

Round-Up 2009

30 December 2009

Press freedom in 2009

76	journalists killed (60 in 2008)
33	journalists kidnapped
573	journalists arrested
1456	physically assaulted
570	media censored
157	journalists fled their countries
1	blogger died in prison
151	bloggers and cyber-dissidents arrested
61	physically assaulted
60	countries affected by online censorship

Wars and disputed elections: The most dangerous stories for journalists

Two appalling events marked 2009: one was the largest ever massacre of journalists in a single day – a total of 30 killed – by the private militia of a governor in the southern Philippines and the other was an unprecedented wave of arrests and convictions of journalists and bloggers in Iran following President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's disputed reelection.

A total of around 160 journalists in all continents were forced to go into exile to escape prison or death, often in very dangerous circumstances. The Iranian press photographers crossing the Turkish border to escape arrest or the Somali radio journalists fleeing to neighbouring countries to avoid certain death had all reported essential news and information that some people would go to any lengths to suppress.

Wars and elections constituted the chief threat to journalists in 2009. It is becoming more and more risky to cover wars as journalists themselves are being targeted and face the possibility of being murdered or kidnapped. But it can turn out to be just as dangerous to do your job as a reporter at election time and can lead directly to prison or hospital. Violence before and after elections was particularly prevalent in 2009 in countries with poor democratic credentials.

No one should be surprised that, as bloggers and websites continue to flourish, censorship and repression have surged proportionately. There is almost no country nowadays that has entirely escaped this phenomenon. As soon as the Internet or new media (social networking, mobile phones etc) start to play a leading role in the spread of news and information, a serious clampdown follows. Bloggers are now watched as closely as journalists from the traditional media.

Our major concern in 2009 has been the mass exodus of journalists from repressive countries such as Iran and Sri Lanka. The authorities in these countries have understood that by pushing journalists into exile, they can drastically reduce pluralism of ideas and the amount of criticism they attract. "This is a dangerous tendency and it must be very strongly condemned," Reporters Without Borders secretary-general Jean-François Julliard said as this review of 2009 was released.

Number of journalists killed up by 26 per cent

Almost every journalist killed in 2009 died in their own country. The exception was Franco-Spanish documentary film-maker Christian Poveda, who was murdered in El Salvador. "Less known to international public opinion than the foreign correspondents, it is these local journalists who pay the highest price every year to guarantee our right to be informed about wars, corruption or the destruction of the environment," Julliard said.

The year began very badly with the Israeli military offensive in the Gaza Strip. As well as refusing to allow foreign media into this territory, the Israeli government carried out military strikes against buildings housing media, in violation of international humanitarian law. Two reporters were killed in these attacks. Journalists and human rights defenders in the Russian Caucasus went through a terrifying year. The witnesses to the dirty war waged by Moscow and its local allies to be "eliminated" with complete impunity included Natalia Estemirova in Chechnya and Malik Akhmedilov in Dagestan.

Radical Islamist groups caused the death of at least 15 journalists worldwide. Nine reporters were killed in Somalia, where the Al-Shabaab militia carried out constant targeted killings and suicide attacks. Four of these journalists worked for Radio Shabelle, which does its best to provide news amidst the surrounding chaos. Reporters in Pakistan have increasingly been targeted by the Taliban in the northwest of the country.

Kidnappings have also continued to rise. Most cases are concentrated in Afghanistan, Mexico and Somalia. New York Times journalist David Rohde and his fixer managed to escape from the Taliban but Afghan reporter Sultan Munadi was killed in the military operation launched to rescue him.

"Three years have passed since the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1738 on the protection of journalists in conflict zones but governments still seem incapable of protecting reporters," Reporters Without Borders said.

Other forms of violence, physical assaults and threats have gone up by a third (from 929 cases in 2008 to 1,456 in 2009). Journalists are most at risk in the Americas (501 cases), particularly when they expose drug-trafficking or local potentates. Asia comes next with 364 cases of this kind, chiefly in Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal. The number of censored media is escalating alarmingly with nearly 570 cases of newspapers, radio or TV stations banned from putting out news or forced to close. This happened to a satirical magazine in Malaysia, a score of reformist newspapers in Iran, Radio France Internationale in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the BBC World Service in Rwanda.

The number of journalists arrested fell slightly (from 673 in 2008 to 573 in 2009) above all because there were fewer cases in Asia. The largest number of cases was in the Middle East.

Election violence

The 30 journalists killed in the Mindanao Island bloodbath in Philippines had been covering an attempt by a local governor's opponent to run as a candidate for regional elections in 2010. Tunisian journalist Taoufik Ben Brik was imprisoned in the days following President Ben Ali's reelection, while his colleague, Slim Boukhdhir, was brutally assaulted. Several journalists were attacked and others received death threats in Gabon following President Ali Bongo's reelection. Around six media were also temporarily shut down for reporting on the post-election violence and criticising members of the new government. Protests about President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's controversial reelection in Iran prompted a horrifying wave of repression against the media.

Pluralist elections that should be a symbol of democracy and free expression can turn into a nightmare for journalists. State media are too often prevented from giving fair and balanced coverage of all the candidates' campaigns. Such was the case during the contentious Afghan elections and the travesty of an election in Equatorial Guinea. The most committed journalists can be exposed to reprisals from a rival camp. Media access is not always properly observed, as evidenced in provincial polling in the Tamil areas of Sri Lanka.

The most serious problems arise when results are announced. Overwhelmed by an opposition movement that was relayed online and in the reformist press, Ahmadinejad's supporters launched an ultra-violent crackdown on hundreds of journalists and bloggers, accusing them of being spies in the pay of foreigners or bent on destabilising the country.

