

# REPORTING RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS

## CHARM MEDIA FELLOWSHIP: THE STORIES



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# REPORTING ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND MEDIA FREEDOMS IN AFRICA

“THIS FELLOWSHIP SUPPORTED THE SELECTED CANDIDATES TO REPORT ON KEY ISSUES THAT EXPLORE RESTRICTIONS ON CIVIC FREEDOMS, INCLUDING THE FREEDOMS OF EXPRESSION, ASSEMBLY AND ASSOCIATION, AS WELL AS HUMAN RIGHTS – WITH A SPECIFIC FOCUS ON WOMEN, LABOUR, LGBTQI+, ENVIRONMENTAL AND INDIGENOUS RIGHTS, AND THE RIGHTS OF JOURNALISTS AND ACTIVISTS.”

From September 2020 to February 2021, [CIVICUS](#) and [Wits Journalism](#) hosted a Media Fellowship initiative, as part of the Consortium to Promote Human Rights, Civic Freedoms and Media Development in Sub-Saharan Africa (CHARM-AFRICA) programming. Journalists, media professionals and producers were invited to apply for the 2020 CHARM Media Fellowship.

The fellowships are part of CHARM-Africa's ongoing work to protect and expand the space for civil society organisations and human rights defenders, as well as nurture and enhance the effectiveness of independent media and journalism in the region.

This fellowship supported the selected candidates to report on key issues that explore restrictions on civic freedoms, including the freedoms of expression, assembly and association, as well as human rights – with a specific focus on women, labour, LGBTQI+, environmental and Indigenous rights, and the rights of journalists and activists.

This publication is a collection of their published articles.

## ABOUT CHARM

The Consortium to Promote Human Rights, Civic Freedoms and Media Development (CHARM) in Sub-Saharan Africa is working collectively to nurture civil society, human rights defenders, independent media, and journalists in the region, by supporting actions to protect and expand freedoms to speak out, organise, and take action.

The six consortium partners (CIVICUS, Fojo Media, Wits Journalism, Civil Rights Defenders, Hub Afrique and DefendDefenders) from across the African continent, are collaborating to strengthen the effectiveness and build the resilience of journalists, media practitioners, social media producers, human rights defenders, and civil society activists and their organisations, to advance more democratic and free societies.

CHARM focuses its work on sub-Saharan African countries where civic freedoms are obstructed, but there is still space to speak out, organise and act, including pockets of resistance that can be supported to strengthen human rights and democratic freedoms. The project is funded by the Swedish International Development Agency.

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*Disclaimer: Articles have been reprinted from the original publication, as part of the fellowship agreement. The content responsibility and opinions expressed are wholly the authors.*

# IN CAMEROON, JOURNALISTS CAN'T BREATHE AS OBNOXIOUS LAWS STIFLE PRESS FREEDOM

JOURNALISTS IN SIERRA LEONE ARE NOW HEAVING SIGHS OF RELIEF AFTER THE repeal – following a gruelling 55-year struggle – of a law which served as a tool used by authorities to curtail press freedom.

On October 28, President Julius Maada Bio signed a decree revising the country's 1965 Public Order Act, which effectively removes measures that criminalised publications deemed libellous or seditious. The promulgation of the law followed earlier scrutiny by parliament.

Press freedom watchdog, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) described the move as “a welcome step towards improving conditions for press freedom in the country”.

Last year, Liberia moved in the same direction with President George Weah saying the reforms were adherence to international legal instruments to which the country is a signatory, and which demand that African countries abolish inflammatory media and other related laws. While Sierra Leone and Liberia have made the list of African countries where libel or slander is a civil offence, and not a criminal offence, journalists in Cameroon are still, in effect, caught up in a state-supported chokehold.

The country has seen a spike in arbitrary arrests and detentions, harassments and other forms of attacks on journalists for their work. Ahmed Abba, Radio France Internationale's Hausa-language correspondent, who was accused of terrorism, spent 29 months in detention before he was released in 2017 and forced to go on exile.







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ARREY COLLINS OJONG

Media scholars, journalism trainers and lawyers in the country also agree that current laws do not protect media practitioners.

Eugene Nforngwa, Media and Development Researcher at Yaounde-based African Knowledge and Policy Centre (AKPC), argues that journalists do not enjoy any form of protection under the current Cameroonian laws.

“The laws in Cameroon are written to check the media and check media excesses rather than to promote the media and freedom of expression. I think we should have a law that is intended to promote freedom of expression and freedom of the media and tries to prevent any efforts by other stakeholders from infringing on these freedoms. This is the only approach that can guarantee that journalists are able to do their work well,” says Nforngwa.

### PUNITIVE LEGISLATION

Arrey Collins Ojong of Arrey & Associates Law Office, a lawyer who offers pro bono defence to journalists and other vulnerable persons, says he is profoundly alarmed about the current state of the media and journalists in Cameroon because available legislation is solely punitive.

Apart from the constitution and a few ratified conventions, which are hardly ever applied, authorities have done little to nothing to put in place legislation that protects free speech, press freedom and digital rights for citizens and journalists, Arrey underscored.

“For instance, the Cameroonian Penal Code still convicts individuals found guilty of defamation under its section 305 with an imprisonment of from six days to six months and with fine of from FCFA 5,000 to FCFA 2 million,” Arrey explained, citing it as part of laws that hinder press freedom in Cameroon.

The human rights lawyer says he was motivated to defend pressmen when he saw how journalists were continuously being molested, beaten and detained without due course, simply because they were struggling to do their job.



*Rene Sadi, Cameroon Communication Minister.*

“I witnessed an extremely risky atmosphere for journalists [in Cameroon] who remained the sole stakeholders to report and inform the common man on the day-to-day issues that directly touch on the lives and future of the people,” said Arrey, who is also National Vice President of Cameroon Humanitarian Lawyers Without Borders (known in French as *Avocats Sans Frontières Humanitaires Du Cameroon*).

“I was motivated to believe even journalists admired so much were an endangered species and required protection, thereby protecting free speech and the only source of this protection would be the law,” Arrey explained.

### ACCESS DENIED

Another issue which further compounds the situation of the Cameroonian journalist is the lack of access to official sources of information. The country lacks a Freedom of Information Act which would compel official sources to disclose public information. This, according to Kini, forces journalists to resort to secondary sources which are sometimes not trustworthy.





*Cameroonian journalists demonstrate on May 3, 2010 in Yaounde. Police in Cameroon forcefully stopped several hundred journalists from staging a demonstration on world press freedom day to call attention to the recent death of an editor held in detention.*

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“You can write a faulty story because the sources that are there are not ready to talk to you and you rely on secondary sources. For instance, you cannot voluntarily go to the Presidency or the Prime Minister’s office to verify a particular issue of public interest,” Kini, who has practised journalism since the early 90s, explained.

