



FAJ

FEDERATION OF AFRICAN JOURNALISTS
FÉDÉRATION DES JOURNALISTES AFRICAINS



JOURNALISTS UNDER FIRE

Report of Solidarity Mission to Cameroon • 3-6 May 2010

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Introduction

The Federation of African Journalists (FAJ), the African regional organisation of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), has been deeply concerned about the worsening of the press freedom situation in Cameroon and the attacks on journalists and media organisations.

Today, Cameroon is ranked as one of the worst jailers of journalists in Africa. Several journalists are on trial charged with possessing government confidential documents. One of the journalists, Bibi Ngota, died while awaiting trial in a Yaoundé jail, allegedly for lack/refusal of medical care. Four other leading journalists are also being tried for their comments made during a June 2008 TV programme in a discussion of an embezzlement case. Arbitrary arrests and criminal prosecution of journalists as well as torture have become routine forms of abuse against press freedom, inflicting huge damage to any confidence in the rule of law and democracy in Cameroon.

At the Congress of the Federation of African Journalists in Harare in March 2010, African journalists considered a strong resolution supporting Cameroonian journalists. As a result, the Steering Committee of FAJ decided to carry out a solidarity mission to Cameroon.

A delegation including FAJ President Omar Faruk Osman and Stanis Nkundiye, member of the FAJ Steering Committee, visited Cameroon from 3rd May to 6th May 2010. The delegation visited Douala and Yaoundé, respectively the commercial and political centres of the country.

The visit by the mission coincided with World Press Freedom Day's celebrations by journalists in Yaoundé and Douala. Sadly the peacefully demonstrations by journalists in front of the office of Cameroonian Prime Minister in Yaoundé was stormed by riots police who did not tolerate the peaceful expression by journalists of their concerns.

Objectives of the Mission

In line with the decisions of the continental congress of the Federation of African Journalists held in Harare, Zimbabwe, from 27th to 28th March, the objectives of the Solidarity mission were to:

- 1 Assess the challenges journalists face in Cameroon;
- 2 Provide practical and moral solidarity for the journalists' community in the Cameroon;
- 3 Gather up-to-date information on the death of Bibi Ngota;
- 4 Communicate concerns of press freedom attacks directly to the authorities;
- 5 Draw the attention of the international community on the press freedom and freedom of expression situation in Cameroon;
- 6 Talk to the authorities about the respect and protection of media rights;
- 7 Mobilise regional and international support for Cameroonian journalists.

Meetings of the Mission

The mission met journalists from the press and electronic media in Cameroon, human rights advocates, leading members of political parties, civil society organisations, and representatives of the international community present in Yaoundé as well as the Minister of Communications of Cameroon and UNESCO's Communications and Information Advisor. The mission also paid a courtesy visit to the family of Jean-Marc Soboth, the First Secretary of the National Syndicate of Cameroonian Journalists (SNJC) and reserve member of the Executive Committee of the IFJ, who is currently in exile and the family of killed journalist Bibi Ngota. At the end of the mission, the members of the mission held a press conference at SOMATEL Hotel in Douala and expressed serious press freedom concerns and some of the mission's assessment of the media situation.

Journalists and Press Freedom Situation

Cameroon is a country where it is very easy to establish a media outlet. According to one senior diplomat "it is easier to set up a newspaper than to set up a shop." The government has registered some 600 newspapers, several TV stations and private radio stations, but most of the papers are published occasionally with only 10 newspapers published on a regular basis.

While confirming this freedom to set up media outlets, the Acting First Secretary of the National Syndicate of Cameroonian Journalists, Alex Gustave Azebaze Djouak, explains the gap between the relative easy administrative procedure to start a media and the difficulty in exercising free journalism. The government has never ratified the Florence Convention that supports the printing press to survive and flourish with tax exemptions on inputs.

