FOI Activists to Form African Network

Freedom of Information experts and activists across Africa will meet in Nigeria in September to map out strategies for establishing a regional network aimed at strengthening campaigns for the enactment and implementation of access to information laws throughout the continent.

The activists will be joined at the three day workshop, which will take place in Abuja between September 19 and 21, by experts on Freedom of Information laws from Asia, Europe and North America.

The workshop is being organized by ARTICLE 19, the Global Campaign for Freedom of Expression, based in London and Media Rights Agenda (MRA) in collaboration with the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (IDASA), based in Cape Town. The meeting is being organized with support from The Ford Foundation.

The workshop will bring together 35 individuals and organisations which are either already active or which are interested in working in future on freedom of information issues to discuss and share advocacy and monitoring strategies and to explore networking and cooperation opportunities. They will also share perspectives regarding the role of access to information in promoting and protecting the full range of human rights in Africa. The participants will be drawn from Anglophone, Francophone and Lusophone countries.

Other participants from outside Africa will come from ARTICLE 19; the Bank Information Center, a Washington-based World Bank watchdog with a very strong right to know focus; Partnership Africa Canada, an organization based in Toronto, Canada, which has conducted pioneering research on the role of illegal oil and diamond trade in fuelling conflict and corruption; the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI), based in India; and the Access to Information Programme (AIP) in Bulgaria.

The specific objective of the workshop include:
To strengthen the momentum behind campaigns to promote and implement freedom of information laws across sub-Saharan Africa;

To enable civil society organisations in sub-Saharan Africa to share experiences and strategies in promoting and monitoring the implementation of freedom of information laws and to enhance their capacity to carry out effective advocacy and monitoring strategies as appropriate; and

To assess the feasibility of establishing a network of civil society organisations on freedom of information in sub-Saharan Africa and map out the basis for any future cooperation and coordination.

The conceptual framework for the meeting will include issues as diverse as conflict prevention and resolution, the struggle against impunity, the role of private and multi-lateral corporations, poverty reduction strategies, HIV/AIDS and reproductive health as well as the relationship between Africa and global financial institutions such as the Bretton Woods institutions.

Once the conceptual framework has been established, the participants will move on to discuss and identify strategies for advocacy and monitoring, including ways of sharing information and experiences in the future, and the legal and institutional frameworks that can most effectively promote and protect openness and transparency.

The workshop is informed by the belief that "information is the oxygen of democracy" and that if people do not know what is happening in their society, or if the actions of those who rule them are hidden, they cannot take a meaningful part in the affairs of that society.

The workshop organizers are proceeding on the basis that information is not just a necessity for people, but an essential part of good government because bad governments need secrecy to survive, while secrecy allows inefficiency, wastefulness and corruption to thrive.

In their view, information allows people to scrutinise the actions of a government and is the basis for proper and informed debate about those actions, although most governments would prefer to conduct their business in secret.

The initiative is designed to take advantage of a changing global climate in which freedom of information is increasingly high on the agenda in a wide range of countries.

There is a growing recognition internationally of the obligation on governments to provide information to their citizens through clearly defined constitutional and legal procedures. Since 1995, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression, Mr. Abid Hussain, has consistently emphasized in his annual report to the UN Commission on Human Rights the importance of access to information within national contexts.

Over 40 countries around the world now have freedom of information laws in one form or another that require the disclosure of government records and information to members of the public. Many others, especially in Eastern Europe, are in the process of adopting such laws.

However, within Africa, although the issue of freedom of information is now a topical one in varying degrees in countries like Nigeria, Uganda, Mali, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Mozambique and Zimbabwe, and there is a likelihood that some of them might be adopting freedom of information laws in the near future, the overall situation in Africa remains unimpressive.

In February last year, South Africa passed the Promotion of Access to Information Act, 2000, to become the first country in sub-Saharan Africa to enact a freedom of information law.

Following the passage of the Promotion of Access to Information Act in South Africa, the Institute for Democracy in South Africa has already established an Open Democracy Centre to monitor the implementation of the new Act and provide training for government officials and civil society organisations on freedom of information.

However, Malawi, Mozambique and Tanzania have only constitutional guarantees of public access to government-held information. They do not have legal framework outlining procedures for giving effect to this guarantees.

In Nigeria, a Freedom of Information Bill is pending before the National Assembly. It has passed its second reading in the House of Representatives and awaiting a public hearing to be held in a few weeks by the Information Committee of the House.
The initiative to get the Nigerian National Assembly to enact a Freedom of Information Bill began since 1994 when MRA in collaboration with the Civil Liberties Organisations (CLO) and the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ), began the campaign. The effort was aided by a coordinated media programme and advocacy efforts, which intensified with the advent of democratic governance in Nigeria in May 1999. The basis of the lobbying activities and the advocacy work is the draft Access to Public Records and Information Act, which arose from the joint efforts of the three organisations.

Guided by the recommendations contained in The Ota Platform on Media Law Reform in Nigeria with regard to access to information, which was drawn up at the Workshop on Media Law Reform held on March 16 to 18, 1999, MRA produced a revised draft of the existing "Access to Public Records and Information Act".

Shortly after the inauguration of the new civilian government, MRA began an intensive lobby to get the National Assembly to pass the Bill into law. MRA initially forwarded the draft Bill to President Obasanjo urging him to use his good offices to actualise its enactment to compliment his anti-corruption crusade. However, the Presidency in a letter to MRA declined, but instead urged MRA to seek other channels for its enactment. MRA then began to reach out to legislatures to serve as arrow heads for the presentation of the Bill to the national assembly.

In the regard, MRA officials met with scores of legislators and wrote to many other legislators, whom they could not meet with, to solicit their support for the draft legislation. MRA also produced and made available to the legislators copies of relevant publications on the issue, including ARTICLE 19's: The Public's Right to Know: Principles on Freedom of Information Legislation, and The Johannesburg Principles on National Security, Freedom of Expression and Access to Information.

MRA has made efforts to generate media support for the initiative, including visits to media houses to meet with journalists, editors and columnists to solicit support for the campaign through the publication of articles and stories on the freedom of information issue; issuing periodic press releases to highlight developments on the issue; granting of press interviews by principal officers of MRA on the issue; facilitating publication in the print medium of feature stories and opinion articles as well as radio and television debates and discussions on the issue; etc.


Again, from September 14 to 15, 2000, MRA in collaboration with the International Human Rights Law Group, held a workshop on the FIO Bill.

The primary purpose of these efforts were to keep the issue alive in the public domain and create a ground-swell of public opinion in favour of a regime of access to information to act as a further pressure for legislative action by the National Assembly. These efforts have been successful as the issue has caught on and frequently crops up in the course of public discussions and debates.

The indications so far are that in all likelihood, the Bill will be passed by the National Assembly. The level of commitment, which the idea has received from the National Assembly, including the principal officers, informs this conclusion. Such commitments have been given either in private meetings with representatives of Media Rights Agenda or at public functions.

The Acting Speaker of the House of Representative, Prince Chibudom Nwuchue, made such a commitment at a meeting with a delegation of MRA which visited him at the National Assembly in Abuja on December 1. He re-echoed the commitment at a lecture during events to commemorate the 75th anniversary of Daily Times newspapers in Lagos June.

In addition to plenary sessions, which will be held during the September workshop, many of the sessions will be conducted in three working groups, each of which will work towards establishing a common framework for addressing the issue and then focusing on a
specific problem. The three problems are: national advocacy and networking strategies; and national monitoring strategies; networking and regional as well as international advocacy and monitoring strategies.

The workshop will provide participants an opportunity to explore in depth the range of means by which information and experience can be shared in future and to agree on a basis for future action and follow-up activities, including creating any capacity needed for this to take place.

It will also create the basis for new and broader alliances within the region and with international participants to be strengthened in tangible ways. This would involve some particular areas or issues where cooperative action will be agreed upon.

During the meeting, a model Freedom of Information law drafted by ARTICLE 19 will also be circulated and discussed along with a discussion paper on comparative standards on access to information that have developed in different spheres of political, economic and social life that identify principles which apply in all spheres and which could therefore be seen as a common "bottom line" in all activities and campaigning efforts.

The workshop will seek to secure an agreement in principle from the participating organisations that they would be interested in being part of the consultative processes we will need to undertake such standard-setting. It is hoped that the participating organizations will agree in principle to work together on collaborative advocacy at the national or international level.

MEDIA MONITORING PROJECT:

Media Under-Reports Human Rights, Accountability In Government - MRA

The performance of the Nigerian media in May 2001 in the area of reporting Politics, Democracy and Human Rights Issues as well as Public Accountability, has been adjudged below standard and therefore in need of improvement. Although the media gave a lot of time to reporting democracy, political issues and interest groups, the fairness and objectivity of the reportage was another matter entirely. Similarly, the focus on democracy and political matters left little or no room for human rights and public accountability reports. Media report was also heavily tilted in favour of urban dwellers, to the detriment of people in the countryside.

These were the findings of a Media Monitoring Project being undertaken by Media Rights Agenda, in two separate reports recently released. The reports, each on the print media and broadcast media, were titled: Print Monitor and Airwaves Monitor, were 29 and 33 pages long, respectively.

The report on the broadcast media noted that there was a glaring paucity of sound bites which cause was not possible to determine. The report also noted that another lapse noticed in the course of monitoring radio and TV stations was that several times, scheduled news programmes were skipped for no obvious reason. Additionally, some stations routinely went off air during news broadcast without offering any reasoning when they finally came back on air. And once in a while, there were mix-ups in the activities shown with the actuality on screen at variance with the news topic.

However, the report commended some state-owned radio and TV stations, for extending editorial coverage to civil groups and other organisations, which were in dispute with government. An example was Radio Nigeria 2 FM's coverage of the recent doctor's strike. The report noted that in the past, such strike action would be ignored or watered down.

The broadcast monitoring report, which was based on the monitoring during the month of May 2001, covered four radio and five television stations. Of these, five are state-owned, namely Radio Nigeria 2FM Lagos; FRCN Kaduna; KSMC Kaduna; NTA 2 Channel 5 Lagos; and NTA Kaduna. The privately-owned stations are RayPower 100.5FM Lagos; Channels TV Lagos; Murhi TV Lagos; and Minaj TV Obosi. All were monitored from Lagos and Kaduna.
According to the report, the primary aim of the media monitoring exercise is to assess the role of the media in upholding and promoting democratic culture and practice as well as ensuring transparency, accountability and good governance.