He went on: “We have had situations in this country where when a journalist goes to a minister who is handling an issue that the public needs to know, the minister says he needs clearance from the Prime Minister, and then the Prime Minister’s Office will say it needs clearance from the presidency. So the story dies if you don’t rely on secondary sources”.

As if to confirm the situation, when this reporter approached a director in the Ministry of Communication for comments, he declined on grounds that he needed clearance from the Minister. At the time of publishing this report, the Communication Minister was yet to reply to an interview questionnaire submitted to him at his request.

The unwritten but scrupulously respected sealed lip policy of the government, according to the president of the English-speaking journalists’ guild, only fuels citizens’ mistrust in authorities as it allows misinformation to flourish.

Despite the fact that Cameroon has ratified both the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, both of which provide protections for journalists and their sources, the Yaounde regime seems to be in no hurry to give journalists the rights they deserve.

Arrey says it is regrettable that the applicability of national and international legal instruments that guarantee the rights and freedoms of journalists and other citizens “remains elusive”.

Respect for press freedom has been declining for years in Cameroon and deteriorated more in the wake of the Boko Haram insurgency and the armed conflict in the Anglophone regions, with journalists exposed to a high risk of threats and arbitrary arrest, according to independent monitors like CPJ and Reporters Without Borders (RSF).

## CONTROVERSIAL ANTI-TERRORISM LAW

In an apparent move to further muzzle the press, the government went on to enact a controversial law that directly influences the functioning of journalism and limits reporting especially on human rights violations in the country.

Leaning on the controversial 2014 anti-terrorism law, Yaounde can label journalists, opinion leaders, activists and government critics as “terrorists” and prosecute them in military courts.

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TO BE UNSAVOURY.

“Under the context of this particular law the government enjoys the exclusive monopoly to define the term terrorism,” says Arrey.

“Individuals and journalists even within the digital and physical space, risk jail terms of up to 20 years regarding an opinion or expression that the government deems might affect public order which they interpret as acts of terrorism which fall within the exclusive competence of military tribunals for adjudication purposes,” he adds.

Arrey explains that the ambiguous law also gives law enforcement officers the leverage to continue restricting press freedom by arresting, detaining, physically abusing and harassing journalists and anyone suspected of holding an opinion and information they are empowered by the said legislation to interpret as acts of terrorism.

“The suppression of freedom of expression in the country has even gone to an extent where security forces in the areas affected by ongoing crisis [like the Boko Haram in the Far North and armed separatist conflict in Anglophone regions] would order an individual in public to hand over his or her mobile phone for examination without any judicial order, thereby violating their privacy, yet no cause for alarm,” the founder of the Limbe-based Arrey & Associates Law Office said.

There have been cases where journalists who are covering riot protests in the country are treated in the same way as protesters and charged/tried under provisions of the said law and given punishments.

At least eight journalists including Tah Mai Javis of My Media Prime TV in Douala and his cameraman, Tebong Christian, Equinoxe TV cameraman, Rodrigue Ngassi, French language daily newspaper, La Nouvelle Expression, reporter, Lindovic Ndjio, and Radio France Internationale correspondent for Cameroon, Polycarpe Essomba, were arrested and detained in different police stations in the political capital Yaounde and economic capital Douala last September while covering an anti-Biya protests. The protest was called by opposition leader

and 2018 presidential candidate, Prof Maurice Kamto of the Cameroon Renaissance Movement (MRC). The journalists were accused of being supporters of the opposition leader, who has been a thorn in the flesh of the Biya regime since the 2018 presidential vote; which he claims he won but was robbed of his victory by incumbent Biya.

“Some of the provisions of the [anti-terrorism] law are very obnoxious. For instance, it suffices for you as a journalist to say Maurice Kamto [opposition leader] or other civil society leaders have a right to protest for you to be accused of supporting terrorism,” says Kini.

## NO WAY TO REPORT

Rights groups have indicted the military combatting Boko Haram in the north and in the crackdown on armed separatist fighters pushing for the secession and independence of the country’s two English-speaking regions.

Out of fear of being persecuted and/or prosecuted as well as the inability to gain access to official sources of information, journalists have underreported the security forces’ excesses and human rights violations in these areas.

“You see in more recent years that curfews and other restrictions on the general public do apply to journalists who are supposed to continue to be informing the population, even if it is about how those curfews and restrictions are successful,” Nforngwa explains, saying this makes the practice tougher.

In response to heavy criticisms for the use of obnoxious laws to muzzle the press, authorities have, in the past, touted the number of private media outlets in the country as proof that the press is free. According to media reports, the government has registered over 600 newspapers, most of which are community and regional papers and are published only occasionally.

Several television and radio stations too operate without a licence. Critics say this policy of delaying to issue definite licences and “administrative tolerance” also retains media





## THE GOVERNMENT ORGANISED WHAT IT CALLED THE NATIONAL COMMUNICATION FORUM IN YAOUNDE IN 2012 ON THE STAKES AND CHALLENGES OF THE MEDIA IN THE COUNTRY BUT ITS RESOLUTIONS HAVE SINCE REMAINED IN THE DRAWERS OF AUTHORITIES IN THE CAPITAL.

in the asphyxiating grip of government because they can be closed whenever their reporting is found to be unsavoury.

Kini and Viban argue, however, that press freedom cannot be measured only by the number of private media outlets.

"It is not because you have a thousand newspapers that you think the press is free. When we have these thousands of newspapers with doubtful publishers and editors, it therefore means that they can be easily manipulated," says Viban.

"It is important to have newspapers that are independent, credible and that can help the population to make informed choices. Having many media organs that are not helping to inform deepens mistrust in government," he adds.

To Kini, projecting the number of private media organs in the country as a yardstick for press freedom is a "very whimsical and misleading" narrative.

"Most of the so-called newspapers are not vibrant enterprises. It is a very chaotic situation because some of the so-called publishers you see are just little birds dancing in the middle of the road where the real drummers are in government. There are many newspapers that are created

by ministers," Kini said, adding "just wait for the period of campaigns and you see those newspapers coming out like dogs, to attack the adversaries and/or perceived and real enemies of their masters".

## INCOMMUNICADO DETENTIONS

Cameroon has a history of detaining journalists incommunicado, according to CPJ and RSF. The country's press freedom ranking worsened this year. The central African country is ranked 134th out of 180 countries – where one is the freest, according to RSF's 2020 World Press Freedom Index. The score is three places lower than its 2019 position of 131. The country has also featured among top on CPJ's list of jailers of journalists in Africa in the last half-decade years, and is rated "Not Free" by Freedom House.

For the current situation of journalists in the country to be better, Nforngwa says there is the need to reform the laws, and the starting point is to have a clear understanding of what the law is intended to do.

"I think we should have a law that is intended to promote freedom of expression and freedom of the media and tries to prevent any efforts by other stakeholders from infringing on this freedom. This is the only approach that can guarantee that journalists are able to do their work well," the researcher, who is also a journalism trainer, proposed.

However, previous attempts at engineering media law reforms in the country have not been successful.

