

Zimbabwe - Journalists in freedom's front line

In January 1999, Mark Chavunduka and Ray Choto, editor and journalist respectively at *The Standard* newspaper in Zimbabwe, were arrested. Charged under Southern Rhodesia's 1960 Law and Order Maintenance Act for publishing reports "likely to cause alarm, fear, or despondency," the two men were taken to a military barracks. There, according to Amnesty International, "military interrogators beat both men all over their bodies with fists, wooden planks and rubber sticks, particularly on the soles of their feet, and gave them electric shocks all over the body, including the genitals. The men were also subjected to 'the submarine' - having their heads wrapped in plastic bags and submerged in a water tank until they suffocated". In Mr Chavunduka's case, this went on for ten days.

The horrific treatment meted out to Mark Chavunduka and Ray Choto graphically highlighted the terrible dangers faced by journalists in Zimbabwe. Sadly, things have not improved in the two and half years since. Economic collapse, government corruption, the deeply unpopular involvement in the war in Congo, and the illegal mass-occupation of farmsteads by suspiciously young 'war veterans', have given the government of Robert Mugabe plenty of reasons to resent and fear the 'unpatriotic' free press.

The assault on the media has taken two forms - literal attack upon journalists, their families, property and places of work - and quasi-legal restrictions on press activities. These include the strengthening of criminal libel laws (to protect ministers on the take) and a so-called 'code of conduct' for journalists. A draft constitution unveiled in December 1999 provided for the establishment of a 'media commission' with powers to take disciplinary action against journalists who violate "any law or code of conduct applicable to them." Meanwhile, legislation which would have ended the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation state monopoly on broadcasting has been scrapped.

In February of this year, the government tightened the noose on freedom of information yet further, when it started expelling foreign journalists including, in July, the Daily Telegraph's David Blair. According to an official announcement, no extensions of work permits for foreign correspondents would be issued until the government has developed a new system for accrediting journalists through the Department of Information and Publicity. Any foreign journalist whose work permit expires before the new system is in place will be deported. The government's announcement set no deadline for finalizing the new accreditation system.

Other attempts to muzzle the free press have been more direct. The *Daily News* and its staff have been repeated victims of attack by government supporters, in part because of its coverage of the Congo war. In the government's rural heartlands, vendors have been attacked, roadblocks have been established to search vehicles for copies of the *Daily News*, and confiscated print-runs have been burned. Reporter Julius Zava was subjected to a vicious attack by 'war veterans' outside the paper's offices, in full view of the police, who did nothing. On 27 January 2001, Information Minister Jonathan Moyo threatened to have the paper silenced 'once and for all' because it posed a security risk to the nation. Someone clearly took him at face value, because in the early hours of the very next morning, an armed group detained the security guards at the factory where the *Daily News* is printed and planted devices which exploded 15 minutes later causing over US\$2 million in damage. (A patently fictitious group calling itself the 'Authentic MDC' claimed responsibility in a note left conveniently undestroyed at the scene.) Mr Moyo's ambition of silencing the *Daily News* has not been achieved, however.

In today's Zimbabwe, it is no exaggeration to state that Zimbabwe's independent journalists are the main guarantors of what remains of civil

society in a country in which state-sponsored terror and disregard for the rule of law are now routine. As R.W. Johnson notes in *The Times*: "Victims of violence no longer bother to tell the police: instead they trek into town to tell their story at the *Daily News* office, so one is liable to see badly beaten, tortured or otherwise traumatised people in the newsroom."

The independent press has faced this nightmare with bravery and ingenuity. One independent news-sheet, the *Daily Bulletin*, is produced in Harare and emailed to six rural sites, where it is printed. Copies are then carried to surrounding towns and villages by youths on mountain bikes - breaking the government's information monopoly in remote areas of the country. The courage of the delivery boys defies easy description. They have been given digital cameras to record any violence they may encounter, but this is hardly likely to protect them from injury or worse at the hands of 'war veterans'. The government has now announced plans to regulate internet access, ostensibly to combat on-line pornography but in reality to bring the electronic media to heel. Robert Mugabe knows full well that the internet is a powerful new weapon in the battle for free speech.

The Chartered Institute of Journalists has joined other international press bodies in condemning the continuing extra-judicial arrest, imprisonment and torture of journalists in Zimbabwe at the hands of the government and the ruling ZANU-PF party. As an organization representing independent journalists and newsgatherers both in the UK and throughout the Commonwealth, we have an interest and responsibility for ensuring that professional journalists are able to conduct their lawful activities without fear of harassment or illegal detention.

We are asking all members to voice their concern at the mistreatment of our Zimbabwean colleagues by writing to the Zimbabwean High Commissioner in London. A sample letter appears in this edition of *The Journal* and the text

is also available at our special *Zimbabwe - Journalists Under Fire* website at <http://www.ioj.co.uk/zimbabwe>.

Zimbabwe's journalists are in the front line - they deserve our support.

Stuart A Notholt (Vice President)

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