

Sokwanele - Enough is Enough - Zimbabwe PROMOTING NON-VIOLENT PRINCIPLES TO ACHIEVE DEMOCRACY

In early November the media reported on a potentially serious air accident: one of Zimbabwe's Chinese-made MA60 passenger planes crashed into a warthog on take-off. It took the emergency services five minutes to reach the plane but, in an act which exemplifies the suppression of freedom of expression and denial of news to Zimbabwean citizens, the rescue team were beaten to the scene by a contingent of secret police, "whose first act was to arrest two passengers for taking photographs". The two passengers were interrogated until 1am in the morning and were eventually released, but without their cameras.

If photographing a plane that crashed into a warthog is enough to attract arrest and intense interrogation, it is not difficult to understand why it was reported in November that journalists within Zimbabwe avoid investigative journalism. *The Zimbabwe Independent* assistant editor Dumisani Muleya was quoted as saying that Zimbabwean journalists should weigh the excitement of publishing a ground breaking story against the cost of exposing the murky activities of powerful individuals and organisations in society [...] because they did not know what would befall them if they wrote controversial but revealing stories.

Journalists who are aware of terrible atrocities and want to honour their mandate to the public only need to look to the experiences of *The Zimbabwe Independent* Editor, Vincent Kahiya and News Editor, Constantine Chimakure to get a sense of what might befall them. Both men were arrested for publishing a story that exposed the role of named CIO agents and police officers in the highly publicised abductions of human rights activists. It's worth noting that one of the abductees, Jestina Mukoko, has since won a case that acknowledges her human rights were violated and that she was viciously tortured. Despite this, Kahiya and Chimakure's ordeal drags on: in November their case was further remanded to February 2010 pending a constitutional challenge. Journalists have reason to be fearful, and this obviously impacts on the quality and type of information Zimbabwean citizens have access to via the media.

These tensions are not limited to the independent media: employees of the state-controlled media, much maligned for its partisan and biased reporting, have expressed dissatisfaction and concern at the amount of power wielded over their work. An Open Society Institute of South Africa report released in November revealed that journalists, editors, and board members were unhappy with the control that Robert Mugabe's spokesman, George Charamba, had over their affairs and that some were 'afraid of him':

One journalist who refused to be named said that Charamba was running the corporation like his personal fiefdom and this was demoralising staff as they felt that the core business of the broadcaster was no longer taking precedence [...] All this has made journalists believe that whatever they do they have to be answerable to the government or individuals in the ministry rather than the general public.

If it is recognised and understood that the role of the media is to provide impartial, objective and factual information to Zimbabweans citizens, then it is only fair to argue that the role of "pirate" radio stations has to be considered in the light of Zimbabwe's broader media environment. The examples cited above are drawn from reports in November alone, and these are enough to point to a fundamental problem within Zimbabwe. It is reasonable to suggest that external radio stations currently broadcast news into a country where the news circulated is limited or not trusted. One could argue that addressing the media issues within Zimbabwe - issues which impact on the personal security of journalists and the integrity of their broader profession - is of far greater significance to the fundamental rights of Zimbabwean citizens than calls for the dissolution of "pirate" radio stations.