The government organised what it called the National Communication Forum in Yaounde in 2012 on the stakes and challenges of the media in the country but its resolutions have since remained in the drawers of authorities in the capital.

The scientific committee of the conference organised by the country's Ministry of Communication said among other things in a document then that the forum had agreed that further reflection should be made, in order to get a substitute to imprisonment against common law offences perpetrated by media organs.

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Charlie Ndi Chia, President of the Cameroon Union of Journalists (CUJ) and member of the country's media regulator, the National Communication Council (NCC), who participated in the deliberations at the three-day conference, together with his secretary-general and NCC colleague, Christophe Bobiokono says the forum, like many others before it, might have been railroaded and taken advantage of by interests surreptitiously opposed to credible media in Cameroon.

"I personally think that completely deregulating the Cameroonian media crowded as it were, by overly gullible practitioners would be a wise step to adopt. Similarly, decriminalising offences committed by pressmen in the line of duty is a pretty dicey venture," says Ndi Chia.

The CUJ president said further that given the queer value system that drives the average Cameroonian media practitioner, it is safer to hang on to the status quo, acknowledging it is debatable, but that it would take very open minds to put the cards on the table and thrash the topic.

Bobiokono recalls that one of the resolutions of the forum was the creation of a national order of journalists which was going to do auto-regulation but the government has been reluctant to implement the resolutions.

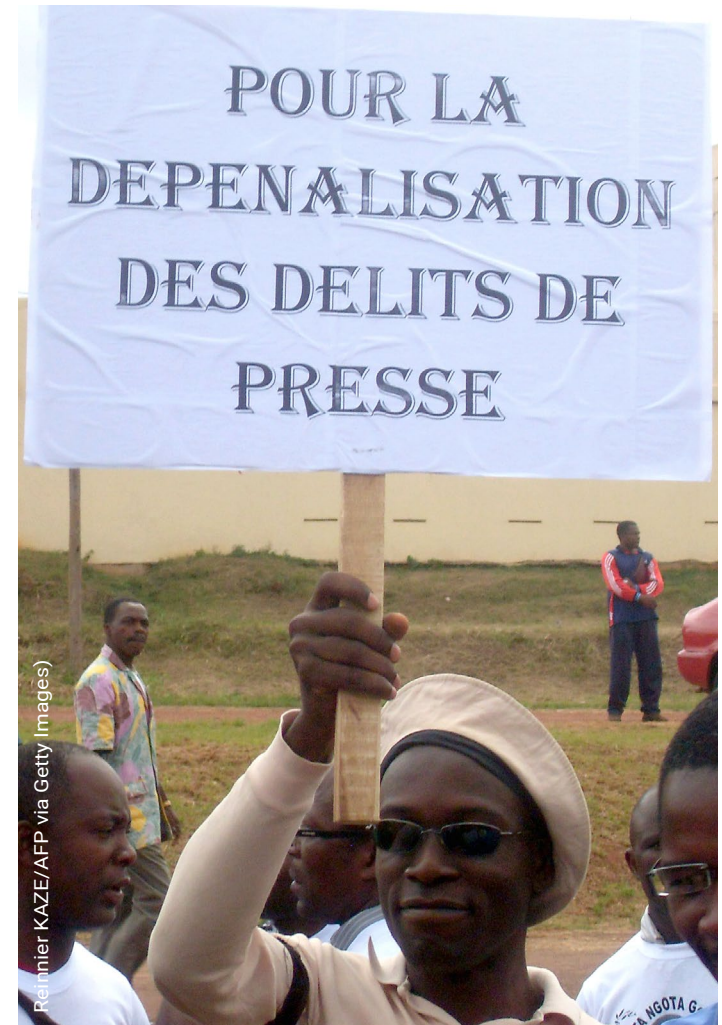
"The national order of journalists was going to act like a regulatory body like it is the case with medical doctors, lawyers, engineers, pharmacists,...You must belong to the order and abide by its rules and it is easy to control and also take decisions," he said.

### NO POLITICAL WILL

Both Ndi Chia and Bobiokono do not see any government will to have a free and independent media in the country.

"Those who run the government are certainly aware of the virtues of a free press. But for parochial interests, I am pretty sure that many of those in government would rather have manipulable lapdogs in newsrooms," Ndi Chia said.

While the repeal of the media law in Sierra Leone was



a fulfilment of a promise President Maada Bio made on the campaign trail prior to his 2018 election, politicians in Cameroon seem not to be concerned about the obnoxious laws in the country. None of the candidates at the 2018 presidential election – including a journalist turned opposition leader, Cabral Libii, during campaigns ahead of the vote, made mention of a repeal of law such as the 2014 anti-terrorism law or putting in place of a Freedom Of Information Act.



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President Paul Biya, who once declared he wants to be remembered as one who brought democracy and press freedom in Cameroon, won a seventh term during the October 7, 2018 vote, extending his grip on the country he has ruled with a tight fist since November 1982.

Pro-democracy advocates fear a free and independent media may be a far-fetched dream for Cameroon as long-serving rulers like Biya will always try to control the narrative and manipulate their own version of reality – a scheme that cannot be achieved with a free and independent media.

Jeffrey Smith, Founding Director of Vanguard Africa, a Washington DC-based pro-democracy advocacy group, says truth, facts and objectivity are a dictator's worst enemy while a free media and an informed citizenry represent their kryptonite.

"This is why leaders like Paul Biya, who have failed their citizens for generations, need to silence or quite literally kill journalists. It's because they expose him for the supreme failure that he is," Smith said.

"It is evident that Paul Biya, and the ruling regime in Cameroon, have no intention of ensuring an open media or political space in the country. Their very survival, in fact, depends on restricting these spaces. This should not, however, be seen as a sign of strength for the regime. It is quite the opposite. It is the ultimate sign of their growing weakness. And they should be rightly called out for it and also held accountable," the executive director of Vanguard Africa opined.

To Smith, for Cameroon to advance towards democracy – real democracy, there is a need for a change in leadership at the very top.

"Cameroonian citizens are clearly demanding change.

This has been evident with the growing protests and dissent we have seen throughout the country. It was also evident during the last elections, which were thoroughly rigged in Biya's favour," Smith said. He added that "Paul Biya has been in power longer than most Cameroonian citizens have been alive. He is a retrograde dictator who represents the worst of Africa's past, not the future that Cameroonians are yearning for and deserving of".

Biya, 87, first became president on November 6, 1982 when a large number of the country's nearly 27 million citizens were not yet born. He inherited a country of 9.2 million people from Ahmadou Ahidjo, the first president.

Cameroonian-born international governance, human rights, and democracy advocate, Dr Christopher Fomunyoh, agrees that Cameroon's state of democracy is worse now than it was three decades ago.

The Senior Associate and Regional Director for Central and West Africa at Washington DC-based National Democratic Institute (NDI) says there is much to fix for Cameroon to actually be referred to as democracy.

