

Uzbekistan

26 - Islam Karimov, President

President Karimov likes to call foreign journalists “agitators,” even “terrorists,” and has done his best to make it impossible for foreign media to operate in the country since 2005. But most of his media victims since he came to power in 1989 have been local journalists. He has been particularly ruthless in his efforts to crush all opposition and eliminate the independent press since a revolt in the eastern city of Andijan in May 2005.

He has the brutal habits of a former Soviet functionary and his victims, including critical journalists, either disappear, or are confined to mental hospitals or are arbitrarily thrown in prison. He said in 1999 he was “prepared to blow off the heads of 200 people, to sacrifice their lives, in order to preserve peace and tranquillity.”

During his campaign for reelection in December 2007, Karimov was ubiquitous in the state media, which credited him with all the country’s “successes.” Independently reported news remains a rare commodity and the price is sometimes high. The last independent journalist operating in the western region of Karakalpakstan was sentenced to ten years in prison on 19 November 2008, while state TV stations wage hate campaigns against *Radio Free Europe’s* correspondents, naming them, calling them traitors, showing their photos and even giving the addresses of the schools their children attend.

Kazakhstan

27 - Nursultan Nazarbayev, President

President Nazarbayev has done nothing to improve his record as a predator of press freedom since his reelection for another seven years in 2005 with 91 per cent of the vote. Any insult to his reputation and dignity has been made punishable by a prison term and he has amended the law to tighten registration of media outlets and make it easier to shut down opposition papers. Journalists employed by newspapers that have been closed down are banned from working for three years.

When US secretary of state Condoleezza Rice visited Kazakhstan in 2005, Nazarbayev told her: “We are in favour of freedom of expression inasmuch as a society in transition can allow it.” This clearly explains why *Radio Free Europe’s* English and Kazakh-language websites were inaccessible for more than six weeks. And why the National Security Committee hounded the editor of a weekly in late 2008 to get him to reveal his source for an embarrassing story. Internal power struggles continue to take their toll on the media.

The country's most popular blog platform, for example, was closed after the president's disgraced former son-in-law used it to launch his own online newspaper.

Russia

28 - Dmitri Medvedev and Vladimir Putin, President and Prime Minister

After eight years as president, Vladimir Putin handed over to Dmitri Medvedev on 2 March 2008 and moved from the Kremlin to the White House and the job of prime minister, having completed the Kremlin's gradual takeover of the media with the help of his ally, the Gazprom state energy conglomerate. Broadcast media diversity is now just a distant dream and the regional press now works under pressure from presidentially-appointed governors or local business potentates.

Even the most distinguished journalists such as *Novaya Gazeta* investigative reporter Anna Politkovskaya can be the targets of violence. The trial of four men accused of being accomplices to her murder opened amid great confusion on 19 November 2008. Neither the killer nor those who ordered the murder were among the accused. The same month, a journalist who had criticised a motorway project was beaten nearly to death in a Moscow suburb. Prior to that, in August, the owner of Ingushetia's sole independent news website, which is highly critical of the local authorities, was arrested and then immediately shot dead by the security forces on his return to the region.

Finally, in November 2008, prosecutors were ordered to step up surveillance of news media that revealed unwelcome information about the impact of the economic crisis in Russia. When it came to choosing between combating the crisis and combating the media, the government chose the latter.

Italy

29 - Organised crime

Italian shop-keepers, businessmen and judges are not the only victims of organised crime networks such as Cosa Nostra, the Camorra, the 'Ndrangheta, and the Sacra Corona Unita. Journalists and writers also find themselves in the line of fire as soon as they try to cover the Italian mafia. One of them is Roberto Saviano, author of the book *Gomorra*, who is forced to live under permanent police protection and now says he plans to leave Italy.