Climate of antagonism and suspicion

The private media works in a climate of antagonism with regard to government in which the media accuses the government and the ruling party's, the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM), politicians of interfering in its affairs and its daily work. The government blames the private media by saying that the media is playing the role of the opposition, instead of facilitating democratic debates. Some journalists who met the mission added that there is a class of journalists who are encouraged by politicians to serve their political interest but they are in a minority. Other journalists stressed however that there is manipulation of some of media by political actors which often results in clashes with government.

Many journalists and human rights advocates argued that government and the CPDM party are not challenged by a strong political party. According to one observer, the opposition political parties were either co-opted or corrupted by the ruling party and thus there is no effectively strong opposition party and the ruling politicians realized it is the media that exposes their misconducts and abuse of power. "If this is what they call opposition role – then they need to understand what opposition party is" said one journalist who led the demonstration of World Press Freedom Day before the office of Cameroonian Prime Minister in Yaoundé.

During the meeting with the mission, Honourable Issa Tchiroma Bakary, Minister of Communications of Cameroon, insisted that there is no hostility between private media and the government although he recognised that the relations between government and media are distorted. He added that the journalism profession is weighed down by bogus journalists. The definition of who is a journalist in Cameroon is unclear and he took responsibility for allowing the current mess in the profession.

According to one government official the real issue is suspicion between journalists and the government. Journalists, he said, use the information they obtain against government officials or distort the information as needed by other politicians, while the media insists that the government, by hiding all the information, allows rumours to flourish and, as a result, the wider public is disconnected as misinformation continue to spread. The government then makes it a justification to attack the media.

Attacks on journalists

Almost all the people that the mission met stated that there are frequent and abundant attacks on journalists in Cameroon, in particular threats and intimidations. Some journalists confirmed that they received anonymous death threats or warnings that they will face harsh consequence should they continue to investigate particular corruption cases. Some of these anonymous phone calls included insults and intimidation; anonymous threatening letters were slipped under the doors of offices and apartments where journalists live or work. Many attacks on journalists were unreported as the journalists fear from reprisal.

Some journalists could not stand anymore the many pressures and were forced into exile and/or went underground like the case of Jean-Marc Saboth of the SNJC and Simon Hervé Nko'o, Yaoundé correspondent of the Douala-based weekly *Bebela*. Many journalists are currently on trial charged with the possession of confidential documents and pressurized to reveal their sources, including some on the leadership of the National Syndicate of Cameroonian Journalists (SNJC). One veteran journalist told the mission that the army or military can call a journalist and ask why he/she is talking about "state security" issues and inform him/her that they may be taken in and held incommunicado for days.

Journalists and human rights advocates told the mission that the government adopted sophisticated tactics, in particular alleging that cases involving journalists have nothing to do with press freedom but are ordinary civilian cases. On the other hand well-known senior journalists or journalists with foremost media houses are only occasionally harassed by government officials in order not to stir international outcry. The government also uses defamation laws to muzzle journalists who raise questions about the administration of public affairs. The mission collated a long list of journalists recently attacked, and among them are:

- ① Henriette Ekwe, journalist and well-respected editor of the Bebel newspaper, was called for a routine inquiry and was faced with threats by officials representing intelligence agencies, the police and various sections of the Cameroonian army.
- ② Junior Binyam, former Editor-in-Chief of the French-speaking daily Mutations and now member of the Communications Department of the Cameroon Football Federation (Feca-foot) has been interrogated by Police and Intelligence services about his participation in the preparation of the Cameroonian journalists' united and peaceful demonstration on May 3rd 2010.
- ③ Nadege Christelle Bowa, a reporter at the privately-owned daily Le Messenger has been detained and interrogated by the Gendarmerie while reporting at the said judicial police unit about the detention for 14 years of the convicted former President Biya's doctor and one-time General Secretary of the presidency Pr Titus Edzoa, who resigned in 1996 and stood in the presidential election against President Biya.
- ④ Alex Gustave Azebaze, journalist and Acting First Secretary of SNJC, Thierry Ngongang, Editor-in-Chief of the privately-owned Spectrum TV; Annani Rabier Bindzi, journalist at Canal 2 International TV and Dr Aboya Endong Manasse, Editor of the bi-monthly newspaper Africa Top Secret have collectively been facing a long trial since January 2010, at the request of the state prosecutor for their participation in a 2008 TV debate on the police investigations of the "Albatross" saga, the failure to explain how a Boeing 727 purchased for the President's fleet was never received, six years after local journalists, led by Azebaze revealed the scandal while working for Le Messenger.
- ⑤ Alain Blaise Batongue, journalist and publisher of the French-speaking newspaper daily Mutations and his colleague Leger Ntiga, are facing, since 2009, a lengthy trial at the Yaoundé Court of first instance at the initiative of Bernard Ndongo Essomba, businessman and leader of the presidential ruling party CPDM Parliamentary Group; for alleged defamation after they revealed that, in the middle of the so-called "Operation Sparrowhawk" aimed at combating corruption in public services and state-owned companies, one of the CPDM parliamentary group leader's own company was implicated in a fictitious contract at the Ministry of Health.
- ⑥ Charly Ndi Chia, Editor-in-Chief and UCJ President, and Yerima Kini Som, Yaoundé Bureau Chief of the English-speaking bi-weekly The Post are on trial in Bamenda court. They have been receiving threats attributed to Fon Doh Gah Gwanyin, traditional ruler of Bali and former member of parliament for the ruling party. The two journalists reported that Gwanyin was still free despite having been convicted to serve a 15-year jail term for the assassination by his militia and in his presence of a local leader of the main parliamentary opposition party.
- ⑦ Jean-Bosco Talla, Editor of the Germinal newspaper, was jailed for contempt of "Head of State" and released after paying a large fine.

- 8 Medjo Lewis, a journalist and Editor of the now defunct La Détente Libre, is still in detention at the Central Prison of New-Bell, serving a 3-year jail term after his newspaper revealed a signed and unpublished presidential decree, prolonging the terms of office of the President and Attorney General of the Supreme Court due to leave office because of their age. Lewis suffers from untreated hypertension.
- 9 Jacques Blaise Mvié and Charles Nwe, Publishing Director and Editor of the New Press [La Nouvelle Presse in French], are prosecuted by the Department of Defence for publishing “defence secrets”, collected from the Human Resources Management of the Army.
- 9 Journalist Michel Mombio, Publisher of L’Ouest Républicain remains imprisoned in Bafoussam for spreading “false news”.
- 11 Bibi Ngota, Publisher of Cameroon Express died in custody for possession of incriminating documents. The SNJC is campaigning for an independent inquiry into the circumstances of his death at the prison in Yaoundé.
- 12 Harrys Robert Mintya and Serge Sabouang, respectively publishers of Le Devoir and La Nation remain in pre-trial detention on the same charges as Bibi Ngota.
- 13 Bertrand Teyou, artist-writer-editor, whose press conference to present his book L’Antécode Biya was banned in Douala, is in trial at the instigation of prosecution for “dangerous activities, conspiracy, attempt at disturbing public order, and incitement to rebellion”. These charges were put together based on his involvement in the publication of a statement calling for demonstrations and strike to protest the high price of fuel.

Legal weapons

The legal environment in which the media operates in Cameroon is not favourable. There are indeed good laws but new legislation has clawed back much of what was progressive and useful for journalists. The government usually uses the Penal Code to criminalize what authorities deem as “media offenses”. The police arrests journalists without warrants required by the law and treat them as criminals from the beginning. Law enforcement bodies detain journalists more than the legally required period of 24 hours extending it to two more 24 hours; they can therefore be detained for many more days in any police or gendarmerie station before being sent to jail. This usually leads to another pre-trial detention without trial that can last many more months like in Bibi Ngota’s case. Some of the detained journalists are deprived of legal counsel and visit by family members, and, in most cases, see their courts cases postponed several times.