"Credible independent organisations such as Freedom House consider Cameroon does not meet the definition of democracy and so I couldn't rate it on that scale. The country's overall state of democracy scorings are worse now than they were three decades ago," Fomunyoh said.

"You can't be the oldest president in the world—soon turning 88—the longest-serving with 38 years at the helm and have that weigh negatively on a country facing multiple challenges," opined Fomunyoh who is author of the book, *The Cameroon of Tomorrow*—series of thoughts, messages, criticisms and proposals on the democratic evolution of the country.

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*This publication has been written as part of the CHARM 2020 Media Fellowship and CHARM-Africa's ongoing work to protect and expand the space for civil society organisations and human rights defenders, as well as nurture and enhance the effectiveness of independent media and journalism in the region. It is funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA)*

# CAMEROON'S BLOODY WAR: INADEQUATE HEALTHCARE LEAVES WOMEN AND CHILDREN ON THE EDGE

A SMILE ADORNS SONITA'S FACE AS SHE WATCHES HER TWO-YEAR-OLD SON PLAY with his peers. Sonita's mind races back to when, animated by joy, she hoped the experience of bringing forth her first and only son would be easy. But she says that hope didn't last long as giving birth to him became one of the most exacting moments of her 27 years on earth.

Sonita got pregnant when she lived in Ekona, a town in the restive English-speaking South-west region of Cameroon.

"First of all, I could not properly follow up antenatal care because of gunshots here and there," Sonita says.

While she thought the conflict situation would get better, insecurity instead worsened, forcing her and other Ekona residents including Sonita's lover and author of her pregnancy to run for their lives. After spending months seeking safety in the jungle, Sonita says she had a fierce bout with malaria. And it was not going to be her last fight for her life.

"That is how labour started," she says. "I came to town with the younger sister of the man who impregnated me. After three days in labour, I had to be operated upon," she explains. The surgery, however, did not end Sonita's sorry story.

"They did a wrong surgery... After three days, pus started coming out of the spot where they incised me and it was smelling. I was taken to the theatre again, but the pus did not stop flowing out. When I was taken to the theatre for the third time, the doctor said my case was above him," Sonita tells *NewsWatch*.





*Minawao, Cameroon – Women wait at the health centre in Minawao refugee camp. Most came to have their children checked for malnutrition.*

Sonita was transferred to the Buea Regional Hospital, some 14km south of Ekona, by the Ayah Foundation, a humanitarian organisation which has been providing lifesaving healthcare to victims of Cameroon's drawn-out conflict. The socio-political tensions have exposed women and children to health problems, and then denied them the basic right to healthcare.

Ayah Ayah Abine, Founder and President of Ayah Foundation, says when tests were conducted on Sonita at the hospital, it was diagnosed that she was between life and death as her womb had been infected, but medics saved her life.

"By the grace of God, Sonita is one of the most beautiful success stories we have had since we started healthcare

assistance to victims of the crisis," Abine says.

He regrets that not all of the cases his foundation has handled have been successful like Sonita's.

"We have those cases in hundreds," Abine says. "There was another lady we took from the bush to the regional hospital. She underwent surgery and everything was just fine. But subsequently, she suddenly died. That is the most painful loss we have had since we started this," Abine regrets.

After overcoming such an unforgettable experience, Sonita named her son Victory, "because going through what I went through and coming out alive together with the child shows God has given us victory." Since she left the hospital, Sonita and her son have been living in Souza, a precinct near the country's economic capital Douala.

"I had no strength to take care of my child following repeated surgeries. His father too ran into the forest for safety. So, my auntie who is in Souza was helping me to take care of the child. I have been living with her since then...I cannot go back to Ekona because everybody is on the run," Sonita says.

## INTRACTABLE BLOODY CONFLICT

The conflict which started in 2016 as peaceful demonstrations by lawyers and teachers in the Anglophone regions over perceived and real marginalisation by the Francophone-dominated government has killed over 3,000 civilians, soldiers and separatist fighters, according to early 2020 estimates by the United Nations.

The escalating violence and increasingly deteriorating security situation arising from the armed conflict, aggravated by restrictions on movement, have prevented many people, especially women and children, from accessing healthcare. It has been hindering this vulnerable set of people from reaching healthcare facilities and disrupting vital supply chains of essential drugs and equipment. Medical staff too have been compelled to flee, forcing health facilities to shut down.

“THE GOVERNMENT  
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The government and English-speaking separatists who want to create a separate nation made up of the Northwest and Southwest regions have been trading accusations over the burning of several healthcare facilities in the regions. However, rights groups have largely indicted the government for the burnings.

The government blamed the burning of the Kumba District hospital in the Southwest region on February 11, 2019, on armed separatists, but separatists on their part, accused the military of perpetrating the inferno that left four people dead.

Some 255 (34%) out of 7,421 health facilities in the Anglophone regions remain non-functional or only partially functional, according to the United Nations Children's Fund, UNICEF. Immunisation in general and measles prevention have been significantly disrupted as a result of the conflict and the risk of outbreaks increased.

Existing health centres, authorities say, are increasingly under pressure due to the influx of the injured and severe trauma patients. The healthcare facilities are overwhelmed due to inadequate staff – majority of whom have flown to safer regions.

### HEALTHCARE ACCESS DENIED

Again, not all emergency cases in the regions can reach the functional health facilities which are mainly in the urban areas. Armed separatists intermittently block roads and have since declared and enforced all Mondays and some national and international days commemorated in the country as “ghost town” days with no movement.

Doctors Without Borders (MSF) noted on its website that a majority of the 2,500 patients it referred by ambulance between June 2018 and March 2019 were women suffering from obstetric complications, “but also include children under 15 and people suffering injuries and wounds inflicted by violence”.

In the restive areas, women, alongside their children, have fled into forests or bushes where they live in extremely poor

conditions in makeshift shelters. Others have been forced to relocate to other cities, where they live on the streets, or with host families in sometimes overcrowded and unsanitary settings.

“The women live in the bushes without even hygienic pads,” Abine says, adding that: “They squeeze tree leaves and insert in their genitals during menstruation. The diseases that follow this method are so terrible for them”.

### UNTOLD TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE

In addition, many people have faced traumatic experiences like conscription into armed groups, kidnappings for ransom or for use in rebel camps as cooks, exploitation and sexual abuse, gender-based violence, restriction on freedom of movements and family separation. Women have been the most affected.

The violence has exacerbated psycho-social distress, according to Dr Belinga Mireille Ndjé Ndjé, Clinical Psychologist and Senior Lecturer at the University of Yaounde I.

“It is well known that these scourges compromise the future of children. If they do not benefit from serious psychological care, we may find ourselves later with deviant adults,” Dr Ndjé says.

UNICEF says over 5,000 children have been registered as separated or unaccompanied since 2018. As schools and entire villages are being burnt, civil society activists say girls who cannot attend school are prone to early pregnancies, difficult deliveries and the risk of obstetric fistula and need care.

