

Gambian journalists charged with sedition

NEW YORK: A magistrate in the Gambian capital, Banjul, on Thursday, 18 June 2009 charged seven journalists with sedition for criticising President Yahya Jammeh's televised comments about the unsolved 2004 murder of editor Deyda Hydara, their defense lawyer said.

Gambian security forces arrested an eighth journalist that morning, although no charges were immediately brought, according to the Gambian Press Union President Ndey Tapha Sosseh.

Jammeh, appearing June 8 on state-run Gambia Radio and Television Service, said the government investigation into Hydara's slaying had stalled, according to media reports. Jammeh noted that a news website has carried a headline saying, "Who Killed Deyda Hydara?" and then retorted: "Let them go and ask Deyda Hydara who killed him."

The Gambian Press Union issued a statement criticising Jammeh for being insensitive and calling for a renewed investigation into the unsolved killing. Four of those arrested thus far are press union leaders. All eight are staffers for either *The Point* or *Foroyaa* newspapers, both of which reprinted the press union statement. Hydara was editor of *The Point*.

All eight journalists are being held at Mile Two Prison, defense lawyer Lamin Camara told CPJ. Only one was granted bail. Journalist Sarata Jabbi-Dibba, mother of a six-month-old, was granted bail of 200,000 dalasi (US\$7,547) but there was insufficient time for colleagues and family members to raise the amount, the press union reported.

One of those charged, *Point* managing editor Pap Saine, suffers from a heart condition and was planning to go to Dakar, Senegal, for medical treatment prior to the arrest, according to a CPJ source.

"We're deeply anguished by the arrests of these journalists, several of whom I met in my visit to the Gambia," said CPJ executive director Joel Simon. "President Jammeh is acting in a petty and vindictive manner and should be held personally accountable for his egregious abuse of power."

The seven journalists charged with sedition were arrested by security agents on Monday, local journalists told CPJ. The charges were lodged on Thursday just moments before the government would have been constitutionally obligated to release the journalists. According to the Gambia's 1997 constitution, a suspect may be held for no more than 72 hours without charge. Security forces arrested Abba Gibba, an editor with *The Point*, on Thursday morning, according to the press union.

The National Intelligence Agency has denied the journalists access to their lawyer, family members, and colleagues, Camara told CPJ. They are due in court again on Monday, when the lawyer said a bail application would be filed.

According to local journalists and the press union, security forces arrested Gibba after questioning staff at *The Point* over why the paper was still publishing despite the detentions of senior employees. Security forces are holding *Foroyaa's* managing editor Sam Saar, assistant editor, Emil Touray, and reporter Abubakr Saidy Kahn, along with *The Point's* managing editor Saine, news editor Ebrima Sawaneh, and reporters Jabbi-Dibba and Pa Modou Faal.

Hydara, one of the nation's leading editors, was killed by unidentified gunmen in his car on the outskirts of Banjul in December 2004. In the June 8 state television interview, Jammeh denied government involvement in Hydara's roadside slaying.

Gambia has become one of the worst nations in the region on press freedom issues. "Chief" Ebrima Manneh, a journalist for the newspaper *The Observer*, was arrested by security forces in July 2006 and has virtually disappeared in state custody. Despite witness statements, the government has denied knowledge of Manneh's whereabouts.

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