The report said the exercise assesses how well the media provides a robust atmosphere for the promotion of political debate, democratic governance and public accountability, ensure fair, accurate and objective coverage of political issues and political interest groups, human rights issues and safeguard the rights of disadvantaged and minority groups. The project also seeks to determine the extent of coverage given to these issues by both the state-owned media and the private media, and identify the significant issues covered and those which were ignored.

Under Political Issues, the monitoring exercise monitored reports on political activities of the federal, state and local governments and their agencies, reports on political-economic issues and the public's responses to them and reports on emerging political issues.

On Democracy Issues, the monitoring focused on reports on separation of power; the legitimate role of the opposition and its activities, reports on the registered political parties, PDP, AD, APP, other political associations and organisations; the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC); and reports on other general democracy issues.

On Human Rights Issues, the monitoring exercise focused on gender issues, human rights violations, promotion, and investigations; and on Public Accountability, the monitoring focused on reports on corruption in government and reports promoting transparency in public life.

The report noted that for much of the period under review, some of the stations were faced with power outages in public power supply or faulty transmitting equipment or both. For example, Raypower 100.5FM intermittently went off air and skipped news bulletins such as the City Update on May 21 and the World News on May 24. NTA's Kaduna station shut down completely between May 28 and 31. It is believed that this was due to a faulty transmitter. FRCN Kaduna also went off air fairly often.

The report findings show that government, its agencies and functionaries constituted the main news subject for the media, and it noted that most news organs made conscious efforts to be dispassionate and objective in news gathering and dissemination. However, the report said the end-product of the process still has flaws and lapses.

Specifically, out of the total number of news reports monitored for the broadcast report, radio accounted for 2,282, covering a duration of 2,942 minutes (49 hours).

For the television, there were 710 bulletins made up of 2,923 news items monitored in a duration of 112 hours, 6 minutes (678 minutes, 23 seconds). Out of this number, 796 were relevant to the variables monitored for and they lasted a time of 34 hours, 4 mins.

In terms of issues that enjoyed the most media attention, reports on Democracy were 593, with total time allocation of 999 minutes, 28 seconds (16 hours, 7 minutes); 581 news items on Political Issues with time allocation of 706 minutes, 54 seconds (11 hours, 8 minutes); on Human Rights, there were 116 news reports with time allocation of 168 minutes, 73 seconds (2 hours, 8 minutes), and under Public Accountability, there were 104 news reports with a time allocation of 118 minutes, 8 seconds (2 hours).

The report indicates that the government at all levels received the highest positive mentions while Political Organisations received the highest negative mentions.

Lagos came tops as the state that produced most stories with Abuja, Akwa Ibom, Abia, Edo and Delta following in that order. The report also showed that Nigeria came tops in the Scope of Reports. At the regional level, the South-west came tops with the North-central, South-south and South-east trailing.

The report noted that with the exceptions of RN2 and Channels TV, most of the stations did not use sound bites in the period being reviewed. Also, all the stations indulged in repeating news bulletins and as well giving prominence to government activities. Private TV and radio stations did not differ in their reports. Most of their reports emanated from government or official sources.
The two stations monitored in Kaduna depended largely on public power supply for their transmission which adversely affected their operation as it is common with dependency on National Electricity Power Authority (NEPA). As such, whenever public power supply failed, they invariably went off air. Consequently, they often had to apologise for breaks in transmission.

Looking at specific stations, the report commended NTA 2 Channel 5 and Channels Television for being "basically fair, balanced and detailed" in their reports. But it noted that most of Channels' bulletins were repeated without any updating although sometimes with the addition of one or two fresh items.

On Minaj Television, the report noted that the news schedule did not follow normal routine throughout the month. Much of the time, the news bulletins in the morning and afternoon were skipped. Also, the station sometimes aired wrong actualities, lacked sound bite and news sources were not diversified.

The report noted that Murhi Television routinely used mostly graphs and still pictures in place of actuality and voice-over in place of sound bites in its reports. It said the station's reports often failed to reflect more than one side of an issue and that most items were generated in Lagos based on press briefings or statements.

NTA in Kaduna was noted to be generally balanced and objective in its reports with appropriate use of sound bites and actualities, and voice-overs were seldom used. The station's news concentrated on federal and state government's activities. The station did not transmit at all between May 28 and 31, probably due to equipment breakdown.

The report lamented that Developmental Journalism, with a bias for promoting the rural regions, was unattractive to the stations as none of them featured rural activities prominently.

Regarding the monitoring exercise of the print media, the report noted that the newspapers and newsmagazines did fairly well in May. For a start, the publications devoted a considerable amount of editorial space to democratic institutions, functionaries and democracy's other appurtenances, indicating that the print media is serious about it self-imposed task of nurturing and safeguarding the country's newest attempt to rule itself through civilian institutions.

However, like its electronic counterpart, the print media under-reported human rights and public accountability issues. The report noted that were it not for the good coverage given to sittings of Justice Oputa-led Human Rights Violation Investigation Commission, the figures recorded for human rights would have been much lower.

The report, while commending most editors "for going after news aggressively", noted that many reports were one-sided with some publications on numerous instances failing or neglecting to speak to all the parties involved in an issue.

Another weak area is that of follow-ups. The report said while publications did a good job breaking the news, it lamented that in most cases they either did not follow-up or when they did, the efforts were weak. The report further chided the print media for severally quoting unnamed sources either as a ploy to gain credibility for reports or simply as a cover for laziness.

The print media was further accused of editorial and production lapses including unannounced replacement of editorial matter with advertisements; story continuations placed on the wrong pages; and outright deletion of some continuations.

The report also observed that print quality and newsprint texture of most publications was fair, although newsprint quality may vary from one publication to another. One or two newsmagazines excelled by having high design standard. It said photographic reproductions were often poor, although this differed widely from publication to publication and even on occasion, from one edition to another of a particular medium. It observed that the situation was complicated by the struggle by several tabloids to reproduce editorial photographs in colour, which they are having difficulty in doing well.

During the month of May, ten newspapers and five newsmagazines were monitored in Lagos. These include government-owned Daily Times and New Nigerian, and privately-owned Daily Champion, Daily Trust, National Interest, The Comet, The Punch, ThisDay and The
Guardian. Others are the magazines, which include The Source, Newswatch, TheNews, The Week and TELL.

In all, there were 2,487 reports monitored in the newspaper and 75 in the newsmagazine, making a total of 2,562 reports monitored in the print media covering a total space of 87,869 square inches. The 2,487 reports in the newspapers covered a space of 70,601-square inches (an average of 464 pages using The Guardian newspaper as a guide), and 75 reports monitored in newsmagazine reports covered a space of 17,268 square inches (an average of 258 pages using TheNews magazine as a guide).

Like its electronic counterpart, far more news reports were classed under Democracy than any other category with 1,149 reports. In contrast, 826 reports were recorded for Political Issues; 163 for Public Accountability and 161 for Human Rights.

On the whole, the publications did not do enough to flesh out reports by consulting different and divergent news sources. And with the exception of perhaps two publications, backgrounding was universally neglected. In terms of Mentions, politicians and public figures dominated the news pages and more often than not, the exposure was positive rather than negative.

Concerning breaking of stories, the south-west zone and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja dominated while the scope of reports was limited to Nigeria and often restricted even further to states and local governments.

The report then recommended that the media should be encouraged to reduce its heavy dependence on news from governmental or official sources. Even when they are used, it is beneficial to flesh them out with countervailing viewpoints from non-governmental sources. It called for back-grounding especially to news derived from releases and press statements and also advised media managers to broaden the base of newsgathering in such a manner that the proportion of news derived from Lagos and Abuja is reduced.

It further called for adequate sourcing of reports rather than the practice of speculative journalism and also urged radio and television producers to make an effort to obtain and use appropriate actualities and give more sound bites to their news.

Media Rights Monitor is published monthly by the Media Rights Agenda (MRA), an independent, non-governmental organisation established for the purpose of promoting and protecting press freedom and freedom of expression in Nigeria. MRA is registered under Nigerian law and has Observer Status with the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights.

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The campaign by independent broadcast stations to reduce the influence of government-owned television network, the Nigeria Television Authority (NTA), has been taken to the upper chamber of the National Assembly which is holding a public hearing on a Bill to amend the Nigerian Television Authority Act.

The independent broadcasters, operating under the umbrella of Independent Broadcasters Association of Nigeria (IBAN), has been at loggerheads with NTA over alleged unfair monopoly they feel NTA enjoys in the airwaves.

Their grouse is that NTA enjoys massive government funding and at the same time competes with them for advert revenue. A situation it claims gives NTA an unfair advantage.

The Minister of Information and national Orientation, Professor Jerry Gana, who supervises NTA, however, said NTA should be left as it is because it ensures the entrenchment of public interest. He said the stoppage of government funding for NTA would destroy democracy fundamentally, and insisted that the interest of the public should not be sacrificed for private organizations. Prof. Gana's position was of course supported by the Director General of NBC, Mallam Danladi Bako.
Although the debate has been healthy so far, it is pertinent to state our position as advocates of free expression and media pluralism. Government funding of a commercially run media enterprise is fundamentally wrong. This position is premised on the fact that such funding, almost always, exposes the recipient organisation to political manipulation and censorship.

This position is further supported by the Windhoek Declaration which came out of a United Nations/ United Nations Educational Scientific and Unilateral Organization Seminar on promoting an independent and pluralistic African Press held in Windhoek, Namibia, in May 1991.

Besides frowning at media monopolies of any kind, the Declaration canvassed that 'all funding should aim to encourage pluralism as well as independence". As a consequence, it held that "the public media should be funded only where authorities guarantee a constitutional and effective freedom of information and expression and the independence of the press'.

MRA believes that government funding of the NTA, which is the crux of the matter in the IBAN/NTA face-off, creates an unfair advantage.

Elsewhere, government funding of media organisations is statutorily provided for in order to avert an incumbent government taking advantage of the situation and manipulating the organisation. Such a policy framework is what MRA advises the government to adopt.

Government policies concerning the media should create a level playing field for all stakeholders.

There can be no doubt that the establishment, maintenance and fostering of an independent, pluralistic and free press is essential to the development and sustenance of democracy, and for economic development.