The mission learned that people are not aware of many aspects of the law but also politicians and even some judges are equally uninformed – the main reason being the strong presidential government and the lack of an internal system for information sharing.

There are no self-regulatory mechanisms for the media in Cameroon. In March 2005, the Union of Cameroon Journalists (UCJ) established a self-regulatory body, the Cameroonian Media Council (CCM), it immediately lost credibility when the first official appointed to head it, Pierre Essama Essomba, a journalist at the state daily Cameroon Tribune, failed to criticise government or ministers acting against the media.

The public media (CRTV) is state-controlled and when the mission expressed to the Minister of Communications the need to transform it into Public Service Broadcasting he did not respond favourably arguing that this remained the only space government owns and uses. "If we allowed private media" he asked "what else do you want?" Journalists consider as "civil servants" those who work for public media and "independent journalists" those in private media, thus dividing journalists in two camps.

Journalists feared being taken into prisons because of their dreadful conditions, including diseases. Jails are overcrowded containing more than four times their capacity. The simple act of being arrested is in itself a distressing experience. The police and gendarmes arrest journalists acting on the orders of politicians and sometimes without the knowledge of the judiciary system. Police and gendarmes, not only take them in, but also routinely beat up journalists.

Among journalists, there was a strong consensus that there are many untrained journalists who make professional errors. The influx of these journalists into the newsrooms is the result of the increase in unemployment after graduation, as the profession remained one of the few open occupations. Corruption, locally known as "gombo" or "okro", is rampant in every sector of the economy, including media. "Partisan journalism is widespread and out of control", one source said. Another reason for the extensive corruption is the poor wages paid by media owners taking advantage of the glut of graduates. Only the public media is able to employ professional journalists.

The judiciary system is widely believed of not being independent, making it almost impossible to challenge the politicians of CPDM and government officials. The media community, as a whole, has no confidence in being able to win cases in Cameroonian courts. This has resulted in increased self-censorship across the board in Cameroon.

Overall working conditions of journalists are very poor and contribute to be an excuse for politicians to meddle in the affairs of journalists. Journalists are paid below the minimum wage (which is 28,000 Francs CFA, the equivalent of less than 50 Euros) while some of them are not paid for more than a year as media owners see them as just jobless youth wanting to be part of a prestigious profession. The bulk of working journalists do not have social security and collective agreements, even when negotiated and agreed, are not implemented. As a result, journalists continue to face contempt by the whole society because of their poor wages.

A collective agreement negotiated thanks to a three-year campaign by the SNJC (2004 to 2006), was finally signed on 12 November 2008, in the presence of government ministers (Work and Social Security and his colleague of Communication) but is yet to be applied.

The Death of Bibi Ngota

A case that calls for immediate justice

On April 22nd, Germain Cyrille Ngota, known as Bibi Ngota, editor of the bimonthly Cameroon Express, died at Yaoundé prison. Bibi had blood pressure and died because of a lack of medical attention. Bibi was arrested last February with colleagues Harrys Mintya of Le Devoir and Serge Sabouang of La Nation after a complaint by Laurent Ezzo, State Minister in charge of the secretariat of the Presidential Services and Chairman of the Board of the state-owned Hydrocarbons Company (SNH). The three journalists were investigating Ezzo's alleged involvement in a corruption scandal at the state oil company. They were held in prison under the terms of pre-trial detention, a procedure that may last six months and be extended twice.

In meeting with Bibi's family and colleagues, the mission was able to confirm the request made by his father to the prison authorities to transfer him to a hospital to receive medical care for his acute hypertension which was denied despite the security of 30,000 CFA (about US\$60) having been paid by the family.

Since Bibi's death, untimely and unfortunate statements by the Minister of Communications only served to exacerbate an already tense situation. He stated that Bibi Ngota died of HIV/AIDS and was an offender. These statements demonstrate the embarrassment of a government who does not seem to know where to start the investigation promised by President Paul Biya, after the protests and condemnation from the international community and the indignation of Physicians, professional media organisations and civil society.

