

# MEDIA ALERT

WEST AFRICA  
2006-2007

ANNUAL STATE OF THE MEDIA REPORT



Disappeared in The Gambia



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*WEST AFRICA 2006–2007*  
*Annual State of the Media Report*

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Media Alert West Africa  
2006–2007

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# *Media Foundation for West Africa*

The Media Foundation for West Africa is a regional independent, non-profit, non-governmental organization based in Accra, Ghana. It was established in 1997 to defend and promote the rights and freedoms of the media, and generally, to help expand the boundaries of freedom of speech and expression in West Africa.

## *Objectives*

The objectives of the **MFWA** are to:

1. Promote the Freedom, Independence and Responsibility of the mass Media;
2. Monitor, publicise and alert public opinion to oppose and resist violations and attacks on Media Rights and Freedom of Expression;
3. Advocate Defence of and support for victims of arbitrariness and repression;
4. Research into policy issues and regulations affecting Media Rights, Freedom of Speech and Expression;
5. Make interventions to reform media legislation that may be inimical to freedom of expression and media freedom;
6. Serve as a documentation centre and resource base to provide research results, data and information to Mass Media, professional organisations, NGOs, governments and inter-governmental agencies;
7. Provide training and other support to strengthen the professional capacity, independence and social responsibility of the mass media;
8. Provide a platform to stimulate discussion and education for the advancement of ideas on Media Rights and Freedom of Expression;
9. Support Mass Media in projects for the promotion of Human Rights, Peace and Democratic institutions;
10. Support the development, growth and strengthening of independent mass media.

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# Introduction

Two decades since the late 1980s upsurge for political liberalisation and media pluralism in West Africa, journalists and their media continue to face repression of and attacks on their freedoms. Despite constitutional reforms making provision for press freedom, government impunity and reluctance to reform repressive anachronistic legislation set the conditions for continued suffocation of freedom of expression on a sustained scale in most of the fifteen countries of the ECOWAS (plus Mauritania).

While there certainly has been remarkable progress in countries like Mauritania and Togo in the last three years, for instance, the general atmosphere is one of unrelenting arbitrary arrests and detention, harassment, abuse by police and soldiers, and widespread prosecution of journalists under laws that make criminal media infractions of various kinds.

The period under review in this publication provides no respite from generalised harassment of media professionals in the sub-region. The daily monitoring the MFWA conducts exposes acts of attacks on journalists and press freedom that require urgent and sustained protests and campaigns to stem the trend.

Side by side with arbitrariness are cases of prosecution by the state wielding draconian and muzzling laws such as "publishing false news", or invocation of archaic colonial legislation that criminalise defamation and "state secrets".

Among the emerging and disturbing cases of repression are the arbitrary acts of regulatory bodies that increasingly show their lack of independence from governmental control and influence. Similarly, in nearly every country, while petty police and security personnel incessantly abuse journalists, there is a growing tendency of intolerance of civilian citizens toward jour-

nalists at the least publication of unfavourable material.

Admittedly, quite often the presentation, or veracity, of some information that provokes the wrath of officialdom questions the professional credentials of the journalists. Sometimes too, the approach of journalists in their search for news, and or the manner of access to official events, betrays professional etiquette.

Still, in overwhelming cases there can be no justification for the attacks by any standard. Indeed, the fundamental problem lies with the absence of legislation and a progressive culture of citizens' (and media's) right of access to very basic information.

Political crises and violent conflicts — such as civil wars — also provide conditions for repression of media rights. In Niger, for example, the resurgence of rebellion by the Tuareg communities has become a pretext for intensified government censorship and silencing of media and citizens' voices. To report on the conflict or discuss it in the media is a criminal offence — with a number of media houses already victimized.

A new and dangerous element adding to the woes of media freedom is the growing trade in hard illicit drugs. The threat of this danger is already baring its fangs. In Ghana, sympathizers of suspected drug smugglers physically attack journalists in the open. In Guinea Bissau, security forces and politicians make sure the media don't dare cover anything they observe about the drug trade that is engulfing the tiny coastal country.

Overall, there appears to be emerging a tendency toward a roll-back of progress gained.

The threat of new backward legislation, such as a new bill on defamation in Ghana, looms high. In Senegal, under the govern-

ment of President Abdoulaye Wade, there are arbitrary acts and reflexive rash to prosecution of journalists all of which threaten to erode the country's respected tradition of tolerance of media independence.

While the general picture is one of gloom, nowhere in the region is the situation as dark as in The Gambia. Over the past decade, President Yahya Jammeh has succeeded in turning a once-open society into a cemetery of freedom of expression. The hallmark of the regime's disdain for freedom includes the unresolved murder of Deyda Hydara, an outspoken editor and champion of press independence, and the "disappearance" of Chief Ebrima Manneh, a reporter of a pro-government

newspaper arrested and detained by Jammeh's goons from his office two years ago without trace of his whereabouts.

Daunting as the struggle for freedoms and openness may appear, it is also true that these dangerous tendencies have tended to abate whenever there appear significant civil society initiatives to seek redress and reform.

Fortunately, too, there exist at ECOWAS and African Union levels international instruments and mechanisms — such as the ECOWAS Community and the African Courts of Justice — that, utilized well, consistently and intensively, should make important (though gradual) impacts on bringing about change.