“People who have suffered the atrocities of the crisis, whether physically or psychologically, need to be taken care of. Many will have problems but will not manifest them right away. Even resilient people deserve support,” Dr Ndjé adds.

She advised that stakeholders should create psychological listening cells in areas in crisis and even in other regions, “especially those hosting the displaced.”





“HOPES FOR PEACE  
WERE AGAIN REKINDLED  
WHEN GOVERNMENT  
REPRESENTATIVES  
AND SOME FRONTLINE  
LEADERS OF THE ARMED  
SEPARATISTS FROM THE  
ANGLOPHONE REGIONS,  
WHO ARE IN PRISON,  
MET IN THE CAPITAL  
LAST JULY. BUT THE  
PRE-TALKS ENDED IN  
FUTILITY.”

The Ministry of Women’s Empowerment and the Family (MINPROFF) in Yaounde was yet to respond to whether such centres have been established or are being envisaged.

### NO END IN SIGHT

Protracted violence in the English-speaking regions has uprooted more than half a million people from their homes, while over 70,000 others have fled to neighbouring Nigeria, according to the International Crisis Group and Human Rights Watch.

Peace talks dubbed Major National Dialogue, organised in late 2019 in Yaounde, granted a ‘Special Status’ to the English-speaking regions but there are no indications this move will work in favour of an end to hostilities. Since then, the bloodshed has continued unabated.

Hopes for peace were again rekindled when government representatives and some frontline leaders of the armed

separatists from the Anglophone regions, who are in prison, met in the capital last July. But the pre-talks ended in futility.

Some Cameroonians welcomed the New Year 2021 with wishes that the crisis should end, but a grisly start to 2021 could be signalling the conflict’s bloodiest year yet. Violence has surged in the two English-speaking regions, leading to the killing of at least 25 people, including women and children, in the first ten days of the year.

In one of the incidents on Sunday January 10, the army raided the village of Mautu in Muyuka sub division of the Southwest region, killing at least 10 civilians, amongst them women and children. The army, however, denied involvement in the killings, saying troops were on a preventive raid on the position of terrorist groups who opened fire at the sight of military vehicles.

During the exchange, “some terrorists were neutralised,” military spokesperson, Colonel Cyrille Serge Atonfack Guemo, said in a statement.

The UN, UK, US and Canada amongst others condemned the rise in violence and killings since the beginning of the year. The US embassy in Yaounde said “the innocent lives cut short were robbed of the opportunity to serve their families and communities,” while the British High Commission in Yaounde said there “must be an urgent and impartial investigation, and the perpetrators must be brought to justice”.

Colonel Atonfack said “a scrupulous investigation has been ordered to uncover every detail” of Sunday January 10 killings.

### EXPOSED TO HARDSHIP, THEN IGNORED

Good health, which is a prerequisite for every human to enjoy other rights such as the right to work and dignity, is presented in the constitution of Cameroon as an “inalienable right,” yet experts say the government seems not to be taking concrete measures in that light to the thousands of most vulnerable women and children affected by the crisis.

Ndansi Elvis, an expert in Health Economic Policy and Management, says the government has demonstrated a

“NDANSI, WHO IS AN OBAMA SCHOLAR AT THE COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY IN NEW YORK, SAYS THE GOVERNMENT IS GOOD AT IDENTIFYING PROBLEMS AND DRAWING UP FANCY PROGRAMMES TO RESOLVE THEM BUT VERY POOR AND UNABLE TO IMPLEMENT ANY OF THEM.”

“high level of neglect” towards the health of the people of the Anglophone regions.

A 2018 government emergency response plan identified healthcare as one of the key priorities for the regions, but the government has not made good on its promises. The plan acknowledges that health needs are high as the displaced population – especially children under five, and pregnant or lactating women – had no access to basic health services.

But Yaounde authorities have been distributing foodstuff, mattresses and blankets to some affected persons with no medical supplies and little or no efforts to ensure health services remain functional and health workers stay safe.

Ndansi, who is an Obama Scholar at the Columbia University in New York, says the government is good at identifying problems and drawing up fancy programmes to resolve them but very poor and unable to implement any of them.

“Why should you give homeless people mattresses?” Ndansi rhetorically questions. He suggests that the first thing will be to provide them with shelter since most of their homes have been burnt down.

“For how long will the food sustain them,” he questions further, saying: “I think the approach government is using is far from being realistic and sustainable”.

The government’s near neglect of the healthcare of citizens affected by the armed conflict in the two English-speaking regions of the country, Ndansi says, is in contrast to goal

number three of the seventeen UN-adopted Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which the country adheres to and claims to be implementing.

“None of the Sustainable Development Goals can be achieved where there is an armed conflict. The government of Cameroon has failed to resolve the arm conflict in the Anglophone regions for over four years today. That is a clear demonstration that the government does not bother about these sustainable goals such as access to healthcare, zero poverty, education for all, and even environmental protection,” he said.

Some Cameroonians think the responsibility to end the conflict in the two regions – which has further compounded pre-existing vulnerabilities for the mostly agrarian population of the regions – lies in the hands of the sovereign government that has the responsibility to protect citizens, provide healthcare and call for a negotiated settlement.

Should the government continue to neglect the health needs of the population in the two regions, Ndansi says, it could breed fresh unrest like it has been the case recently with haemodialysis patients in Bamenda who protested against the breakdown in machines. The neglect, he says, could also reverse the gains the country has made in terms of immunisation. Also, a sickly population will undermine Cameroon’s prospects of becoming an upper-middle income economy by 2035.

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*This publication has been written as part of the CHARM 2020 Media Fellowship and CHARM-Africa’s ongoing work to protect and expand the space for civil society organisations and human rights defenders, as well as nurture and enhance the effectiveness of independent media and journalism in the region.*



# CAMEROON'S BLOODY WAR: INADEQUATE HEALTHCARE LEAVES WOMEN AND CHILDREN ON THE EDGE

EBANG PATRICE\*, AN INDIGENOUS BAGYELI FOREST COMMUNITY MEMBER, SITS under A palm tree next to his dilapidated thatched house. With a broom in his left hand, he savours some fruits which he says his children harvested from a lush bushland, just a few meters away. Ebang uses the broom from time to time to chase away uninvited guests – notably flies and bees which attempt to join him in his feast.

The old man says, without any scientific backing though, that besides being a source of essential nutrients, the fruits are medicinal. But it may just be the last time the Bagyeli patriarch is enjoying such fruits as the source, a pristine forest where Indigenous communities live, is being deforested for a palm oil production and processing agro-industrial complex.

Ebang's community falls within a 60,000-hectare concession the Cameroon government has leased to a little-known domestic company, Cameroun Vert SARL (CAMVERT). The concession spans the Campo and Nyete subdivisions in the Ocean division of President Paul Biya's native south region of the country.