LETTERS

As Informative As Ever

I am writing to you for the second time. I have just been privileged once more to go through some editions of Media Rights Monitor, precisely Vol. 6. Nos. 4 and 5, for April and May 2001. As usual, they are well-packaged and informative.

Thank you for the effort, while the battle to achieve a free media environment in Nigeria continues. But I remain certain that we will win the battle.

Meanwhile, I would like to be put on your mailing list.

Thank you.

Prince Charles Dickson

Newswatch

Jos, Plateau State

Editor’s Note

Dear Mr. Dickson,

Thank you for your letter. We do not recall receiving your earlier letter referred. However, you have been put on our mailing list. I am sure that subsequently, you will receive our publications regularly.

Thank you.

Put me On Your Mailing List

I write to commend you for your effort in monitoring, documenting and ameliorating the plight of working journalists. I kindly request you to include my name in your mailing list.

Yours faithfully

Mohammed S. Gama
P.O.BOX 182
Kano.

Editor’s Note
Dear Mr. Gama,
I recall having received a letter from you requesting to be included in our mailing list. I, however, wrote to you asking to know if you are a journalist or your work involves information management or free expression advocacy. Those are our target audience.
So, if you are any of the above, do furnish us with your official address for inclusion in our mailing list.
Thank you nonetheless for the interest shown.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT
Media Rights Agenda (MRA) is grateful to The Ford Foundation for providing the grant for the publication of this Journal

EXECUTIVE WATCH
Two Years In Office: Nigerians Scores President Obasanjo Low
Were it a terminal examination, the result sheet of President Olusegun Obasanjo's two years in office would have been all red bic and the teacher's remark would have ran thus: "This student has failed most woefully and is hereby advised to withdraw". There would be no option of a repete. Luckily, this is not an academic examination and it is as well not a terminal assessment. But in the opinion of a vast majority of Nigerians, the two years of President Obasanjo’s stewardship has been a total failure.
The above summarizes the opinions of Nigerians in a public opinion poll conducted by Media Rights Agenda under its Executive Watch Project. The poll was conducted between June 11 and 21, in eight Nigerian cities spread across the three main regions. They include Benin City, Enugu, Ibadan, Kano, Kaduna, Lagos, Port Harcourt and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja.

For this survey, 8,000 questionnaires were produced and 1000 copies administered in each of the eight cities. Out of these, 6,629 were returned. This number represents 82.9 per cent.
The response pattern show that an outright majority of Nigerians rate the governments performance 'Poor' in the areas of Education, Transparency and Accountability (Anti-Corruption), Employment and Labour relations, Energy (Fuel and Electricity), Economy, Health, Agriculture, Works and Housing and Security (lives and properties).

In the area of Foreign Policy, majority of respondents rate the administration as having performed ‘Below Average’, and in the areas of Respect for Human Rights and Democratic Principles, Response to Religious Conflicts and Freedom of Expression and Press Freedom, they unanimously agreed that the government’s performance was 'Average'.

There was, therefore, no area in which the government was rated as having performed 'Above Average' or 'Excellent'.

It could be recalled that on May 29, 2001, the civilian administration marked two years in office. Reviewing their activities so far, President Obasanjo and Vice President Atiku Abubakar said their administration is on course and they have not derailed from their set goals. They, therefore, declared a verdict of "so far so good".

However, some Nigerians criticised the administration, arguing that President Obasanjo has performed "below average". According to them, half way into the administration, people are yet to see the dividends of democracy promised by the administration at its inauguration on May 29, 1999.
The survey sought to determine how Nigerians rate the performance of President Obasanjo in 14 critical areas of activities on the occasion of his two years in office. It consists of two close-ended questions. The first question asked thus: “How would you rate the performance of the government in the following areas: (a) Education, (b) Transparency and Accountability (Anti-Corruption), (c) Employment and Labour relations, (d) Foreign Policy (e) Respect for Human Rights and Democratic Principles (f) Energy (Fuel and Electricity) (g) Economy (h) Health (I) Agriculture (j) Works & Housing (k) Security (lives and properties) (l) Response to Religious Conflicts (m) Freedom of Expression and Press Freedom”.

Respondents were enjoined to choose from the following options: Poor, Below Average, Average and Excellent, and also cautioned to: "Please tick as appropriate. We kindly advice you not to respond to any issue you may not be adequately familiar with". (See table for specific pattern of response by participants)

In a second question, respondents were asked: “Overall, how would you assess President Obasanjo's performance during the two years in office?

The response pattern showed that 987(14.9 per cent) out of the total respondents, scored the president 'Poor'; 1651 (24.9) 'Below Average'; 2193 (33.1) 'Average'; 827 (12.4) 'Above Average'; and 316 (4.8) 'Excellent'. Six hundred and fifty-five respondents, representing 9.9 per cent, were undecided.

INSIDE THE NEWSROOM:

NAWOJ Is Unnecessary - Obi

In the Nigerian media, the person of Comfort Obi cannot be considered an unknown entity for several reasons. Firstly, is the fact of her being among the very few Nigerian women who have excelled in the journalism profession. For instance, on one occasion, she has been adjudged Nigeria's Journalist of the Year by the organizers of the respected Nigeria Media Merit Award.

Secondly, during the dictatorship of the late Nigeria's military head of state, General Sani Abacha, the magazine which she was editing then, The Sunday Magazine (TSM), incidentally owned by another senior woman journalist, was one of those that suffered untold hardship for its staunch opposition to the dictatorship.

Obi emerged from that gory experience toughened, more daring and determined to expand the frontiers of excellence in journalism practice in Nigeria.

Now as publisher and editor-in-chief of The Source magazines, she has, indeed, come a long way. She has been at the center of sundry controversies over her magazine's stories, which critics dubbed "ethnic" journalism, among others.

As a female journalist and publisher, she faces problems but none of which, she says, could be said to be gender-specific. Not surprisingly, she doesn’t see any relevance in an organisation such as National Association of Women Journalists (NAWOJ).

You will find her views controversial and thought provoking in this interview with Osaro Odemwingie. Excepts:

What is your assessment of the performance of the Nigerian media during these past two years of democratic governance?

I think it has performed fairly well. The media has kept the public officers on their toes and tried very well to fight for the people. If you recall how the media fought, and continue to fight something like the deregulation of petroleum sector, if you recall how the media has consistently fought about the non-recognition of Chief M. K. O. Abiola after all he did for this country, and on other issues, I think the media has performed well.

I believe it was the media that sent the military packing, not NADECO (National Democratic Coalition), not Afenifere, not G.34, not OPC (Oodua Peoples’ congress), nor CLO (Civil Liberties Organisation); I think it was the media that removed the military, because all
these people could have said anything, done everything, but if the media has given it a black-out nobody would hear them.

But having fought dictatorship, having battled the military and shouted and shouted, the media has also had some minuses. I will give series of examples. Having fought so hard, I think now that we have democracy, I think some of us practitioners, all of us practitioners, need a re-orientation. Having written some stories, at times some of them exaggerated, but which we thought we should continue... anything to push the military out, I repeat we need a re-orientation.

It is like we have put ourselves in this straight jacket, we have accused, and accused and accused, we have criticised and criticised and criticised, without offering a solution. I don't think it is right. I think the media itself should be told that democracy, freedom of writing, freedom of speech, does not mean freedom to insult, freedom to libel. That is my opinion.

**Given these your observations, how professional and ethical would you say the average Nigerian journalist is when writing a story?**

Let me put it this way; Nigerian journalists are very vibrant. When they mean it, they can go out of their way to get stories, investigate stories, put in their best. But like I said, I think something about what most of us suffered during successive military regimes has affected us. So some of us no longer give a hoot about professionalism and it is very sad. It is like some of us are engaged in a competition to see who sensationalizes the most, who fabricates stories the most, who blackmail people the most and I don't think that is right.

But again, most times I put it down to the situation on the ground. The public has been used to reading all these terrible and sensational stories during the military regime that it has become a question of 'look, stamp this on the cover so that we can sell'. I put that to an unhealthy competition and I don't think it is right. But again I agree that it is the public that demands it. It is like when you don't sensationalize and put in all these awful, outlandish stuff, you don't sell. But like I keep saying, I keep telling my people here, I think it has its short-term effect. Very soon, people will start to appreciate who is who, and which is which.

But let me tell you, I think at times this thing boils down to the pay package of journalists. Most media organisations don't pay well because of the economy, you see most of us owing for months. Some of the middle level journalists, therefore, have no qualms in collecting a story and collecting money to blackmail people. And it is sad that people now know that you can just walk into a newspaper, any journalist, and give a one-sided story and it is flashed like that without any effort to look for the other party and at least try to balance the story. I think it is sad, but what does one do?

**How much of this problem in the media would you credit to ethnicity, against the background of conflicting media positions on issues which clearly are influenced by their ethnic affiliation?**

Yes, it does come into play, like you said. We have the Evan Enwerem's case, Salisu Buhari's case, you know what happened to both men. And take the case of the Lagos State Governor for example,... you can see that when it got to Buhari's case everyone of us jumped at it. In the Enwerem's case it was the same. But when it came to Tinubu, it was like some of us said 'well, this is our own person, he is from our own side of the country'. But I think again that sympathy now came into it; like Enwerem and Buhari, none of us heard about them during the fight to remove the military either in NADECO or anywhere, and Tinubu, his case was different. I think Tinubu's case was a combination of that.

But again we have equally seen instances where ethnicity came into play. Check out what is happening with the OPC check out what is happening with the Egbesu Boys, Bakassi and the other stupid one which I don't reckon with, MOSSOB (Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra). You would see that when it comes to OPC for example, some of us are like covering up, and I think it is sad. Maybe it happens elsewhere, but it is wrong.

Let me give you an example. Adams (Ganiyu) of the OPC has been declared wanted by the police. If somebody is declared wanted by the police, I think it is the responsibility of any
responsible law abiding citizen to help the police. If he hasn't done anything why is he on the run? This is democracy. But I have reservation about some of us going on, knowing where he is, interviewing him and celebrating him. I don't want them to say I am saying this because I am Ibo, but this is how I feel.