In all, some 10 journalists work under police protection. There have been hundreds of cases of threats, anonymous letters, vandalised tyres, and torched cars. Every journalist writing about these criminal groups has been watched at one time or another. Lirio Abbate, 38, correspondent in Palermo, Sicily, for the news agency *Ansa*, and author of *I Complici* (The Accomplices), also lives under permanent police protection. This is also the case, since March 2008, for Rosaria Capacchione, a 48-year-old journalist working for more than 20 years for the leading Naples daily *Il Mattino*, who covers the Camorra and who, like Roberto Saviano, is being hunted by the Casalesi clan. This power struggle and the mafia's determination to hold sway have existed for decades. Journalist Giancarlo Siani, who worked for the same daily paper, was shot dead while investigating the Camorra in September 1985.

Spain

30 - ETA, terrorist organisation

Euskadi ta Askatasuna (Basque Homeland and Freedom), the armed separatist group that is better known by the acronym ETA, has constantly targeted journalists, both in France as

in Spain, since its creation in 1959. Controlling the news is a key goal for ETA and journalists considered “enemies of the cause” are among its potential targets. ETA’s media victims include José María Portell, murdered in 1978, José Javier Uranga, wounded in a shooting in 1980, José Luis Lopez de la Calle, murdered in 2000, and Gorka Landaburu, who sustained severe face and hand injuries when he opened a parcel-bomb in 2001. Several dozen Spanish journalists are currently forced to have bodyguards because of ETA death threats.

ETA spoke in 1998 of “the need to give the people a voice, that the people get their voice back and that their voice be respected.” But it has never shown the same enthusiasm for giving a free voice to journalists, whom it often describes as “dogs” or “policemen.” Speaking on condition of anonymity, a journalist with the Madrid-based daily *El País* said of ETA: “The last few years have been tough. The problem is the general climate, the tension that makes our work so difficult. I am tired of it all. It has been going for too long.”

MAGREB AND MIDDLE EAST

Saudi Arabia

31 - Abdallah Ibn Abdulaziz Al-Saud, King

Abdallah, who became Saudi Arabia’s sixth king in August 2005, is also “custodian of the two holy mosques” and prime minister. Under his command, the regime has swung between repression and openness. He has had political activists and journalists arrested but he also staged the country’s first municipal elections.

The Saud family’s hold on the state and the supremacy of its Wahabi ideology depend on rigid control of news. No laws protect freedom of expression so journalists dare not criticise the regime and self-censorship is the rule. Regional unrest and the fight against terrorism continue to be used to justify curbing basic freedoms. Visiting foreign journalists are always accompanied by government officials who report back on what they do.

Iran

32 - Ali Khamenei, Supreme Leader

Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has guided the country since the death of the Islamic Republic’s founder, Ayatollah Khomeini, in 1989, consolidating his predecessor’s ultraconservative policies. He controls the country’s main political institutions and the public radio and television network, and he is consulted about the choice of person for the post of Minister of Culture and Islamic Orientation, who is responsible for most of the arrests of journalists

Ayatollah Khamenei often accuses the press of being manipulated by foreign governments, especially Israel. For example, the Commission for Press Authorisation and Surveillance, the censorship arm of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Orientation, ordered the suspension of the daily *Kargozaraan* on 31 December 2008 for “defending Israel’s actions in Gaza and its crimes against the Muslim populations.” A total of 30 newspapers were suspended in Iran in 2008, 22 of them by the Commission for Press Authorisation and Surveillance. Nonetheless, Khamenei claims that Iran’s journalists are free to say what they like. “The fact that certain media can freely criticise the government and the system of rule is an explicit indication of respect for free expression in the country, even if the Iranian nation pays no attention to this criticism,” he said.

Iran

33 - Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, President

The ultra-conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad continues to limit freedom of expression and has announced his intention to run for another term in the June 2009 presidential election. Since taking office as president in August 2005, he has named former “revolutionary guards” to head the main government ministries and institutions.

