

CPJ condemns charges against Leadership journalists

Nigerian authorities should stop the legal harassment of journalists in connection with a critical story about President Goodluck Jonathan's political plans, the Committee to Protect Journalists said recently.

A reporter and editor for the Nigerian daily Leadership, and a representative of the Leadership parent company, were arraigned in court and charged anew with forgery along with new counts that could put them in prison for life.

"These excessive criminal charges are intended to deter critical coverage of the president as elections draw nearer," said Peter Nkanga, CPJ's West Africa consultant. "Authorities should drop these charges immediately."

Tony Amokeodo, political editor; Chibuzor Ukaibe, political reporter, and Omofuma Juliane, a secretary representing Leadership Group Ltd, were charged at the Abuja High Court with forging a presidential memo that described plans to increase gas prices and to sabotage a merger of opposition parties ahead of the 2015 general elections, according to the newspaper.

The president's office has denied that the document is authentic and said it was designed to mislead the public and discredit the president, news reports said. Journalists with Leadership have said they believe the document is genuine and are standing by the 2 April 2013 story.

Amokeodo and Ukaibe and Leadership Group Ltd. were charged on 11 counts, including forgery, conspiracy to commit a felony, inciting feelings of disaffection against the president, and inducement to commit an offense against public peace, Ugo Udoji, the journalists' lawyer told CPJ. They were granted bail of 500,000 naira (about US\$3,165). A court date has been set for 16 July, Azubuike Ishiekwene, the managing director of the Leadership group, told CPJ. The journalists could face up to life in prison, according to CPJ's review of the Nigerian penal code.

Initial charges that included forgery had been filed against the journalists and Leadership Group Ltd. at the Federal High Court in April, but were dismissed in May after Leadership challenged the court's jurisdiction to hear the case.

Reuben Abati, a spokesman for the president, told CPJ the initial charges had been dropped "on technical grounds" because police had filed the complaint in the wrong court. He said the case was re-filed at an Abuja High Court as a matter of jurisdiction.

Azubuike Ishiekwene, the managing director of the Leadership group, said in a statement to CPJ in April that he believed police were acting on direct orders from the president in an effort to get the source of the presidential memorandum report.

Source: [allAfrica](#)