I have an Ibo man who calls himself Uwazurike, I think he is irresponsible, I think if the government declares Uwazurike wanted and as a responsible citizen and I know where he is, I will tell the police. I am not saying that his case is the same thing as Ganiyu Adams'. Adams is fighting a cause which I think is ok. He protects the Yoruba interest, which is ok and which is not what Uwazurike is doing. So when it comes to that, I don't think I as an Ibo will say 'oh, because he is from my ethnic group I should protect him'. I think he has not done anything to protect the interest of the Ibo man and that if anything he is drawing the Ibo man backward. Here we are my people are talking about the Ibo President and there he is talking about the Republic of Biafra.

Yes, ethnicity has come into play. My colleagues from the north do not see anything wrong with Sharia; some of our colleagues in the north do not see anything right about what Obasanjo has done because they accuse those of us from the south of not seeing anything good that any head of state or president from the north has done. So I think it is a cocktail of all of these that has faced the press.

Do you think women are adequately represented in the Nigerian media?

No, no, no. In fact, I feel lonely the way I am, I am lonely. That is why I am sad about what happened at Concord newspapers. But by the grace of God I am sure they will come back. I like to read and hear about her progress in the media; Doyin (Abiola) has done this, Doyin has done that. But again I say it is the problem of the women. You see, it is not only in journalism. I never like women who, when they are working or doing anything, think of themselves as women. I don't like it. Which is why I know NAWOJ (National Association of Women Journalists) has given me an award, but I don't think NAWOJ should be encouraged.

You see, some of us women in journalism, we have gradually let the men take-over. That is why you see in newsroom the beats that their editors will give them will be go and cover beauty contest, fashion parade, cooking competition, children and all that. No! What is wrong with sending men to do those things, what is wrong with women handling tough beats? Which is why I like the lady at THISDAY, Ijeoma Nwogwugwu, Group Business Editor; she has done quite well. Let women in the media brace-up; leave all these fashion, cookery beats. Because when they give you all these, they reduce you. I have always encouraged female journalists, female reporters, anywhere they are. I am a reporter, first and foremost. I report stories. I encourage them to look beyond those beats that I could refer to as feminine beats. And that is why I am sad about NAWOJ.

There is an association for all journalists in the country, Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ). That association should be for all journalists, male or female. So why would female journalists go and form NAWOJ? Has it stopped our editors from restricting us to those beats? It is like we are leaving the NUJ for men. How come male journalists have not formed an association for male journalists? Why should women journalists form an association? Some of them now ridicule us that 'what do they do in NAWOJ? The only thing they do is paint themselves and pay courtesy calls'. I think we should all belong to NUJ and fight it out there and bring up some of these issues of always sending women to go and cover fashion and this and that.

But of course you have some female journalists that have done us proud, Doyin Abiola, Remi Oyo, Ijeoma Nwogwugwu and Funke Egbedode, the lady editing Saturday Post Express. I think some of us have done well, but I think we should do more. But we can only do well by insisting that we are capable of covering these beats. We can only achieve it by insisting that 'oh, send us to these beats, we can equally do that, and not behave like we are fragile, we cannot compete, by making excuses in the newsroom, 'I won't do this, I won't do that'.
As a female and a publisher, are there peculiar problems that you face?

Thinking of it, no. No, because I have never seen myself as a female. Maybe because they call all of us ‘Gentlemen of the press’. As a woman, I do the cooking in the house, everything. Nobody enters my kitchen to make soup or stew for me, no. When I am in the house I am all woman, but when it is this job, no, I have never presented myself as a woman. And when I go visit a man, it is for serious business, ... no, no, no, no. On the contrary, I have had nothing but encouragement. Nothing has ever pulled me back. But of course, every woman has experiences, but I don't think it has given me headache for a second or that I thought about it or it has stopped me from doing anything, no.

You have talked about your opposition to NAWOJ and called for one strong NUJ. How do you place Beat Associations in this equation?

Absolutely nonsense. I think most of them are corrupt and I think we should stop it. Go to the airport for example, those ones that call themselves Airport Correspondents Association, you have Crime Reporters Association, Sports Writers Association, you have maritime and this and that, we are selling ourselves cheap. What most of these associations are doing is that they have formed themselves into a cartel, a syndicate, so now you can't trust your reporter to source a different story, you see that all of them carry the same stories. Who are journalists to be giving awards? An association like Crime Reporters will organise an award ceremony, some will say we are giving out awards to the best Governor, the best this and best that. That is not our work. I think those associations are illegal and I am surprised that the NUJ has left them to be doing what they are doing. I am surprised that the Guilds of Editors has kept quiet, I think it is something that all of us must fight.

Let me tell you what a governor told me. He said: 'Each time I get a letter form one journalists' association or the other say for an award, I know they are looking for money'. I felt very sad, as a journalist, I was ashamed. When the man made the statement I was not the only person there, but I was the only journalist and you can imagine what I felt. I think some of us are deviating and it is not only these beat associations.

For example, there was a time the national body of the NUJ said they organised an award ceremony for some governors and their deputies, I think we shouldn't be doing something like that, I think it is irresponsible, to say the least. I have a great respect for the National President of the NUJ, Smart Adeyemi, but I was disappointed last week... in Kogi State for example, the governor, Audu, has built a university against mounting opposition, but I think he is doing a good thing if he can maintain it... But I was disappointed that the NUJ president was one of those that asked that this man should name the university after himself. Some people there had mooted the idea including the students. What was the business of the NUJ President? I don't think he (the governor) should do that, name a university after himself. I don't think people should be honouring themselves while in office. What if someone else comes and changes the name after himself? People that have done that in the past have seen that it is not right.

What is the financial situation of The Source presently? Now and then you are unable to make it to the newsstand.

No, it is not that it is difficult... no media house is very healthy though. Let me tell you what happened: I think it was in January/February. What happened to us that time is like what happened this week. It is not the money or something like that, we had problem with the landlady. Usually, we don't take our leave. What we do is that around December period we break for one month and if you had our last edition in December, before Christmas, we indicated that we will be off for our usual time. We were off for one month only for the landlady to make things difficult for us. We are not owing her, on the contrary she said she was prepared to return some money to us and that she needs the boys quarter to use immediately.

This week what happened was that in the heat of our production night at about 2 a. m., our generating set broke down and there was no light. And you know the competition in the
industry, if you don't start selling on Sunday, you will have lost the market. In fact, some magazines start selling on Saturday. So by the time we got the generating set fixed, our marketers advised that if we go on like this, this magazine will not get to the market until Tuesday and that means low sale. So we had to stop it. Not that it is ok with us, because the terrain is generally rough.

**Do you manage to pay salaries regularly?**

Yes. And without begging anybody outside, no bank, no individual.

**Advertising is the backbone of the media and going through your magazine it seems you are not doing well in that area. So how do you cope?**

You are right. But if you look also, you will see that our advert has improved. But let me tell you how we have managed until now; we have a lot of goodwill, that is one. Secondly, we do very well in the north and in the east. In both places our sales are very good. But apart from our sales in the north and the east, when you open our magazine any story that you see Special Report is paid for. So we make do with such stories; those that want us to do story they don't want in advert form. And of course you know these local government people, they have been spending some money. And I am proud to say that as a daughter of the East, my local governments have been very supportive.

**When you say goodwill, it seems some kind of situation when some people make donation?**

I wouldn't call it donation. But once in a while… it is not just us, a media house could have some assistance… I have actually called-up a couple of my friends and say 'can you do this for us this week'. At times, some people cannot actually believe… that you are a woman and you survived till now, what can we do for you, how can we help your organisation, some with computers, camera and at times newsprint. I think we have been lucky.

**Has any of your benefactors ever asked for a pay-back in terms of a favourable story?**

We don't have such friends fortunately.

**Looking at the problems of the media, if somebody, a group or the government thought of an intervention programme to help the media, what would you suggest?**

The only assistance the media would need from the federal government... no country can survive without the communication, without information flow and all that… the government should try as much as possible to bring down the cost of materials; newsprint has gone up over a hundred per cent, ink as well as all other things, I think that is the only thing that the media could ask of the government. And I think it is a legitimate demand, we don't need to do anything for them.

But I think NPAN (Newspaper Proprietors Association of Nigeria) is trying to help. I know they have sent out letters to media houses asking them to contribute some money to see how they can put heads together and order for newsprint. If something like that is done it will be well appreciated. But we have to admit that the federal government has not done anything to help the media. The cost of printing material as is the cost of everything in this country is abnormally high… and of course let us have access to information, it is actually when some of us don't have access to information that we sit down in our offices and fabricates stories and speculate. These are the two things they can do for us. And I don't think that they would ask us for anything and of course they can only ask from government owned media houses. Those of us that are private will have no business with them.

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Na ‘Abba Raises Hope On FOI Bill, Alleges Unfair Media Reports

The fate of Freedom of Information Bill which seeks to give citizens a legal rights of access to information at the public domain, brightened last month when the Speaker of the Nigerian House of Representatives, said that the body was set to pass the bill. He also gave
assurances that House would soon commence action to repeal all obnoxious laws inhibiting press freedom in the country this year.

Honourable Umar Ghali Na'Abba gave the pledge at an event marking the 75 anniversary of Daily Times of Nigeria Limited, publisher of Nigeria's longest surviving newspaper, Daily Times.

Speaking at Agidingbi, Ikeja premises of the Daily Times, on the topic: “The Press in a Democracy", which climaxed the week-long anniversary celebration, Na'abba observed that though journalists no longer work under the atmosphere of fear characteristic of the military era, laws which have the potential of inhibiting press freedom are, however, still in the statute books.

According, to him, the House Committee on the Judiciary and Human Rights would identify the obnoxious laws, which contradict the spirit of the constitution for the House to repeal. He also gave assurances that the House would soon pass the Freedom of Information Bill. In his words, Na'Abba said: "Before the end of the year, the House of Representatives will pass the Freedom of (Access) to Information Bill. These are intended to liberalise the condition for the flourishing of the media".

Na'Abba, who was represented at the function by the Deputy Speaker of the House, Hon. Chubudom Nwuche, observed, however, that the Nigerian press is on trial, just as the politicians themselves. "There are indications that the press is at a loss to reconcile the new experiment, which upholds process and procedures over everything else. There is an indication that the press has been slow in transforming from the battle mentality that it required to survive the 16 years of military rule. That psychological adjustment is necessary for the media to help the society make sense of the process of democracy", he asserted.