The hardline pro-regime media sometimes get away with criticising his policies but the pro-reform press does not enjoy the same kind of leeway. Independent journalists are often summoned by the secret police and can be held incommunicado for weeks without being allowed to contact family or lawyers. The judicial system’s entrenched irregularities facilitate the harassment and detention of journalists and dissidents who still dare to speak out. Many websites were censored in 2008 for posing a threat to state sovereignty. In July 2008, the National Assembly began considering a bill that would introduce the death penalty for anyone creating a blog or website that promoted corruption, prostitution or apostasy.

The government still refuses to put an end to the state monopoly on broadcast media and it is still forbidden to own a satellite dish. Foreign media are closely watched and their local correspondents can have their accreditation withdrawn at any time. International organisations very rarely manage to obtain permission to visit Iran.

Israel

34 - Israel Defence Forces

The Israeli authorities have banned journalists from entering the Gaza Strip since 6 November 2008. This blockade on the foreign media was reinforced by Operation Cast Lead, launched on 27 December 2008.

In general, the Israeli security forces behave arbitrarily towards Palestinian journalists and media assistants in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. A Palestinian cameraman working for *Reuters*, Fadel Shanaa, was killed in the Gaza Strip on 16 April 2008 by a shell fired from an Israeli tank. The army’s investigation did not lead to legal proceedings against the soldiers implicated nor did it shed light on the circumstances of his death. A missile or shell hit the Al-Shurouq Tower, a building in Gaza City that houses several news organisations, on 15 January, injuring an *Abu Dhabi TV* journalist and a *Reuters* cameraman. *Afag TV*, a station based in the West Bank city of Nablus, had to cease operations on 10 July 2008 after Israeli soldiers closed its studios and put them under seal.

The Israeli army regularly arrests Palestinian journalists as they move about within the Palestinian Territories or on their return from visits abroad. For example, Ibrahim Hamad, a sound engineer working for the Palestinian news agency *Ramattan* was arrested on 15 July 2008 and placed in detention for six months. Four *Ramattan* journalists and technicians were arrested on at a checkpoint at Zaatara, near the West Bank city of Nablus, while headed for Nablus on 22 June 2008 in a vehicle with TV markings. Israeli army abuses rarely result in legal proceedings against the soldiers involved.

Libya

35 - Muammar Gaddafi, Head of State and Guide of the Revolution

Since launching his “Green Revolution” in 1969, Muammar Gaddafi has distanced himself from his original socialist ideals. The ending of Libya’s diplomatic isolation has had a significant impact on the economy but not on press freedom. Journalists are only very slowly benefiting from the easing of political tension. They still have no room for manoeuvre and have to relay Gaddafi’s propaganda. His personality cult is visible everywhere in the streets and in the official media.

Non-governmental media were permitted in Libya in 2007 for the first time since Gaddafi took power but were closely supervised by his immediate staff. Media diversity continues to be a mirage. The foreign media are closely watched and foreign reporters find it hard to get visas to visit Libya. Many international newspapers and magazines are confiscated on arrival.

Syria

36 - Bashar al-Assad, President

Reelected with more than 97 per cent of the vote in 2007, when he was the sole presidential candidate, Assad has refused to make any compromises since succeeding his father as president in July 2000 and has maintained the state of emergency that has been in effect since 1963. Long awaited democratic reforms such as a law permitting the creation of political parties and amendments to the press law have not materialised. Recent years have seen an increase in the number of media, but not in their diversity. Syria’s return to the international scene in 2008 has not really changed things.

The authorities have stepped up Internet filtering, blocking many websites, and a 2007 law forces Internet café managers to keep a record of all comments which their clients post online. The authorities continue to crack down on anyone putting out news at odds with official ideology. Four journalists and five cyber-dissidents remain in prison. Michel Kilo, held in custody since 14 May 2006, continues to be an emblematic figure in the struggle for democracy in Syria. He received the Speaker Abbot Award (from the UK Parliamentary Press Gallery) in October 2008.

A Reporters Without Borders delegation was denied access to Syria in September 2008. The information minister said: “They will never get a visa.”

