

Angola tense as journalists, protesting youth targeted by government

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1 Nov 2011

Barely three weeks after an Angolan judge thought to be a member of the ruling MPLA (People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola - Labour Party) handed down a two year-suspended sentence to a journalist and fined him US\$105 000 (about R840 000), another Angolan journalist is being threatened with harm and possibly death by armed gunmen believed to be working for the government.

New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) last night urged authorities in the Angolan enclave of Cabinda to take all steps necessary to ensure the safety of independent journalist José Manuel Gimbi, following reports that unidentified armed men raided Gimbi's residence on Thursday 27 October 2011, and threatened to harm him.

Critical media targeted

The Gimbi saga is just one of the many cases, including unreported ones, that has clouded the media space of Angola in the past three years, as the government cracks down on critical media, commentators and protesting youth demanding an end to the dictatorial regime of president Jose Eduardo dos Santos.

President Dos Santos, has denied being a dictator and vowed to stay on despite tensions and a wave of protests by youth apparently disgusted by extreme poverty, high unemployment, human rights violations and economic mismanagement.

Gimbi, who is also a lawyer, is a local correspondent for US broadcaster Voice of America (VOA) and has been openly critical to the MPLA regime.

Oil-rich Cabinda, which is much closer to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in the north and has no boundaries with Angola, has been the stage of armed confrontations in the past 35 years between government troops and the Frente da Libertacao do Enclavo do Cabinda (FLEC) separatists.

Threats

Thursday in the evening, armed men in plain clothes with walkie-talkies went to Gimbi's residence, where Gimbi's children and an eyewitness overheard the men threaten him with unspecified harm, CPJ said in a statement, citing local new reports.

"VOA is always concerned about reported incidents of harassment and threats to our reporters. We're currently looking

into the incident," David Borgida, VOA public relations director, was quoted by CPJ as saying.

"We hold authorities in Cabinda responsible for Gimbi's safety and call on police to conduct an investigation into the incident," said CPJ Africa advocacy coordinator Mohamed Keita. "These intimidation tactics are an attempt to silence a crucial source of independent news from this oil-rich region."

CPJ also reported that in March this year another journalist, Armando José Chicoca, was sentenced to prison over coverage of an alleged sexual harassment scandal implicating a top judge. And observers alleged that since that incident journalists have become easy targets for the judiciary, who want to avenge their colleague's humiliating defeat. Critics believe that almost all judges serving in Angolan judiciary are rich and corrupt, and are members of the ruling MPLA.

In a brief telephonic interview with Bizcommunity.com today, a source said on condition of anonymity: "The situation is tense, and we are afraid something really bad is going to happen soon or later. As independent journalists, we are living in fear and it seems we are being watched by government spies."

Another source said, "Riots and protests have aggravated, but there is no extreme violence or shootings. We hope that this will remain peaceful."

Angola was ranked 104th in 2010 in terms of media freedom by media watchdog Reporters Sans Frontieres.

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Issa Sikiti da Silva is a winner of the 2010 SADC Media Awards (print category). He freelances for various media outlets, local and foreign, and has travelled extensively across Africa. His work has been published both in French and English. He used to contribute to Bizcommunity.com as a senior news writer.

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