Communities and local NGOs are sounding alarm bells that the project is dangerous to the livelihood of some 28 surrounding Indigenous communities – mainly hunters and non-timber forest products gatherers.

Besides being a key source of livelihood, the forest, which borders the iconic Campo Ma'an National Park, is also a cultural asset and spiritual sanctuary for the Mvae, Iyassa and Bagyeli Indigenous people. But these communities will lose access to the land and its livelihood as the concession goes into agricultural production.

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EBANG PATRICE



*The Bagyeli community of Moungue Village. Photo Madeleine Ngeunga-FPP.*

“The forest is very important to us,” Ebang says. “Our lives depend on that forest because it is a source of medicine. It is our pharmacy. We treat our sick with either tree leaves, tree barks or roots which we get from the forest,” he explains, admitting that with the land now leased to the investor, they will lose this important source of medicine.

Ebang, who is in his early sixties, said the forest is also their spiritual sanctuary. “Our forefathers are buried inside and we go there and perform some traditional rites when that is necessary. Now with the coming of the big company, we will not perform this ritual again and this is dangerous to our livelihood as our ancestors can curse us,” he bemoaned.

### CULTURE OF POLITICKING ON FORESTS

Like the Bagyelis, the Indigenous Banen people in the Littoral region of the country were on the verge of losing their forest and spiritual sanctuary when the government announced that it was opening up the Ebo forest for logging.

However, following stiff resistance from the Indigenous community and rights activists, the government went back on its vomit, suspending the logging projects.

The Ebo Forest is one of the last intact forests in central Africa and home to many endemic species as well as the critically endangered lowland gorillas and chimpanzees. Besides these fauna species, those opposed to the project cited a loss of community rights, livelihoods and unique forests.

Local non-governmental organisations and communities had actively opposed the logging project which saw the conversion of a forest area of 68,385 hectares – the size of 96,000 football fields – into a Forest Management Unit (FMU) for logging.

Last August 2020, the office of the Prime Minister and Head of Government in a statement said it had been instructed by President Paul Biya to reverse the earlier decree allowing logging in the forest.

Environmentalists and the Indigenous Banen people





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described the sudden government U-turn as a major victory. But while the Banen community and activists are singing victory songs, the Bagyelis of Campo and Nyete are gnashing their teeth in agony following the implantation of the CAMVERT project.

The Cameroon Ministry of Forestry and Wildlife announced that it will reclassify 2,500 hectares of the the CAMVERT concession but activists have faulted the government decision which they say grossly violates the rights of Indegenous Bagyelis.

#### RIGGED PROCEDURES

About 40 local civil society organisations (CSOs), including Green Development Advocates (GDA) challenged the reclassification of the important forest area in a statement.

Such an announcement was supposed to have been preceded by public consultations where a social and environmental impact assessment study is presented, views or objections of communities involved, before a decree by the Prime Minister is signed opening up the area, according to Aristide Chacgom, an environmental campaigner and coordinator of GDA.

Legally, even if the company had conducted consultations and not taken into account views of communities, the decree to begin operation would have still been a prerogative of the country's President, given the size of the concession.

“The declassification and procedure asking CAMVERT to begin exploiting 2,500 hectares of the concession were marred by several illegalities,” Chacgom said.

The declassification process, Chacgom explained, also ignored two preconditions for changing the legal status of the forest which also violated the rights of local people enshrined in the Cameroonian law.

“Two conditions are supposed to be fulfilled for declassification; an initial study which says if the land can be declassified and then a declaration of public utility which is done by the Ministry of State Property and Land Tenure. None of these were done and the environmental impact study came after declassification by the Prime Minister contrary to what the law says,” Chacgom detailed the procedures which he said were rigged.

#### GOOD EXAMPLE SUCCEEDED BY SERIOUS ASSAULT

Dutch logging firm, Wijma, ran the concession as a Forest Management Unit between 2005 and 2016 and according to independent environmental campaigning organisation, Greenpeace Africa, it was a good example of a well-managed logging concession, earning a Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification as “sustainable”.

The firm's careful logging left many trees within the concession standing and serving “an important carbon

“THE PROMOTER OF CAMVERT THEN PRESENTED THE PROJECT TO THE MINISTER OF AGRICULTURE WHO CONTACTED THE PRIME MINISTER’S OFFICE TO DECLASSIFY THE ‘DEGRADED FOREST MANAGEMENT UNIT’. WHEN THE PM’S OFFICE CONTACTED THE MINISTRY OF FORESTRY, THE LATTER CONFIRMED THE RESULT OF THE STUDY.”

MAMUDOU BOBBO

sink,” the CSOs said in their statement. It also serves as a strategic wildlife migration corridor.

Yet a senior official of CAMVERT, Mamudou Bobbo, said the zone had been degraded by over 70 per cent and could no longer be exploited as a Forest Management Unit and the promoter of the project carried out studies which results showed the area is fertile for palm oil production.

“The promoter of CAMVERT then presented the project to the Minister of Agriculture who contacted the Prime Minister’s Office to declassify the ‘degraded Forest Management Unit’. When the PM’s office contacted the Ministry of Forestry, the latter confirmed the result of the study,” Bobbo who is CAMVERT Project Manager told local television channel, Equinoxe TV.

“No human activity or village exists within a Forest Management Unit...It is just incomprehension, people thought the promoter of the CAMVERT project was coming to grab their land but that is not the case,” Bobo explained.

But Greenpeace Africa maintained the project, on a land surface about seven times the size of Dakar, is land grab and agribusiness’ “most serious assault on indigenous rights in the region in years.”

“The CAMVERT project is a case of illegality and abuse of Indigenous rights that will aggravate the climate and biodiversity crises if it goes ahead,” said Greenpeace Africa Cameroon Campaign Manager, Ranèce Ndjéudja.

“It exposes once again the perilous myth of sustainable forest management, as well as the growing problem of conversion of forests – including logging concessions certified ‘sustainable’ by the Forest Stewardship Council – into agribusiness plantations in Cameroon,” he added in a statement on the website of the rights group.

### POWER, POLITICS, BUSINESS

CAMVERT which is owned by Aboubakar al Fatih began initial planting in September last year. Fatih is a billionaire



*Samuel Nguiffo says conflicts emanating from land lease for agribusiness in the country are a result of legislation that does not recognise customary ownership.*



*Aristide Chacgom says CAMVERT project marred by several illegalities.*





“EXPERTS SAY THE HIGH DEMAND FOR LAND FOR PALM OIL IS A RESULT OF GROWING NEED FOR OIL; FOR COSMETICS, FOOD, AND TO COOK SOME INDUSTRIAL PRODUCTS.”

forest operator who is close to President Paul Biya's ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) party.

According to Greenpeace Africa, another company controlled by Fatih appears to have been associated with recently suspended plans to log the Ebo Forest.

The CAMVERT project highlights a growing trend of demand for land for palm oil production in the country.