Palestinian Territories, Gaza Strip

37 - Executive Force, armed wing of Hamas

From the time it seized power in the Gaza Strip in June 2007 and throughout Operation Cast Lead, launched by the Israeli army on 27 December 2008, the Hamas government has demonstrated a determination to control the media in Gaza. After disbanding the Gaza branch of the Palestinian Journalists Union, Hamas set up a new system of accreditation for all telecommunications and Internet companies as well as broadcast media and news agencies based in the Gaza Strip. Hamas also enforced a 1996 law under which disseminating news that threatens “national unity” is punishable by imprisonment. There have been dozens of cases of journalists being arrested, harassed or physically attacked by the Executive Force, the armed wing of Hamas, for criticising Hamas policies.

Hamas has clearly been trying to equip itself with laws that allow it to ban media that show too much support for the Palestinian Authority. The Gaza City studios of the state-

owned Palestinian Broadcasting Corporation (PBC) were closed down and the distribution of newspapers allied with Fatah (*Al-Hayat Al-Jadeeda* and *Al-Ayyam*) have been banned. The Executive Force has also carried out heavy-handed raids on the home of journalists whose news organisations are suspected of supporting Fatah. All this has not only forced Palestinian journalists to censor themselves. It has also helped delay the return of foreign reporters who pulled out of the Gaza Strip when British journalist Alan Johnston was kidnapped.

Palestinian Territories, West Bank **38 - Palestinian Security Forces**

On the West Bank, Palestinian security forces under the control of President Mahmoud Abbas persecute journalists close to Hamas, the Islamist party controlling the Gaza Strip. For example, two journalists working for *Al-Aqsa TV*, a Hamas-funded station, were imprisoned for 20 days and then released without charge. Arrests of journalists are used to settle political scores and no one is safe. Palestinian Authority security forces used violence against journalists from various media trying to cover demonstrations in Ramallah.

Tunisia **39 - Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, President**

Since succeeding Habib Bourguiba as president in 1987 after having him impeached on the grounds of senility, Ben Ali has kept a tight grip on the country and the media. He amended the constitution so that he could be reelected in 2004 and was expected to win another five-year in 2009. He promised in 2004, at the start of his fourth term, to “promote media diversity by expanding areas for discussion, encouraging private initiatives in the media and improving working conditions for journalists.”

However, although sometimes described as a “soft” dictatorship, the regime is obsessive in its control of news and information. Journalists and human rights activists are the target of bureaucratic harassment, police violence and constant surveillance by the intelligence services. Control of the Internet has been stepped up in the past year. And visiting foreign journalists are constantly accompanied by an official from the Tunisian Agency for External Communication. As an ally of the west in its fight against terrorism, Ben Ali is nonetheless treated very leniently by international organisations.

CYBERSPACE

Egypt **40 - Dr. Tarek Mohamed Kamel, Minister of Communications and Information Technology**

Head of the National Authority for the Regulation of Telecommunications, head of the Agency for Industrial and Information Technology Development, head of the National Telecommunications Institute and head of the Executive Bureau for Arab Telecommunications and Ministerial Council for Information – all these posts show that this telecommunications engineer is a civil service product rather than a politician. Trained at the best Egyptian and German universities, Dr. Kamel is recognised as one of his country’s authorities on new technologies. But as Minister of Communications and Information Technology since 2005, he now runs a department that monitors and punishes Internet users.

At least six bloggers were arrested in 2008 because of what they had posted on online. They were blamed for a wave of demonstrations in April when, in response to calls issued on online social networking forums, thousands of people took to the Cairo streets to protest against cost of living increases. Surprised by the size of the demonstrations, the government decided to monitor Internet users more closely. And now, to get a wifi Internet connection, you have to provide personal details that allow the authorities to locate you.

One of the most outrageous actions taken by the government to which Dr. Kamel belongs is to have sentenced blogger Kareem Amer on 22 February 2007 to three years in prison for “inciting hatred of Islam” and another year in prison for insulting President Hosni Mubarak. The sentence was upheld on appeal three weeks later.