The Minister's statement stated that the autopsy would be held "in the presence of independent personalities" but the mission found that both autopsies have been made without the agreement nor the presence of the deceased's family. Moreover, the statements by the Minister of Communications leave no doubt as to the true motivation of these autopsies. Contrary to the Minister's statement, Bibi Ngota was married to Angela Collette Ngota whom the mission met with the entire family in Yaoundé still mourning for her husband.

Due to national and international outcry over the death of Bibi Ngota, President Paul Biya ordered setting up a judiciary inquest on how the journalist died in the pre-trial detention centre.

The Federation of African Journalists (FAJ) and the global organisation representing journalists worldwide, the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), believe that Bibi Ngota case is a press freedom case and hold to account all the Cameroonian officials involved in his death. The FAJ and IFJ have initiated an international campaign supported by its affiliates worldwide in support of the SNJC's demand for a public and transparent inquiry to establish the truth in Bibi's death, independent of the Executive and the judiciary.

Recommendations

To the Government of Cameroon:

- 1 End Attacks on journalists and news media organizations and make strong and explicit political commitment to press freedom.
- 2 Drop all the ongoing trials and charges against journalists and release arrested journalists immediately and unconditionally.
- 3 Expedite and publicize a credible and independent report on the death of Bibi Ngota.
- 4 Ratify the Florence Convention without delay and reduce the costs for newspaper companies.
- 5 Decriminalize all media offenses and revoke all laws and decrees/rules curtailing media freedom and freedom of expression such as those contained in the Penal Code, and guarantee the free and unimpeded work of journalists.
- 6 Initiate the revision of the Social Communication law to end arbitrary arrests and rights abuses of journalists by the security services.
- 7 Support and speedup the process of setting up independent, credible and representative self-regulatory mechanisms.
- 8 Adopt clear criteria for the granting of aid to the press to put an end to cronyism and politicization.

- 9 Guarantee the independence of judiciary system of the country that journalists and other ordinary citizens can have confidence in.
- 10 Combat corruption and prosecute officials proven to be guilty in corruption cases.
- 11 Cooperate with the National Syndicate of Cameroonian Journalists (SNJC), media owners and other media NGOs to professionalize the media sector.

For Cameroonian Journalists:

- 1 Strengthen cross-media and cross-language solidarity among the journalists' community in their efforts to protect and promote rights and freedoms of journalists and media.
- 2 Build unity within the internationally-recognized and well-respected National Syndicate of Cameroonian Journalists (SNJC).
- 3 For those who are not members of the SNJC to join forces with your brothers and sisters in the National Syndicate to build it into the most authoritative voice for the journalists of Cameroon.
- 4 End "gombo" or okra", the corruption system, which debases the profession and allows predators of press freedom to flourish and to exclude from the profession bogus journalists in order to safeguard the profession.
- 5 To engage with the SNJC for the effective implementation of the national collective agreement for journalists and related professionals and the decriminalisation of press offenses campaign.

For the Global Journalists' Community:

- 1 Provide support and solidarity to Cameroon journalists.
- 2 Pay close attention to the situation in Cameroon so that fellow journalists know and feel that their colleagues in the world are with them.
- 3 Provide emergency humanitarian and legal support to the victims of press freedom attacks and their families in Cameroon.
- 4 Strengthen the capacity and the democratic structure of the National Syndicate of Cameroonian Journalists (SNJC)
- 5 Press your governments as well as inter-governmental and international organizations to urge the Government of Cameroon to implement these recommendations

For the International Community:

- 1 To support the fight for the decriminalization of press offenses of Cameroon.
- 2 To put pressure on the Cameroon Government to end attacks on the press and review legislation, including but not limited to decriminalization of press offences.
- 3 To provide strong, swift and practical support to the National Syndicate of Cameroon Journalists and the media community for their struggle for press freedom, media professionalism, social justice and democratic reform.

