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Contribution of Reporters Without Borders (a non-governmental organisation in special consultative status) about press freedom in CAMEROON

Introduction: Overview of press freedom situation

Certainly, Cameroon is no longer the tense and brutal place it was in the first few years after 2000, when journalists were imprisoned even for poking fun. But it is still dangerous to be a journalist in a country in which the president and his family, the prominent figures of the army, secessionist impulses on the part of the English-speaking region and corruption are still sensitive subjects. In addition, in common with other countries on the continent, poverty has fostered a press which is easily corrupted, exploited by business and political clans to outdo their rivals. In these conditions, press freedom is a precarious quality in Cameroon. The politicians are the main beneficiaries, making use of badly or unpaid journalists to settle their scores with opponents through bogus “revelations”.

In 2008, as the communications minister called on newspapers to be “responsible”, civil unrest has left the privately-owned press in crisis after security forces raided the studios of Magic FM radio seizing equipment and forcing it to close. Much of the privately-owned printed press has been prevented from appearing. Trouble broke out on the fringes of a taxi-drivers strike on 25 February, against the background of political tensions over a planned reform of the Constitution aimed at ending the limit on the number of terms the country’s president can serve. Despite the end of the strike, on 27 February, clashes continued and escalated between demonstrators and security forces and privately-owned newspapers, chiefly printed in Douala, have not been able to appear. Only state media were being distributed. In June, a total of six journalists were briefly arrested for referring to a sensitive issue involving the president and a TV programme was cut short while being broadcast for the same reason two days ago.

Later during the year, gendarmes detained two journalists for several days while they were trying to photograph the homes of defence minister Rémy Ze Meka, former finance minister Polycarpe Abah Abah and Alain Edgar Mebe Ngo’o, the head of the police criminal

investigation department, who are all from Zoétélé. A private TV station was also shut down for several weeks by Communication minister Emmanuel Béyiyi Bi Essam for allegedly failing to pay the required bond of 100 millions CFA francs (150,000 euros) for an operating licence. The financial grounds cited for suspending Equinoxe TV seem to be just a pretext for harassing a news media that has criticised the government's decision to amend the constitution

1. Online freedom

Reporters Without Borders has not observed any special problems with the free flow of news online in Cameroon.

2. Government steps to improve the situation

No specific steps were taken by the government this year to improve the situation.

3. Working with non-governmental organisations (NGO)

Reporters Without Borders deplores the lack of political will from the government to cooperate on the reform of the press law, for example, or to show more transparency and openness to proposals made by local or international NGOs whenever a journalist is arrested.

4. Recommendations

- The government of Cameroon should scrap the existing press law and adopt a new legislation adapted to democratic standards, eliminating prison terms for press offenses and providing a credible regulation tool for the media. Background : Since the law in Cameroon provides for prison sentences for such ethical lapses, it is therefore likely that unprincipled journalists will serve time in prison. Reporters Without Borders's position, expressed in a comment piece carried in 2006 by the privately-owned daily Le Messenger and the privately-owned weekly Le Jeune Observateur, was quite clear: While unreservedly condemning this kind of journalism, tinged with hatred, as have a large majority of Cameroon's journalists, the organisation above all stresses that prison is not a reply to these abuses. On the contrary, these mercenaries of journalism, once sentenced, will serve their sentences and come out crowned with all the glory of press freedom martyrs. Reporters Without Borders has therefore proposed to the Cameroon government that it reforms not only its press law but also its mechanisms for regulating the media. The Communications Minister, Pierre Moukoko Mbonjo, attempted to introduce reform but it was clumsy and inadequate, proposing administrative police powers for the ministry which would allow it to order the seizure of newspapers. This was rejected by parliament and the minister finished by resigning his post in the autumn without having pushed through this reform.
- The government of Cameroon should review its policy of financial support to the private press and hand over some of the administrative responsibilities of the Communications Minister to an independent, credible and respected regulation institution.
- The armed forces (police and army) should receive training on human rights and press freedom, while mechanisms of sanctions should be put in place in order to tackle the

impunity benefiting some elements of law enforcement whenever the attack or wrongfully detain journalists.

The data in this report has been gathered and verified by Reporters Without Borders, which has a network of correspondents in 130 countries and partner organisations in a score of countries.

In some countries, a journalist can be imprisoned for several years just for a word or a photo someone does not like. Reporters Without Borders, founded in 1985, works daily to support press freedom because imprisoning or killing a journalist removes a key witness and threatens the right of all of us to be kept informed of the news.

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