Over ten years ago, SG Sustainable Oils Cameroon (SGSOC), a local subsidiary of New York-based agri-corporation, Herakles Farms, struggled to clear 70,000 hectares of rainforest for an oil palm plantation in the English-speaking southwest region of the country claiming a “vast majority of the concession is secondary and degraded forest.” A massive opposition by forest-dependent communities around the project area and

national and international NGOs resulted in the company abandoning the claim.

The Oakland Institute, an independent policy think tank, bringing fresh ideas and bold action to the most pressing social, economic, and environmental issues, had said the SGSOC “land grab” involved backroom bullying by the US government.

A similar project by Palm Resources Cameroon SA, a subsidiary of Singaporean company Biopalm Energy Limited in the Bipindi and Lokounje subdivisions still in the Ocean division is also being contested by Indigenous Bagyeli communities of Bella, Nkollo, Gwap and Moungue.

On behalf of the Indigenous communities, two non-governmental organisations, Forest Peoples Programme (FPP) and Association Okani, have taken legal action seeking to cancel a 2018 presidential decree leasing the 18,000 hectare concession to Biopalm.

The organisations have also referred the matter to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, according to documents *NewsWatch* has seen.

Experts say the high demand for land for palm oil is a result of growing need for oil; for cosmetics, food, and to cook some industrial products. Demand for oil in the country stood at more than one million tons, while local supply was just 300,000 tons per annum as of 2018, according to Cameroon Vegetable Oil Refiners' Association (ASROC).

### PALM OIL DEMAND NOT JUSTIFICATION

However, conservationists say destroying biodiversity-rich forest and habitats of Indigenous communities for monoculture is creating more problems than seeking solutions to the country's palm oil deficit.

“Monoculture of palm oil cannot equate very rich biodiversity of natural forest. In economic terms, you will see what you earn but will not see what you lose in terms of economic value of the forest including environmental services that the forest provides to communities around, to

“ACCORDING TO THE CED SECRETARY GENERAL, THERE IS SOME GLIMMER OF HOPE THAT LAND TENURE LAW CURRENTLY BEING REVISED WILL TAKE INTO CONSIDERATION CUSTOMARY OWNERSHIP AND THIS WILL GREATLY REDUCE CONFLICTS AMONG INDIGENOUS PEOPLE, INVESTORS AND THE STATE.”

the country and to humanity,” said Samuel Nguiffo, Secretary General of the Yaounde-based Centre for Environment and Development (CED).

“We are only seeing the short-term benefits and are oblivious of the long term loses in the process of making decisions. We think palm oil will generate a lot of jobs, but it is not always the truth. You will have jobs, for sure, very poorly paid jobs but if you look at the long term, what you lose in terms of potential of job creation, job generation in the forest, it is very high,” Nguiffo added.

To the CED Secretary General, conflicts emanating from land lease for agribusiness in the country are a result of legislation that does not recognise customary ownership.

While government leases out land which it considers state property, communities on their part believe they have ownership of the land and that to start any activity on it, an investor needs their authorisation.

“This clearly means there is a problem with our legislation. There is a problem with especially the issue of land ownership in our legislation. We cannot continue like that with our legislation else we will be having more and more conflicts because with time, land becomes more and more scarce and people become more and more ready to fight to keep it,” Nguiffo said.

### OBSOLETE LEGISLATION

For these conflicts to be reduced, Nguiffo says the very old 1974 land tenure law of the country has to be revised and customary ownership recognised.

“Communities will never have the capacity to negotiate with multinational companies. So the state will have to organise the law in such a way that each deal at the local level should be approved by the government and signed by three parties; the community, the investor and the state,” said CED.

With this system, he said, the government will be getting money from taxation which according to him will fetch the government more money than what it obtains now.

“Today government gives one hectare of land for one dollar, but it can generate more than one dollar on a hectare if taxes are a proportion of wealth generated. The government will be able to make more than 10 dollars a year on a hectare and the three parties will be happy,” Nguiffo explained further.

CED and other organisations have been working with key stakeholders across the country to improve customary and formal rights to land and natural resources through a project known as LandCam. The organisations organised a land tenure week in Yaounde last January with five members of government in attendance.

According to the CED Secretary General, there is some glimmer of hope that land tenure law currently being revised will take into consideration customary ownership and this will greatly reduce conflicts among Indigenous people, investors and the state.

“One of the things that clearly came out (of the land tenure week) was the need to recognise the rights of all the actors. It was a very clear message that there will be no land security for any of the actors if the right of only one of the actors is not recognised and protected,” Nguiffo said as one of the key messages to the government at the Yaounde gathering.

Until the obsolete land tenure law in Cameroon is properly revised, the fate of thousands Indigenous people like Ebang will continue to be on the balance.

**\*Ebang Patrice is not a real name. The source's name was changed for security reasons.**

*This publication has been written as part of the CHARM 2020 Media Fellowship and CHARM-Africa's ongoing work to protect and expand the space for civil society organisations and human rights defenders, as well as nurture and enhance the effectiveness of independent media and journalism in the region.*



# GAY CHRISTIANS KEEP THE FAITH DESPITE PREJUDICE FROM PULPIT AND PEWS

FROM YOUNG, BAKANG NDABA LOVED WORSHIP AND BEING ACTIVELY INVOLVED IN his church. At school, he was a passionate member of member of Scripture Union, a global youth bible study organisation.

Today, it is a sore point for the 21-year-old that while he still values his Christian faith, he does not feel the same for the Christian community that he says discriminated against him throughout his life, simply because of his sexual orientation.

Ndaba identifies as gay and says he has been mistreated by Christians both at church and at home.

"I didn't see or feel anything wrong with myself," Ndaba explained.

He is among many gay Christians who find it difficult to practice their faith because of the prejudice of fellow worshippers.

It has been more than two and a half years since the Botswana High Court issued a historic ruling decriminalised homosexuality. But for many LGBTI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex) people, like Ndaba, the struggle against discrimination continues. And the memories of their traumatic experiences – many being treated as people possessed with demons – still haunt them.

Growing up, Ndaba knew he was different from other boys – he was more feminine and liked playing with girls. His first encounter with homophobia, he said, came when he was around five years old. He recalls how his aunt reacted with disgust to a gay person on a television show the family was watching.

"She said that if God ever gives her a gay child, she would kill him," Ndaba recalled. Even though he was little, his aunt's words hurt him.



Jakayla Toney/Unsplash



“HIS FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH HOMOPHOBIA, HE SAID, CAME WAS WHEN HE WAS AROUND FIVE YEARS OLD. HE RECALLS HOW HIS AUNT REACTED WITH DISGUST TO A GAY PERSON ON A TELEVISION SHOW THE FAMILY WAS WATCHING.”

Ndaba recalls a visiting pastor who came to preach to pupils at his school in 2015. “He took me aside and said he wanted to pray for me because I had an evil spirit that must be cast out,” he says. He also adds that a high school official once accused him of having a legion of demons and that of being a bad influence on other students, by being gay.