Conclusion

The media community in Cameroon has shown a strong spirit to live to fight another day despite harsh and difficult times and an unwavering capacity to resist wave after wave of oppression. The solidarity mission of the FAJ has provided moral support not only to SNJC leaders and members but also to all the media practitioners who have been victims of intimidation, harassment and manipulation that has been growing continuously since December 2009.

Problems facing the media have been exacerbated in the run-up to the elections, by the campaign by government officials to quash any action that may cast a shadow on the country's public image, by the government's intolerance of any independent and critical reporting on their management of public affairs, by the lack of professional journalism as well as the widespread poor working conditions in the media sector.

It is important that the IFJ and FAJ remain mobilized to obtain the necessary substantial changes that could result in the release of Cameroonian journalists from jail, in the decriminalization of press offenses and the revision of the draconian laws on communication.

Acknowledgements

The Federation of African Journalists (FAJ) thanks the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) for supporting this urgent solidarity mission to Cameroon. FAJ is very indebted to its affiliate in Cameroon, the National Syndicate of Cameroon Journalists (SNJC), for the hospitality and all its efforts to realize the mission in Cameroon.

The delegation also thanks the various personalities from the government, political and administrative authorities as well as the diplomatic community who devoted ample time to meet and talk to the mission about the media situation in Cameroon. The FAJ mission is grateful to the leaders of SNJC, the journalists' community and civil society for talking to the mission frankly and openly.

The delegation also thanks the family of Bibi Ngota, his father, mother, wife and brothers for their resilience and fortitude in fighting for justice and for truth to be out. We will certainly continue to support them fully in this endeavour.

23 APRIL 2010: FAJ Demands Justice for Cameroonian Journalists after Editor Dies in Custody

The Federation of African Journalists (FAJ), the African Regional Organization of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), has today expressed its shock and dismay at the death in custody last Wednesday of leading journalist Bibi Ngota, editor of the bi-monthly newspaper Cameroun Express.

Bibi has been held at a prison in Yaoundé since March 10th when he was arrested with three colleagues, Serge Sabouang, editor of La Nation, Robert Mintya, editor of Le Devoir and Hervé Nko'o, reporter at the weekly Bebel newspaper, following a complaint by the Secretary General of the Presidency of the Republic, Laurent Easo, that they allegedly "falsified his signature on a document in order to blackmail him". The journalists were carrying an investigation into an alleged corruption involving the state-owned oil company SNH.

"We are tremendously shocked by the death of Bibi and the conditions in which these journalists have been detained," said Omar Faruk Osman, President of FAJ.

Bibi's family repeatedly warned about his poor health as he had asthma and high blood pressure. According to his colleagues, the death certificate stated that he did not receive medical treatment when he asked for it. "We share in the sorrow of Bibi's family and the Cameroonian journalists who mourn his loss and we pass our deepest sympathy and condolences," Faruk added.

FAJ remains extremely concerned about the reports of alleged torture to force Cameroonian journalists to reveal their source and fully supports the demands made by its affiliate in the Cameroon, the National Syndicate of Cameroonian Journalists (SNJC). "We back the call for an independent commission of enquiry to examine and determine the circumstances of the arrest and detention of these journalists which resulted in this dreadful tragedy," said Faruk.

The death of Bibi has come at a time when journalists in Cameroon are suffering increased harassment and abuse at the hands of the authorities. The International Federation of Journalists has protested many abuses against journalists perpetrated by security forces and the use of criminal legislation to independent media. In a letter to Cameroon President Paul Biya last February, IFJ President pleaded for his intervention to stop arbitrary arrests, criminal prosecutions and torture of journalists. He raised in particular the cases of four journalists, Thierry Ngogang from STV2, Alex Gustave Azebaze, independent journalist and leader of Syndicat National des Journalistes du Cameroun (SNJC), Anani Rabier Bindz from Canal2 International and Manassé Aboya Endong from Africa Top Secret, currently under trial, and demanded that the charges against them be dropped.