Making an assessment of the performance of the Nigerian press so far in a democracy, he alleged the emergence of a reportorial style which tries to absolve the office of the President of responsibilities preferring instead to blame the National Assembly for perceived shortcomings on the day-to-day running of government.

Speaking further, Na'Abba traced the roles of the press in the nation to the present day and said in the current democracy "the shift of power to the South, in which for the first time a South-Westerner is President of the country appears to have redefined roles" from its one-sided nature of the past administrations.

"The need to stabilise a Southern President appears to have caused a shift of focus in the press. The South-West is also in the hands of a Yoruba controlled-party. The party at the centre is seen as sufficiently dominated by the North.

"But there is new pattern of reportage. There is attempt to isolate the Office of the President and absolve it of responsibility in areas where the government is perceived to have not done well. Rather than the entire Federal Government, the press excuses the Presidency and blames the National Assembly for everything, even for executive inactions. Unlike President (Shehu) Shagari in the Second Republic, the demon of this republic is the National Assembly, he said.

The Speaker further said "the technique of salience has also come into the treatment of regional issues. The treatment of the OPC, Bakassi, and APC debacle has been different. The treatment of the killings of Northerners in Lagos, Shagamu, Ibadan and elsewhere, have elegantly differed from the treatment of retaliatory killings in Kano, the riots in Kaduna and elsewhere. So are the reportage of the calls for Sovereign National Conference (SNC) and its counterpoise; the agitation for resource control and arguments against it, the treatment of Odi massacre etc.

The controversy over whether the media has been unduly critical of the Legislature and sympathetic to the Executive aside, the occasion of DTN 75th anniversary also had its other moments of truths. One of such was the admittance by its Managing Director, Dr. Onukaba Adinoyi-Ojo, that the media organisation colluded with the military dictatorship to the detriment of the Nigerian people. He, therefore, made a passionate plea for forgiveness, promising never again to allow itself to be used against the Nigerian people.
According to him, "there was a time when you (Nigerians) were taken for granted, I apologise to you all. I promise we will never be so foolish again. Our uncritical support for tyrannical, anti-people past governments was wrong. I pledge here that we shall never again allow ourselves to be used against the Nigerian people. We regret the pains we inflicted on the innocent citizens of this country".

_Daily Times_, which is the first major newspaper and the longest surviving in Nigeria, had at its pinnacle, been the most widely read and respected, assuming the image of an oracle, the authoritative voice for the Nigerian people. But its problem started in 1975 when the military government took it over. The newspaper over the years gradually lost its authoritative status as government begun to manipulate its content. The citizens loss of confidence in the publication was accelerated during the General Ibrahim Babagidan and late General Sani Abacha regimes when its independence was totally erased. Consequently, public patronage went down and distress set in.

The present government, however, recently relinquished its interest in the company which has embarked on a drive to regain the confidence and patronage of the Nigerian people. The event was attended by several generations of Nigeria media men and distinguished Nigerians from various walks of life.

**Tempers Rise Over Government’s Funding Of NTA**

For the Nigerian broadcasting community, these are not the best of times. Between the publicly and privately funded stations, there is no love lost. The two groups are presently up against each other over the role of government in the industry.

At a Senate public hearing on the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) Act Amendment Bill, in Abuja on June 18, leading figures in the nation's broadcast industry were divided over continued government funding of the nation's only television network, the NTA.

Leading the pro-government funding team was Minister of Information, Professor Jerry Gana. He had, in his team, his subordinates at the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC), NTA and Voice of Nigeria (VON). He canvassed the continued government funding of NTA on the note that the network's continued existence was vital to the survival of democracy.

Pushing the anti-government funding option were members of the Independent Broadcasters Association of Nigeria (IBAN), led by Dr. Raymond Dokpesi, Chairman of Daar Communications, owners of Raypower/AIT, and Senator Mike Ajegbo, owner of MBI Television. In their presentations, they argued against the continued funding for the NTA by the federal government. But in the event that NTA wishes to continue to receive government's funding, IBAN sounded a caveat: the public television network should withdraws from all commercial activities. Another alternative, which Dokpesi canvassed on behalf of IBAN, is the privatization of the television authority.

In a sarcastic tone, Dokpesi said: "If NTA is actually interested in going commercial, BPE (Bureau for Public Enterprises) is there. So why don't we take it to BPE and sell it off, afterall El-Rufai (Nasair El-Rufai, Director General of BPE) will be very happy".

Earlier in his presentation, Professor Gana posited that the NTA existed to ensure the entrenchment of public interest on the air waves. He then insisted that the fundamental interest of the public would not be sacrificed for private organizations. He stated that the level playing ground of complete federal government withdrawal of funding to the NTA canvassed by the private broadcasters would "destroy democracy fundamentally."

He further stated that many of the 26 fully fledged television stations of the NTA were located in economically unviable locations making government funding essential to their continued existence. He argued further that the NTA depends on government for drawing the bulk of its commercial activities.
Mallam Danladi Bako, Director-General of NBC, the broadcast industry regulatory body, similarly criticized the private broadcasters' crusade for the withdrawal of NTA from commercial activities.

Answering a question from Senator Omololu Meroyi, a member of the Information Committee, on the degree of collaboration between the NTA and the private broadcasters, Dokpesi narrated how repeatedly NTA had denied the private broadcasters the opportunity of linking up to national events. Applauding the role of private broadcasters in a democracy, Dokpesi said that private operators provide a voice to opposition voices in the states where governments have denied opposition access to public funded media.

He claimed also that it was the private broadcasters that provide alternative voice to the ruling Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) in the South-Western states controlled by the Alliance for Democracy (AD) which he alleged has virtually shut out other parties from the airwaves.

Earlier in his address, Chairman of the Senate Committee on Information, Senator Jonathan Zwingina, promised that the committee would "be open to any submission or memoranda," that will be presented before it.

In a related incident, plans by the BPE and the National Council of Privatisation (NCP) to privatise some government-owned media organisations have been opposed by some heads of the organisations who said it would be "counter-productive" if the planned privatisation is effected.

The objection was raised at a forum organised by the House of Representatives Committee on Information inside the National Assembly complex to appraise the moves by BPE and NCP to sell the government media.

The media houses are VON, NTA, News Agency of Nigeria (NAN) and Daily Times of Nigeria (DTN). Others are the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN) and New Nigerian Newspapers (NNN).

NITEL, High Tariff May Mar Access To GSM

The hope of many Nigerians to have access to cheap and affordable GSM services seems to be receding by the day as the role out deadline nears. Even among Nigerians government officials, there is desperation to avert what will definitely be as earth shaking policy failure in recent years in the event that a hitch occurs in the telecommunication liberalization, specifically the GSM operation, exercise.

Thus, while Nigerians and stakeholders are frantically calling on government and licensed GSM operators to charge affordable tariff, the government is convening series of meetings with relevant actors in the sector to ensure that the GSM train continues to be on tracks.

Although MTN, for instance, has scheduled between August 2 and 9 for its role out in three cities - Lagos, Abuja and Port-Harcourt - there are still terrible flaws in the GSM role out plan, going by a plethora of problems and issues daily sprouting. These include the inability of the licenced prividers to put in place adequate infrastructure necessary for the role-out scheduled for August 9, a mere three weeks from now, and most frightening being the uncooperative attitude and ill-preparedness of NITEL.

To smoothen these problems, the government on July 3, held a crucial meeting with the licencees, MTN Communications limited, Econet Wireless Nigeria Limited (EWN) and the Nigerian Telecommunication Limited (NITEL). The meeting held in Aso Villa at the instance of President Olusegun Obasanjo and chaired by Vice-President Atiku Abubakar. Also in attendance were the Minister for Communications and his Minister of State, officials of the ministry, the Nigeria Communications Commission (NCC) and the Bureau of Public Enterprises (NBE).

Emerging from the meeting was the setting up of a 12-man technical taskforce to assist NITEL in putting its house in order in order to be able to carry out its role out operation and also smoothen the path for the other two licencees. This followed the obvious difficulties NITEL is having in putting on the ground the necessary structures for its GSM role out and the
apprehension expressed by MTN and Econet officials over the effect the ill preparedness of NITEL will have on the quality of GSM services that may be introduced in the country. NITEL officials were said to have confessed that the company was ill prepared to take on the massive introduction of lines from the GSM operators, even as it is still unable to satisfy the traffic need of the existing Private Telephone Operators (PTOs).

At the meeting, the licencees were impressed with the readiness of the NCC to apply necessary sanction on any company that fails to meet the deadline given for the GSM role out.

MTN and Econet officials also used the opportunity to solicit the assistance of the Federal Government in securing Certificates of Occupancy (C of Os) for plots of land in several states they intend to build their base stations. They had complained that the red-tape they encounter in various states is capable of forestalling their ability to meet universal service obligations as stipulated in their licences.

Meanwhile, not wanting to be bugged down by NITEL's foot dragging on the interconnectivity agreement, coupled with the threat of sanction on failure to begin role out as scheduled, and not forgetting the fate of CIL after the bids for the licencees, MTN and Econet left the Aso Villa meeting for Oceanview Restaurant on July 5, to sign an interconnectivity agreement. The agreement will enable an MTN subscriber call any Econet subscriber and vice versa when the GSM service begins. The agreement also includes commercial details such as revenue sharing and technicalities involved in interconnecting such as cite sharing.

Despite the warm feelings emanating from that exercise, chairman of MTN, chief Pascal Edozie at the ceremony expressed the two companies' frustration at NITEL's sluggishness in signing the interconnectivity agreement and hoped that government interest in that respect will yield fruits. His words: "Its is our hope that with the concern shown by the presidency, an interconnectivity agreement with NITEL will be signed in the quickest possible time and NITEL will put in place the capacity for interconnectivity."

The reasons interconnectivity with NITEL is very crucial in the successful operation of the GSM in Nigeria is because it will further expand the access by subscribers and most prospective subscribers are already on NITEEL's network. The communications minister has, however, ordered NITEL to interconnect the two companies on or before August 9.

Even as the role out date nears, there is yet no official and concrete words on the tariff prospective customers will pay for GSM services. This has left the field for speculative reporting by various newspapers. Some of these speculations hint that Econet has proposed N50 per minute for peak period, while MTN has proposed N60.00. The speculations also indicate that subscription fee is also put at between N20,000, while the lowest handset will cost N30,000. In most parts of Africa where GSM is already in operation, a GSM subscription and handset cost less than N15,000.

