



COMMITTEE TO PROTECT JOURNALISTS

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March 11, 2010

H.E. Paul Biya
President of the Republic of Cameroon
Yaoundé, Cameroon

Via facsimile: (237) 22 20 33 06

Dear President Biya,

We are writing to express our alarm at a wave of arrests, harassment, criminal prosecutions and even abuse of at least a dozen journalists who raised sensitive questions about issues of public interest in Cameroon, such as the management of public finances, the progress of an anti-corruption drive dubbed [Operation Sparrowhawk](#), and local government affairs. We call on you to take measures promoting the transparent conduct of public affairs, and the respect for fundamental rights, such as the enactment of a law guaranteeing access to information, and the transfer of defamation cases to civilian courts.

We call on you to hold members of the administration accountable for using security forces and criminal laws to settle scores with the media.

- Since February 26, three journalists investigating the state-run [National Hydrocarbons Company](#)'s (SNH) purchase in 2008 of the offshore vessel [Rio Del Rey](#) are under arrest in the capital, Yaoundé. Editors Harrys Robert Mintya of the weekly *Le Devoir*, Bibi Ngota of *Cameroon Express*, and Serge Sabouang of the bimonthly *La Nation* were charged with "imitating the signature of a member of government," a criminal offense carrying up to 15 years of imprisonment, according to defense lawyer Jean Marie Nougua.
- The journalists, who were transferred from police custody to Kondengui prison on Wednesday, had been arrested on February 5 after obtaining a document, presented as a confidential memorandum of presidential adviser Laurent Ezzo, who is also the board chairman of SNH. The memo ordered the disbursement of secret payouts to company managers in connection with the boat's purchase. Ezzo has not publicly commented on the allegations, which were first reported by the press in September 2009.

The February 5 arrests drew our alarm and indignation since they were carried out by state security agents of Cameroon's Directorate-General of External Intelligence. Mintya and Ngota were interrogated for more than 12 hours.

- Another journalist, reporter Simon Hervé Nko'o from the weekly *Bebela* was held incommunicado for a week without charge. We are outraged by reports that security agents used [torture](#) to force Nko'o to reveal his sources. CPJ obtained a copy of a February 22 medical certificate detailing his physical examination after his release. The certificate stated that Nko'o had bruises on the soles of his feet and that he told the doctor security agents had subjected him to waterboarding, sleep deprivation, and exposure to cold. Nko'o went into hiding fearing arrest, according to local journalists. We ask you to order an investigation into these serious allegations.

We are also alarmed by the ongoing harassment of at least eight other journalists who

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GRADUATE SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM
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THE NEW YORKER
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Lara Logan
CBS NEWS
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David Marsh
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Geraldine Fabrikant Metz
THE NEW YORK TIMES
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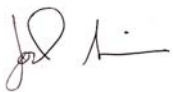
have raised critical questions about the administration's conduct of Operation Sparrowhawk, an official investigation of former officials accused of mismanaging public funds.

- Currently, four leading journalists and an academic face criminal charges in the commercial capital Douala in relation to commenting during a June 2008 TV program on police investigations of Yves Michel Fotso, a former executive at national airline [Camair Co accused](#) of embezzlement. Fotso has publicly [denied](#) any wrongdoing. [Spectrum TV](#) Editor-in-Chief Thierry Ngogang, freelance journalist Alex Gustave Azebaze, reporter Anani Rabier Bindzi of [Canal 2 International](#), and Jean-Marc Soboth, a prominent journalist and leading press freedom activist, were charged in January with “biased commentary” likely to prejudice an active investigation, according to defense lawyer Francis Jackson Ngnie Kanga.
- A second charge, “unauthorized disclosure of a confidential document,” was based on the journalists’ discussion of a copy of Fotso’s police statements that were leaked to the press. Soboth fled into hiding in January after reporting that he received anonymous death threats, according to local journalists. Also, [Lewis Medjo](#), an editor imprisoned since September 2008, was arrested only a few months after raising questions about the Fotso case, which some journalists speculate may have led to his imprisonment.
- In recent weeks, security forces have obstructed two journalists from the leading daily [Le Messenger](#) from reporting on the cases of two former presidential advisers indicted in Operation Sparrowhawk, according to CPJ research. On January 17, officers at the State Secretariat for Defense in Yaoundé briefly detained Nadège Christelle Bowa and confiscated her notes from an interview with Thierry Michel Atangana, who is [jailed](#) on corruption charges, according to news reports. On February 24, police [detained](#) reporter Justin Blaise Akono and forced him to delete courtroom photos during a hearing in the trial of Titus Edzoa, accused of embezzlement, the paper reported.
- Finally, two other journalists in the northwest town of Bamenda are on trial over an October 2009 story referencing the criminal case of Doh Gah Gwanyin III, of a former local official convicted of [involvement in the murder](#) of an opposition politician in 2006, according to the Cameroon Association of English-Speaking Journalists. Editor-in-Chief Charly Ndi Chia and Yaoundé Bureau Chief Yerima Kini Nsom of the English-language biweekly [The Post](#) are free while battling charges of “libel, blackmail, and abuse,” defense lawyer Dinga Godlove told CPJ.

We believe that arbitrary arrests, criminal prosecutions, and even torture of journalists who raise critical questions about government affairs undermine not only your efforts to root out public corruption, but also confidence in the rule of law and democracy in Cameroon. Access to information is enshrined as a fundamental human right by the United Nations, and upheld by the [African Charter on Human and People's Rights](#). We therefore call on you to create [access to information legislation](#), and also to ensure that press offenses are referred to civil courts.

Thank for your attention to these very important matters. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Joel Simon, Executive Director

CC:
H.E. Bienvenue Joseph Charles Foe Atangana, Ambassador of Cameroon to the United States
Hon. Jean-Jacques Ekindi, Member of National Assembly of Cameroon
Benoît Sossou, UNESCO Representative in Cameroon
Ekue G. Kpodar, International Monetary Fund Representative in Cameroon
Mary Barton Dock, World Bank Cameroon Director of Operations
Faith Pansy Tlakula, African Commission Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression
Manfred Nowak, U.N. Special Rapporteur on Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment or Punishment
United Nations Committee against Torture
International Federation for Human Rights
H.E. Janet Garvey, Ambassador of the United States to Cameroon
Michael Posner, U.S. Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
H.E. Bruno Gain, Ambassador of France to Cameroon
H.E. Raul Mateus Paula, Head of the European Union Delegation to Cameroon
International Federation of Journalists
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