During the Congress of the Federation of African Journalists in Harare in March 2010, African journalists adopted strong resolution supporting Cameroonian journalists. The Federation is due to carry out a solidarity mission to Cameroon in the next few weeks.



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Excellence,

La Fédération Internationale des Journalistes, l'organisation globale de journalistes, souhaite vous exprimer sa profonde inquiétude au sujet du procès qui se tiendra demain mardi à l'encontre de quatre journalistes camerounais.

Comme vous le savez, le 12 janvier 2010, les journalistes Thierry Ngogang, Rédacteur en chef à la chaîne privée STV2, Alex Gustave Azebaze, journaliste indépendant et deuxième secrétaire du Syndicat National des Journalistes du Cameroun (SNJC), Anani Rabier Bindzi, journaliste à la chaîne de télévision privée Canal2 International et Dr Manassé Aboya Endong, directeur de publication de Africa Top Secret, avaient été cités à comparaître devant le tribunal pénal de Douala. L'ouverture des débats a été reportée à ce 9 février 2010, à la demande des avocats des journalistes, pour consultation du dossier de l'accusation non communiqué aux prévenus ainsi que les faits qui sont reprochés à chacun d'entre eux.

Jean Marc Soboth, Premier Secrétaire du Syndicat National des Journalistes du Cameroun (SNJC), affilié à la FIJ et à la Fédération africaine des journalistes (FAJ), dont l'absence à cette étape de la procédure est uniquement due aux incohérences du Parquet de votre pays, aurait reçu de nombreuses menaces depuis qu'il a condamné publiquement, la veille de l'ouverture du procès, la procédure engagée contre ses quatre collègues. Selon sa famille, prenant cette menace très au sérieux, il est depuis la mi-janvier réfugié à l'étranger afin d'échapper au risque d'une bavure judiciaire redoutée au terme de cette procédure discutable.

Selon les informations qui nous sont parvenues, ces journalistes et hommes de média auraient, lors d'une émission diffusée le 1er juin 2008 (soit plus d'un an et demi auparavant), débattu librement et de manière contradictoire sur les enquêtes policières autour d'anciens gestionnaires de deniers publics soupçonnés de corruption et/ou de détournements de deniers publics dans le cadre de l'opération Epervier lancée par votre gouvernement.

Cependant, au rythme où vont les choses, et tenant compte de la tournure déjà prise par la première étape de la procédure, nous sommes de plus en plus inquiets de voir la politique influencer la décision finale qui sera prise à l'encontre de nos collègues.

Au moment où, la liberté d'expression et d'opinion deviennent de plus en plus une aspiration forte des populations du continent africain en vue d'asseoir des démo-

craties solidement ancrées, il nous paraîtrait déplorable et inapproprié de cibler des journalistes et collègues dont le seul tort a été d'avoir donné leurs points de vue sur des questions d'intérêt public et alors que deux années se sont déjà écoulées depuis les faits.

C'est pourquoi, nous nous en ouvrons à votre Excellence, afin de garantir à nos collègues un procès juste et équitable et qu'ils puissent bénéficier pleinement de leur droit légitime à être défendu équitablement.

Comme nous l'avons constaté dans notre dernier rapport sur la liberté de la presse en Afrique, les périodes électorales ont presque partout été des moments difficiles de cohabitation entre les pouvoirs politiques et les médias. Nous saisissons cette occasion pour lancer un appel solennel pour l'ouverture d'un dialogue direct avec les acteurs des médias afin d'apporter une plus grande sérénité dans les rapports avec les médias.

Avec l'espoir que vous userez de votre autorité pour une justice équitable qui dépénalise les délits de presse à l'endroit de journalistes, nous vous prions de bien vouloir agréer, Excellence, l'expression de notre très haute considération.



Jim Boumelha

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