Although these speculations have been stoutly denied by some concerned while other have maintained silence, the prospect is that Nigerians may have to pay so much, if not far more than what is being speculated, to enjoy the GSM services. The implication is that Nigeria may end up running the most expensive GSM services in the world and only the rich will have access to the services.

Ghana Set To Expunge Libel Law, Expels Liberian Journalist

Ghana's Attorney-General and Minister of Justice, Nana Akufo-Addo, has confirmed reports that the process to expunge criminal libel from the statute books has begun. The repeal of the law on seditious libel is part of the package.

The Bill was gazetted June 8, 2001, and going by the rules governing parliamentary practice in Ghana, it would go through its first reading after fourteen days. Two readings later, the Bill would become law.
That bit of cheering information was, however, rubbished by an alarmed sounded by the West African Journalists Association (WAJA) in Accra, on June 20, that the country's immigration authorities have claimed that they don’t know the whereabouts of Liberian journalist, Ambrose Darrul Nmah, days after he was expected to have left the country. Nmah had been asked to leave Ghana for allegedly overstaying the period of stay granted him while working without the requisite documents.

Repeal of the libel law was a campaign promise of the new government in Ghana, while the former government had vowed to keep the law. Former Attorney-General Obed Asamoah even pledged not to repeal the law if his party retained power in the December 2000 elections.

During President Jerry Rawlings-led government the law was used to harass journalists. In 1991, George Naykene was jailed under the Criminal and Seditious Libel laws for an article published in his newspaper, The Christian Chronicle. The article alleged that all the members of a military junta, which included Rawlings, had benefited from a loan contracted by the government after the junta handed over power to a civilian government. Naykene spent eighteen months in prison for the article. In 1996, three journalists were charged with seditious libel and sent to jail for two weeks when the trial judge refused them bail. The trial continued for four years until the change in government in January 2001. The Attorney-General led a team to the court on judgment day to file for a withdrawal of the case in February.

Meanwhile, information said that the missing Liberian journalist, Darrul, was on May 31, 2001, picked up by personnel of the Ghana Immigration Service (GIS) for working without a work permit at the premises of Radio Gold, where he hosts a magazine programme called The Morning Show.

Though he claimed to be a refugee, officials of the GIS say Darrul had no certificate from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and had used his Liberian passport to enter the country on March 4, 2001.

According to information gathered from the GIS, Darrul was granted a 90-day stay in the country. His employers were fined 10 million cedis (US$1,400) for employing an illegal alien. There has been some disquiet concerning the action taken against Darrul. His employers are seen as having sympathy for the former government, which lost power in January. The Liberian journalist asked for and was granted a one-week extension before being repatriated. The Ghanaian immigration authorities tasked the management of Radio Gold to ensure that he left at the expiry of his extended stay on June 5, 2001.

WAJA in a statement signed by Richard Akoi, the organisation's Information Officer, said it had information which indicates that Darrul was still in Accra, though his employment with the radio station has been terminated.

Darrul obtained his Bachelors degree in Political Science at the University of Ghana, where he enrolled for a three-year course in 1993.

**NBC Rescinds On Threat To Shut Zamfara Radio**

Under pressure from Muslim adherents from Zamfara state, the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) has allegedly withdrawn it threat to jam radio Zamfara over allegation that it was overshooting 10 per cent prescription of the commission's code on religious programme. The station was among the nine the NBC had earlier publicly indicted for violating its code among which is the promotion of one religion or one political party over the others.

NBC alleged volte face was as a result of pressure from a Muslims group form Zamfara State who staged a peaceful demonstration at the organisation's headquarters in Abuja in early June at which the protesters allegedly secured a written undertaking from commission's chairman Malam Danladi Bako on the fate of Zamfara radio.
The group at a press conference held in the living room of the Zamfara state governor's lodge in Abuja, said the NBC threat is part of the campaign of calumny by agents of the Federal Government against the expressed wishes of Zamfara people for the Sharia legal code.

The group's spokesman, Engineer Katankarfi, said: "There is no difference between Islam and our politics, or our business, so those who are prescribing a quota for us on our religious programmes are curtailing our freedom, one of the hallmarks, of our democracy".

As if speaking for the state government, Engineer Katankarfi said the state was desirous of procuring a new radio license for an Islamic station, which shall operate from Gusau, the state capital. His speech was accompanied by intermittent shouts of "Allahu Akbar" (God is great}).

The spokesman said the group has written to the presidency, protesting the threat and plans also to write a letter to National Assembly on the matter.

Asked to present the latter from the NBC granting the state media concession regarding the broadcast of religious programmes, Katankarfi declined saying: "We met him and presented our protest and he said; he had already withdrawn the threat. It is not my duty to give you the letter but he gave us a letter but he gave us a letter to withdraw the threat”.

AI Indicts Kenya, Cameroon, Liberia, Burkina Faso, Others

Amnesty International, the renowned worldwide organisation against torture, has called on world leaders not to use Globalisation as an excuse for states to shirk their human rights responsibilities. The organisation made the call on the occasion of the release of its 2001 annual report on May 30. The report which coincided with the organisation's 40th anniversary, documents a wide range of human rights violations in 149 countries, including abuses of the right to freedom of expression. AI said numerous governments "have adopted the rhetoric of human rights, but few have delivered this as a reality”.

In its regional summary on Africa, AI in the report said that "government officials systematically used their positions to gravely undermine freedom of expression and association", pointing specifically at countries such as Kenya, Tanzania, Cameroon, Togo, Liberia, and Burkina Faso. The report said in Zimbabwe, "members of the judiciary and the press were constantly under constant physical threat," and noted that in Morocco increasing violations of the right to freedom of expression led to the imprisonment of prisoners of conscience.

In the Americas, AI reports that "human rights defenders, political opponents and journalists suffered harassment, threats and attacks in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru and Trinidad and Tobago." In Colombia, eight journalists were killed in 2000 and others had to flee the country. In Haiti, pre-electoral violence claimed the lives of many people, including prominent radio journalist Jean Dominique. In Cuba, "individuals and groups peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression and association continued to face repression." AI also points to some positive developments in the Americas, notably hopes that changes of government in Mexico and Peru will bring human rights improvements.

The report records numerous freedom of expression abuses in the Asian countries of Malaysia, China and Singapore, as well in the European countries of Yugoslavia prior to last year's presidential elections, Bosnia-Herzegovina and in Greece.

In the Middle East AI cited, among other nations, Iran for curtailing freedom of expression through the arbitrary arrests and imprisonment of scores of journalists and intellectuals; and Yemen, where court proceedings continued against several journalists.
Free Expression Groups Protest Jailing Of Togolese Journalist

The Togolese private press as well as the West African Journalists Association (WAJA), Reporters sans frontières (RSF), the Writers in Prison Committee of International PEN (WiPC) and the World Association of Newspapers (WAN), have jointly protested the arrest of Lucien Messan, one of Togo's senior journalists.

Messan, editorial director of the weekly Le Combat du Peuple, was on June 5, sentenced to eighteen months in jail, six months of which is suspended, for "falsehood and the use of falsehood". The 55 year-old journalist, known to be one of the harshest critics of President Gnassingbé Eyadéma's regime, was arrested on May 23. His jailing is seen as part of a larger campaign to silence the independent press.

The Interior Minister had lodged a complaint against Messan for allegedly signing a communiqué from the Togolese Private Press Publishers Association (ATEPP). The communiqué denounced statements by the Togolese Prime Minister, according to whom "publication directors were unanimous in affirming that there have never been hundreds of deaths in Togo."

ATEPP accused the government of "seeking to take advantage of the private press."

To protest Messan's arrest, thirteen Togolese newspapers participated in a "pressless week" by refusing to publish from June 12 to 15. The editorial staff of two pro-government newspapers that continued to publish during the week, Le Soleil and La Nouvelle Opinion de Tchaoudjo, also launched a plea for a presidential pardon for their jailed colleague.

On July 2, a delegation from the World Association of Newspapers met with the Togolese Prime Minister, Agbéyomé Kodjo, in Lomé to urge him to release the imprisoned journalist.

In addition to calling for Mr. Messan's release, the delegation condemned the police seizure of the day's edition of Le Combat du Peuple, hours before the meeting.

After meeting with the Prime Minister and Interior Minister General Sizing Walla, the delegation was allowed to meet Messan in prison. He said he had been allowed very limited contact with anyone outside the prison.

"While the Prime Minister stressed he could make no promises, he gave us some hope that the situation could improve," said Aralynn McMane, Director of Development and Educational Programmes for WAN and a member of the delegation, "however, the meeting with the Interior Minister - who insisted that the conviction and the seizure of the newspaper were justified - left us feeling less positive. We will continue to press for Mr. Messan's release."

The delegation also called on authorities to withdraw threats of arrest facing Apollinaire Méwénémessé, the Director of the Togo Media Observatory and Publisher of the weekly La Dépêche, and to cease harassing the country's independent press.

Other members of the delegation were: Dr. McMane; Kajsa Törnroth, Coordinator of WAN African Press Network for the 21st Century; Abdourahmane Camara, Publisher of Walf Adjiri, Senegal; Arona Kante, Chief Editor of Le Cafard Libéré, Senegal; Oumarou Keita, Chief Editor of Le Républicain, Niger; and Mahamane Hamèye Cissé, Publisher of Le Scorpion, Mali.

Stories Uncle Sam Didn't Want Us To Read

Project Censored, a US-based media watchdog, has released its list of the "top 25 censored media stories for 2000," which details news items which the government of the United States of America (USA), had censored. The controversial list covers important stories that, according to Project Censored, went unreported or under-reported by the mainstream media in the US.

Alongside it, the organisation has issued its annual report on what it called the "Junk Food News" served to the public in the place of more substantive reporting.

Some of the "censored" stories deal directly with the media or suppression of freedom of expression. Number three on the list is the revelation that five U.S. army "psychological operations" soldiers were involved in news production at the Cable News Network (CNN)'s
bureaus during the war with Yugoslavia. Pressures from the bio-technology industry to censor critics of genetically engineered food made number seven in the list, along with U.S. government suppression of research that found tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the active chemical in marijuana, destroys tumours in laboratory rats, which is number 22 on the list.