The courage shown by journalists this year before and after elections earned them periods in custody, mistreatment and prison sentences that were in some cases extremely harsh. These post-election crackdowns should stimulate the international community to seek better ways of protecting the press after rigged election results are announced.

"This wave of violence bodes ill for 2010, when crucial elections are scheduled in Côte d'Ivoire, Sri Lanka, Burma, Iraq and the Palestinian Territories" said Reporters Without Borders, which often carries out media monitoring during election campaigns.

More than 100 bloggers and cyber-dissidents imprisoned

For the first time since the Internet's emergence, Reporters Without Borders is aware of more than 100 bloggers and cyber-dissidents being imprisoned worldwide for posting their opinions online. This figure is indicative above all of the scale of the crackdown being carried out in around ten countries. Several countries have turned online expression into a criminal offence, dashing hopes of a censorship-free Internet.

The Internet has been the driving force for pro-democracy campaigns in Iran, China and elsewhere. It is above all for this reason that authoritarian governments have shown themselves so determined to severely punish Internet users. This is the case with two Azerbaijani bloggers, who were sentenced to two years in prison for making a film mocking the political elite.

Although China continued to be the leading Internet censor in 2009, Iran, Tunisia, Thailand, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam and Uzbekistan have also resorted to frequent blocking of websites and blogs and surveillance of online expression. The Turkmen Internet remains under total state control.

This year, bloggers and ordinary citizens expressing themselves online have been assaulted, threatened or arrested as the popularity of social-networking and interactive websites has soared. Egyptian blogger Kareem Amer is still in jail, while the famous Burmese comedian Zarganar still has 34 years of his prison sentence to serve. The approximately 120 victims of Internet policing also include such leading figures in the defence of online free expression as China's Hu Jia and Liu Xiaobo and Vietnam's Nguyen Trung and Dieu Cay.

The financial crisis has joined the list of subjects likely to provoke censorship, particularly online. In South Korea, a blogger was wrongfully detained for commenting on the country's disastrous economic situation. Around six netizens in Thailand were arrested or harassed just for making a connection between the king's health and a fall in the Bangkok stock exchange. Censorship was slapped on the media in Dubai when it came for them to report on the country's debt repayment problems.

Democratic countries have not lagged far behind. Several European countries are working on new steps to control the Internet in the name of the battle against child porn and illegal downloads. Australia has said it will set up a compulsory filtering system that poses a threat to freedom of expression. Turkey's courts have increased the number of websites, including YouTube, that are blocked for criticising the republic's founder, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk.

"The number of countries affected by online censorship has doubled from one year to the next – a disturbing tendency that shows an increase in control over new media as millions of netizens get active online," said Lucie Morillon, head of the Internet and Freedoms Desk. "That is why Reporters Without Borders will launch a new campaign against the Enemies of the Internet on 12 March."

Media on trial

At least 167 journalists are in prison around the world at the end of 2009. One would need to go back to the 1990s to find so many of them in jail. Although the UN special rapporteur on freedom of expression keeps reiterating that imprisonment is a disproportionate punishment for press offences, many governments keep laws that allow them to jail journalists, and continue to abuse these laws. The sentences given to journalists in Cuba, China, Sri Lanka and Iran are as harsh as those imposed for terrorism or violent crime.

Imprisonment and brutality are too often the only way authorities react to journalists. At least one journalist is assaulted or arrested every day in the Middle East. More than 60 journalists were physically attacked or arrested in Iraq in 2009. In the Palestinian Territories, more than 50 journalists were detained by Hamas in the Gaza Strip and by Fatah in the West Bank.

Africa and Asia were neck and neck in the numbers of journalists detained. More than 10 journalists were arrested in 2009 in Niger, Gambia and Somalia, while Eritrea maintained its dubious distinction of jailing the most journalists in Africa, with 32 of them behind bars. In Asia, arrests are thankfully down, but the Chinese and Pakistani security forces continue to arrest foreign or local journalists when they crossed the "red lines" they are supposed to observe.

The 28 June coup in Honduras, which was backed by the conservative press, resulted in the persecution of journalists suspected of sympathizing with the ousted president, Manuel Zelaya, and

the suspension or permanent closure of their media. Finally, Cuba drew attention to itself again this year with at least 24 arrests and two new long jail sentences, bringing to 25 the number of journalists in prison.

When the powerful are not arresting journalists, they are harassing them by constantly dragging them before the courts. One editor in Algeria, Omar Belhouchet, was summoned before judges 15 times in 2009. The opposition press in Turkey and Morocco have been bombarded with law suits, which almost always lead to convictions or closures because the courts are more inclined to favour the plaintiff than the media.

Choosing exile to stay Alive

For the first time, the Reporters Without Borders annual roundup includes figures for journalists who have been forced to leave their countries because of threats to their lives or liberty. A total of 157 journalists went into exile in the past year, often in very harsh conditions. Among the countries where the exodus of journalists and bloggers was particularly dramatic were Iran, with more than 50 fleeing, and Sri Lanka, with 29. In Africa, some 50 journalists fled the chaos in Somalia while scores of Eritreans sought refuge abroad for fear of being targeted for reprisals by the continent's worst dictatorship. Journalists also fled Guinea, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Mexico, Colombia and Ethiopia.

This new measure is an indication of the level of fear that exists within the media in some countries. Journalists encounter many hazards as they go into exile and seek an uncertain future. Some wait months, even years, to get protection and possible resettlement.

Thanks, RSF