Project Censored also criticised the mainstream U.S. media over its failure to report on efforts by the World Bank and multinational corporations to privatise water, rated as number one on the list; allegations in the European press that the U.S. deliberately bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999, rated number four; and a damning Organisation of African Unity report on the failure of the United States and other western nations to prevent the genocide in Rwanda, which rated number 6.

However, there have been criticism of Project Censored's list. Critics have argued that such stories go unreported or under-reported not because of censorship, but because of a finite amount of time and space available for coverage.

In its report on the Project Censored list, the online news service AlterNet states that few mainstream U.S. news organisations experience "overt, top-down censorship," such as an editor killing a controversial story or firing a reporter who has dug too deep, but that censorship occurs in more subtle ways. "As mainstream media outlets are increasingly dominated by large corporate conglomerates, they become ever more beholden to the bottom line," says AlterNet. "Stories that don't make money - either because they don't capture a large audience, are too expensive to research or might offend advertisers and investors - often end up on the newsroom floor."

An element of self-censorship is also involved, according toAlterNet, as reporters and editors "quickly learn to play by the narrow rules of the game, and to keep their stories within a certain range of ideas and topics."

But while the controversy over Project Censored report ranges, there was another hair-raising allegation of how the U.S. media deliberately turned a blind eye to cases of electoral fraud during the recent presidential polls.

In a March 12 article in Media Channel, an on-line publication, titled: Silence Of The Lambs: The Election Story Never Told, by a British journalist, Greg Palast, who reports for the Britain's Guardian newspaper (and its Sunday edition, The Observer) and for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) television, alleged that in the months leading up to the November balloting, Florida Governor Jeb Bush and his Secretary of State, Katherine Harris, ordered local elections supervisors to purge 64,000 voters from voter lists on the grounds that they were felons who were not entitled to vote in Florida. But Greg alleged that these voters weren't felons, or at least, only a very few were. The voters on this "scrub list", he said, were notably African-American (about 54 percent), while most of the others wrongly barred from voting were white and Hispanic Democrats.

Greg alleged that when the evidence of a systematic attempt to disenfranchise black voters was discovered, the country's mainstream print and electronic media deliberately ignored it or in most cases played it down. Greg further alleged that even when the U.S. Civil Rights Commission held hearings on the evidence, the U.S. media still ignored it.

He revealed that even he who reported the news for foreign media had to move his family to Europe in order to print or broadcast the story because of obvious threats to his life.

Although Greg acknowledged that the reluctance of the American media to investigative the allegation may be due to usually expensive cost, risky and often upset the wisdom of the established order, but insisted that the ultimate problem blocking significant investigative reportage is what he called America's "journalistic culture." This, he explained, is the tendency of the average American journalist to be content with press releases and canned stories provided by officials and corporation public relations operations.

Greg alleged that during the period of the controversy over the disenfranchisement of blacks voters in the state of Florida, and shortly after the UK and Salon stories hit the worldwide web, he was contacted by a CBS network news producer ready to run their own version of the
story. He alleged that he offered information regarding names, phone numbers, all the items one needs for a quick TV story, to investigate the allegations, but the producer called him up the next day to say the story didn't hold up because he called up the office of the Florida Governor and they denied the story.

Greg alleged that among other reasons, American media backed out of investigating the story due to the influence of the Bush family and threats of libel suit. He alleged that his paper was sued over his report that former American President George Bush worked for a gold-mining company after he left the White House in 1992.

He alleged further that the U.S. media often sieve information by assuming that the public doesn't want to hear bad and very un-sexy news, or that the public just doesn't care. Greg gave an instance where a journalist with Newsweek magazine, Mike Isikoff, just before the elections, handed him some information about President Clinton, suggesting corruption in office. He alleged that Mike in reply to his inquiry as to why he wouldn't run it in his medium, said: "Because no one gives a shit!", expressing his exasperation with the news chiefs who kill or bury these stories on page 200 on the belief that the public really doesn't want to know.

But contrary to this belief, Greg said when his story about the theft of the Florida vote first appeared the London Observer, Americans by the thousands flooded the newspaper’s Internet site, setting a record for hits leading to its giant server computers being blown down. Similarly, when BBC ran the story, viewership of the webcast of Newsnight grew by 10,000 per cent mostly as a result of Americans demanding to see what they were denied on their own media.

**MRA LEGAL SERVICES**

**Journalist Sues Lagos Police Commissioner, Community Bank, For Rights Infringement**

A journalist with *City People* magazine, Victor Orilola, has taken the Attorney General of Lagos state, the state's Police Commissioner and New Life Community Bank, Omole, Lagos, to an Ikeja High Court seeking leave for the enforcement of his fundamental human rights and the sum of N10 million for an alleged unlawful arrest and detention, and infringement on his fundamental human rights. Other respondents in the suit are the divisional police officers of Area G and Area F, both in Ikeja.

Mr. Oriola in a motion exparte action brought under Sections 46(1), 6(6)(a) and 46(3) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999, Order 1 Rule 2(1), and (3) of the Fundamental Right (Enforcement Procedure) Rules 1979, is seeking for a declaration that his arrest without a warrant and detention for an undisclosed offence constitutes a breach of his fundamental human rights guaranteed under section 34, 35 and 41 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 and Articles in 5, 6 and 7(1)(a) of the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights (Ratification and Enforcement) Act Cap 10 Laws of Federation of Nigeria 1990. He is also seeking a declaration that the inhuman and degrading treatment meted to him by some policemen by putting him in handcuffs is a violation of his fundamental human rights guaranteed by the Nigerian constitution and the ACHPR.

Mr. Oriola is also seeking a declaration that the interference of the New Life Community Bank and the Nigerian police in the cause of his quest for information at the bank is a violation of his fundamental human rights guaranteed under Section 39 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 and Article 9(1) of the ACHPR; an order awarding the sum of N10 million being general and exemplary damages against him jointly and severally for the illegal and unconstitutional arrest, detention and violation of his fundamental rights; an order directing that the respondents undertake to make a public apology to him in accordance with the provision of Section 35(6) of the Nigerian Constitution of 1999; and such further order the court may deem fit to make in the circumstances.
In a 27-paragraph affidavit in support of the motion filed on June 26, by Joyce Enaboifo, of Free Expression Associates, the legal arm of Media Rights Agenda, Mr. Oriola said that on May 14, 2001, he went to the bank to investigate a story that borders on fraud and occultism. He said on arrival at the bank, he was asked to wait for Mr. Olalekan Idowu, the alleged perpetrator of the crimes.

He alleged that while he was waiting four plain-clothes policemen came in and arrested him despite showing them his press identification cards. He was subsequently handcuffed, driven to area G Police station at Ogba and without being told his offence nor asked to make a statement he was detained in a dingy, stinking cell and subjected to degrading and inhuman treatment.

Mr. Oriola was detained the following day when he was released to General Investigation Department (GID), another arm of the police. The journalist alleged that Sergeant Amadi Dennis, the investigating police officer, refused his pleas that they should pass by his office to enable him inform his editor of his arrest on their way to the GID. At the GID, the journalist was interrogated by the second-in-command and was subsequently allowed to make a statement. He was then ordered detained at Area F police station.

On the afternoon of May 16, Sergeant Dennis, in company of another policeman and Mr. Idowu, the journalist, in handcuffs, was taken to his office in a Peugeot 504 car owned by the bank. Mr. Laye Amzat, editor of the magazine, and Mr. Kayode Molade, the company's lawyer, later went with the team to GID. After discussions with the second-in-command, Mr. Amzat was asked to write a statement, which he did.

On preliminary investigation, it was established that the journalist was arrested because he was investigating a story which the bank felt is "too sensitive". The officer-in-charge of the GID then ordered the journalist's release.

The suit has not been fixed for hearing.

ATTACKS ON THE PRESS IN JUNE 2001

Journalist Arrested, Detained

A journalist, Victor Oriola, with City People magazine, was on May 14, 2001, arrested by men of the Nigerian police force and subsequently detained. Mr. Oriola was arrested at the premise of New Life Community Bank in Omole Estate in Ikaja, Lagos, where he had gone to investigate a story that borders on fraud and occultism.

The journalist identified himself on arrival at the bank and asked to see one Mr. Olalekan Idowu, the alleged perpetrator of the crimes. He was told to wait for Mr. Idowu. While he was waiting four plain-clothes policemen came in and arrested him, despite showing his press identification cards. He was subsequently handcuffed, driven to area G Police station at Ogba and detained in a dingy, stinking cell where he was subjected to a lot of degrading and inhuman treatment. He was neither told what his offence was, asked to make a statement or allowed to contact his office or lawyer.

Mr. Oriola was detained till the following day when he was released to General Investigation Department (GID), another arm of the police. The journalist's plea with Sergeant Amadi Dennis, the investigating police officer, that they should pass by his office to enable him inform his editor of his arrest on their way to the GID, was turned down.

At the GID, the journalist was interrogated by the second-in-command and was subsequently allowed to make a statement. He was then ordered detained at Area F police station.

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later went with the team to GID. After some discussions with the second-in-command Mr. Amzat was asked to write a statement.

On preliminary investigation, it was established that the journalist was arrested because he was investigating a story which the bank felt is "too sensitive". The officer-in-charge of the GID then ordered the journalist's release.

**Accused Manhandles Photo-journalist**

A photo journalist with the Vanguard newspapers, Mr. Gbenga Olamikan, was on June 7, harassed at the hearing of the case brought against a Senior Advocate of Nigeria (SAN), Mr. Milton Paul Ohowovoriole, and three others over their alleged involvement in a N3.5 million gratification plot to influence the cause of justice.

Olamikan was harassed by one of the accused persons, Chief Adebayo Olafisoye, when he grabbed his camera and in the process damaged the flash accessory.

**Journalist Detained, Charged For Defamation**

The editor of a soft-sell weekly magazine, Glamour Trends, Mr. Nnamdi Onyeuma, was on June 8 arrested and detained by state security agents. Before his arrest, the Security Agents from the Presidency, Abuja, held the workers hostage for more than two hours. The journalist's arrest and detention was in connection with a story, captioned: Secrets Behind Obasanjo's Foreign Trips.

He was held in solitary confinement and later charged to court on June 19, on a count of alleged defamation of the president. The charge sheet stated that a letter of complaint was received in the Office of the Inspector General of Police from President Obasanjo on June 5 alleging that Onyema published a story headlined: Exposed: Secrets Behind Obasanjo's Foreign Trips, alleging that the president receives $1 million in allowance for each trip he undertook abroad and that the president has as at May 30, 2001 made $58 million (N6.5 billion) in allowance in two years “an allegation you cannot substantiate. You thereby committed an offence punishable under section 392 of Penal code law”.

At the hearing the prosecuting officer, Police Inspector John Ude, blocked the defence layer's application for bail and applied for a date for further mention to enable the police conclude their investigations.

Ruling in the application was adjourned till June 21.

**British Envoy Exposed Journalists To Danger**

The British Deputy High Commissioner in Nigeria, Mr. Roger Kershaw, on June 8, exposed some Nigerian journalists to being killed by bandits when he expelled them from his house at the wee hours of that day. The journalists were in his house on his invitation to monitor the results of the UK 2001 election.

The journalists, drawn from The Post Express, The Punch, Nigerian Tribune, Vanguard and The Week, were among many others who had graced the party that preceded the monitoring and had hoped that the monitoring would continue till daybreak. But during the course of the night, an aide of the embassy, Mr. John Sharp, informed the journalists that the monitoring would stop at 2 a.m. rather than 4 a.m. contained in the programme schedule inviting the journalists.

The journalists pleaded with their host to allow them stay the night at the centre, which incidentally is Kershaw's residence, but he declined, replying that he had expected them to have made adequate arrangement for their transport before honouring his invitation. He was not persuaded by the journalists' explanation that they had not envisaged a change of schedule and had hoped to stay there till the earlier scheduled time of 4 p.m. when it was safer to move around, before they left.
Shortly after they were dismissed, they settled down near the Lagoon, having roamed the adjacent streets for late-night buses without success. One of the journalists explained that soon after they got there two Landrover Jeeps drove by and some men in mobile police uniform "jumped out and ordered us out, with their fingers on the trigger of their guns, they threatened to shoot us should any of us make any funny move", one of them recounted.

**Journalist Barred From Government House**

A correspondent of Daily Times newspaper who is based in Dutse Jigawa State, Mohammed Abdul, was on June 20 turned back from the state house and told that he has been barred from going in there. The action followed a story published by his paper which the government considered offensive to it.

According to the journalist, he was at the government house on that day to crosscheck some facts for a story, when a security man at the gate trailed him to the press gallery and ordered him out of the premises.

The correspondent quoted the officer as saying: "My friend, we are sorry your security can no more be guaranteed. You have to leave the government house immediately.

"You can't be writing negative stories about the government and still be getting access here. You have to leave for your safety. That's the instruction".

Mr. Abdul said that the security officer was intent on applying force to get him out of the premises, but for the prompt intervention of the chief security officer to the governor house, who asked him nonetheless to "to leave for your safety".

The “offensive” story was published in the newspaper edition for June 18 with caption: Youths Attack councilors in Jigawa.

**Group Demands Ransom From Media Worker**

A faceless gang by the name, ADC Group, and which claimed to be operating from Port Harcourt, Rivers State on May 20, 2001, wrote a letter to The Punch newspaper circulation officer in Aba, Mr. Nurudeen Hassan, demanding $600 ransom or they would kill him.

The poorly written letter was received on May 29 by post and was captioned: "Mr. Nurudeen your life or your money only $600 dollars for nine men (sic) gang latest 8-6-2001".

The group wrote: "... if Mohammed fail (sic) to go to Mountain, Mountain will go to Mohammed" and threatened that if the media man does not consider his life to be worth up to the sum it was requesting, his life would be snuffed out after the deadline.

The group sent along a drawing of a spot along Onuoha Close in Port Harcourt, as the drop point for the ransom. They asked Hassan to "come to Port Harcourt, drop at 2, Artillery junction, before picking a commercial motorcycle to the No. 1 Onuoha Close" where he would drop the envelope near an electric pole there. The letter explained: "Put it (the money) in a brown envelope like this and drop it as shown on diagram and find your way off; don't stay".

The letter continued: "We never told you, but if you think that your Bakassi will save your life after 8-6-2001, then why not fail on 8-6-2001.

"Note that we have visited you in your house five times, at your office eight times and on your way eight times with our 190E Benz white. So you can run but you cannot hide. So is only your $600 dollars will save you after 8-6-2001".

They threatened further: "The question is your life or your money. Note that we will write you (sic) as we collect it."

**Press Secretary, Others Threaten Journalists, Families**

The Chief Press Secretary to the Anambra state Governor, Mr. Ody Chukwube, and some government officials on several occasion in June openly threatened to use the state security apparatus and Anambra Vigilance Services (AVS), also known as Bakassi Boys, an ethnic
militia having official backing, to deal with journalists, who they claimed report stories that were unfavourable to the state government and its officials.

The journalists, operating under the aegis of Correspondents Chapel of the Nigerian Union of journalists (NUJ), Anambra State, therefore, embarked on an indefinite boycott of activities of the state-government, after a meeting it at Awka, the state capital.

The journalists, in a statement, noted with regret the threat posed to journalists by security agents attached to many government offices and officials and the constant threats by some government officials to use the state security apparatus to deal with journalists. The statement observed that in view of recent assassinations and attacks on prominent citizens of the state perceived to be outspoken, it has no other option but to take the steps to let the public know about the plight of its members in Anambra State.

In the release signed by all the correspondents in the state, copies of which were sent to the state governor, Dr. Chinwoke Mbadinuju, Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), NUJ, the Commissioners of Police and state security services (SSS) they noted that several efforts through personal calls and letters to relevant government officials to seek assurances that the threats were not officially sanctioned have been rebuffed.

JOURNALISM / PRESS FREEDOM AWARDS

CJFE Seeks Nominations For International Press Freedom Awards

Canadian Journalists for Free Expression (CJFE) has asked for nominations for its annual International Press Freedom Awards. The award honours a journalist or media outlet that: reports on human rights issues or other issues, or from regions or countries, not often covered by other media; demonstrates a commitment to human rights by reporting without bias, sexism, racism, etc.

The award is also given to journalists who have not won a major press freedom award from another organisation; will benefit from international exposure due to the difficulty/threats caused by their work; has overcome enormous odds simply to produce the news; and has taken personal risks or suffered physical reprisals for working as a journalist. Colombian journalist Jineth Bedoya and Iranian journalist Akbar Ganji were last year's winners.

Organisers say nominations should include biographical information on the journalist/media outlet, samples of the nominee's work and contact details, and must reach CJFE by July 31. Two award winners will each receive a cash prize of C$2,000 (approximately US$1320) at a ceremony in Toronto on November 8.

For further information contact David Cozac, e-mail: cozac@cjfe.org

Entries Invited For Excellence In Environmental Reporting

The World Conservation Union is receiving nominations for the 2001 Reuters-IUCN Media Awards. The awards, which were established in 1998, aim at raising global awareness of environmental and sustainable development issues, by encouraging excellence in environmental reporting worldwide.

The award is open to print and Internet journalists from six regions - Latin America; North America; Europe; Asia; English-speaking Africa, including the Middle East; and French-speaking Africa. All submissions must have been published between August 30, 2000 and July 31, 2001.

One winner from each region will be invited to attend the Global Awards Ceremony taking place in Berlin, during the ECOmove Film Festival, in the first week of December 2001. The global winner will receive a prize of $US5,000.
Last year's winner, Alanna Mitchell of The Globe and Mail newspaper in Canada, wrote from the Vanishing Forests of Madagascar -- a comprehensive look at the growing number of extinct species on this island nation off the East Coast of Africa, often referred to as "the land of living fossils."

Candidates may submit one article only, accompanied by the entry form, to the nearest IUCN office. Entries written in a language other than English, French or Spanish must be accompanied by a translation. The deadline for entries is August 5, 2001.

For more information and application forms visit website: http://www.foundation.reuters.com and http://iucn.org/reuters, or contact: Jo Weir on e-mail: jo.weir@reuters.com

Entries For The 2002 Golden Pen Of Freedom Award Open

Nominations are being received for the 2002 Golden Pen of Freedom, the annual award made by WAN in recognition of the outstanding action, in writing or deed, of an individual, a group or an institution in the cause of press freedom.

The rules for the attribution of the Golden Pen state that freedom of the press should be "taken in the general sense of freedom of expression" but also stipulate that the action in favour of press freedom for which the award is made must have been undertaken for "the benefit of all and not for the sole benefit of a person who would later refuse this same freedom to the expression of opinions different from his own".

Deadline for applications is August 3, 2001 and applications supported by adequate details and documentation.

For details, visit the website: http://www.wan-press.org

US Institute Of Peace Fellowship

The United States Institute of Peace invites applications for the 2001-2002 Senior Fellowship competition in the Jennings Randolph Programme for International Peace. The programme aims to strengthen the nation's capacity to promote the peaceful resolution of international conflict. Fellowships are awarded annually to scholars and practitioners from a variety of professions, including college and university faculty, journalists, diplomats, writers, educators, military officers, international negotiators and lawyers.

The Institute funds projects related to preventive diplomacy, ethnic and regional conflicts, peacekeeping and peace operations, peace settlements, post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation, democratization and the rule of law, cross-cultural negotiations, U.S. foreign policy in the 21st century, and related topics. Fellows reside at the Institute for a period of up to ten months to conduct research on their projects, consult with staff, and contribute to the ongoing work of the Institute.

The fellowship award includes a stipend, an office with computer and voicemail, and a part-time research assistant. The competition is open to citizens of all nations. Women and members of minorities are especially encouraged to apply.

Contact Jennings Randolph Program, E-mail: jrprogram@usip.org
Deadline for application is September 15.

Nigerian Journalist Is Steve Biko 2001 Scholar

Olayinka Oyegbile, a journalist with Sunday Punch newspaper, has been named as the year 2001 Steve Biko Scholar by the Institute of the Advancement of Journalism, Johannesburg, South Africa.

By this award, Oyegbile is expected to be in South Africa for a period of one month with effect from July 29. While there, he is to attend a one week lecture in the Institute and in the
second week work for a South African newspaper and spend another week teaching students of journalism at any of the country's universities. He is also expected to visit Zimbabwe.

Oyegbile has worked with Nigeria Standard and The Guardian newspapers before joining The Punch in March this year.

“Democracy is impossible without freedom of the press. Complex controversies cannot be solved without freedom of the press, as questions must be aired”

German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, May 3, 2001