Still determined to his practicing his faith, Ndaba now attends Catholic mass as he has found that Catholic churches to be less homophobic than the Pentecostal ones.

Transgender people in Botswana are subjected to similar prejudice. Transgender refers to a person whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth.

Onneile Sam, a transgender man, has an aunt who used to insult him, saying she was going to look for a boyfriend for him and questioned why he dressed like boys and used men’s body lotion. “Sometimes she would mock me in a different language saying I’m a Satanist,” said 26-year-old Sam, from Marobela. The term trans-man is used as a short form for either identity (transsexual man and transgender

man). This commonly refers to someone whose sex was identified as female at birth but identifies as male.

Sam said he left his church because he was being forced to attend services in skirts – something he never liked.

While international human rights organisations and others hailed the court judgement that legalised same sex relationships as a step in the right direction, not everyone is happy with it. The government has appealed the ruling and a decision is still expected. Biggie Butale, Botswana Patriotic Front (BPF) president and a man of the cloth, warned that if government is not careful, the country is going to end up like Sodom and Gomorrah.

Sodom and Gomorrah were notoriously sinful cities in the Bible that were destroyed by God for its people’s wickedness, including homosexuality.

“It’s a terrible decision. We have opened a pandora box,” Butale said. The ruling, he fears, will open the door to other undesirable things such as gay marriages, gays adopting children and gay parades. “Soon, we are going to see prostitutes say they also want to be legalised,” he said.

Religious groups like Scripture Union (SU) Botswana have also criticised the court decision, as being un-Christian.

While such groups challenge the move, others like the Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals of Botswana (LEGABIBO) and Rainbow Identity fight to support it along with those, like Ndaba and Sam, who are attacked for their sexual orientation.

For Ndaba, it came as a glimmer of hope when he finally got to be invited to a LEGABIBO meeting in 2015. “It was the first time I saw gays and lesbians together under one roof,” he said. Sam also got to meet other transgender persons upon attending Rainbow Identity events.

“They made a difference in my life. I got acquainted to them and managed to open up to facilitators. I felt I wasn’t alone anymore,” he said.

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# ENGEN EXPLOSION LATEST IN LINE OF GRIEVANCES

ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISTS AND RESIDENTS IN SOUTH DURBAN have long been asking for stricter environmental policies to clear the polluted air they breathe every day.

The explosion at the Engen refinery in Durban South two weeks ago is merely the latest in a string of events a resident such as Joanne Groom, born in the area and now an environmental activist, spends her time fighting against while also advocating for the rights of residents.

The Engen refinery is in the middle of the township of Wentworth and has been a site of controversy for decades because of the harm it causes to the health of residents. Former minister of environmental affairs Valli Moosa recognised the area as a pollution hotspot as early as November 2000.

Groom, a community worker and communications officer at the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance (SDCEA), says the harmful effects of pollution on human health and the environment are worsened by high rates of unemployment and poverty.

“South Durban residents are surrounded by gas-emitting industries and people’s homes are dangerously located within a few kilometres [of] them. While some people find work from the industries, a lot more are suffering with respiratory illnesses that many have to live with until death. Unemployment also worsens the health status of residents because they cannot afford proper medical services.”

About 200 000 people live in the South Durban Basin, which is made up of Wentworth, a working-class area that was designated for people classified as coloured by the apartheid government; Merebank, which was an Indian township under apartheid; and the Bluff, formerly a working-class white suburb.

Large petroleum companies like Engen are allowed to pollute freely in South Durban, says Groom.



*Environmental activists and residents in South Durban have long been asking for stricter environmental policies to clear the polluted air they breathe every day.*

"In First World countries, they manage plants and they reduce their carbon footprint in the industries, yet here it is different. Even the standard set by the World Health Organization is not followed in South Durban by these industries.

"We need stricter enforcement of the Constitution and environmental health policies, which means regulatory bodies should stay away from corruption and instil policies that are aimed at protecting the environment and the lives of people."

### MULTIPLE BURDENS

South Durban communities carry the burdens of poverty, unemployment and drug abuse. Health factors are often at the core of these issues. "Young people do not even qualify to work in the very industries that are causing most of the social and economic problems they face. This is because they fail even the induction because they have

medical issues like bronchitis, asthma and other respiratory diseases, which disqualify them from working in the chemical industries," says Groom.

The explosion at the Engen refinery two weeks ago hospitalised six employees and two residents, an 83-year-old and a toddler, who were treated for shock. A block of flats was also damaged, forcing about 28 residents into temporary accommodation.

The Department of Employment and Labour has issued Engen with a prohibition order and the plant has been reportedly shut down with a 20m no-go zone around the affected area of the facility, pending the outcome of a safety investigation.

Ishaam Abader, the acting director general of the Department of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries, said the provincial department would be completing a report on the incident in 14 days.

Following the explosion, social justice groups and residents expressed outrage outside Engen's facility, demanding the refinery's permanent closure. On 9 December, protesters arrived at the gate to deliver a memorandum of demands. But Engen's management failed to receive it, further fuelling emotions in the crowd.

SDCEA air quality and youth development officer Bongani Mthembu told the demonstrators: "This is disrespectful. We have been asking for a proper emergency evacuation plan and communications procedure since 1997. We are still waiting. Engen does not even have the decency to send an executive member to receive our demands because they don't care for this community.

### 'FUGITIVE EMISSIONS'

This is not the first time residents have been directly affected by the refinery. Merebank, Wentworth, Treasure Beach and the Bluff residents suffered breathing problems after a gas leak at the Engen plant released methyl mercaptan into the air on 22 July.



“FOLLOWING THE EXPLOSION, SOCIAL JUSTICE GROUPS AND RESIDENTS EXPRESSED OUTRAGE OUTSIDE ENGEN’S FACILITY, DEMANDING THE REFINERY’S PERMANENT CLOSURE.”



*Durban-south residents protest at the Engen refinery gates.*

The SDCEA is demanding accountability, compensation and community engagement from Engen.

“Engen must engage in a long-term participatory and consultative planning process to develop a decarbonised strategy that takes the needs and interests of affected communities,” says Mthembu, who has been an environmental activist for 14 years. The gradual progress on environment and climate change awareness demands more accountability from companies emitting “fugitive emissions”, he adds.

“Growing up, my mother was always sick. She always had asthmatic attacks, which were very severe. I did not understand why she couldn’t function properly. As I grew older, I soon realised that the main cause for that sickness were the environmental effects of the industries that were in our area where we had previously stayed, in Montclair, South Durban.

“We need to continue lobbying so that companies like Engen take responsibility and accountability for the damage and risks they continue to impose on its workers and neighbouring residents,” says Mthembu.

“A HEALTH STUDY CONDUCTED IN 2002 AT SETTLERS PRIMARY SCHOOL, WHICH IS BETWEEN THE ENGEN AND SAPREF REFINERIES, INDICATED A 52% OCCURRENCE OF ASTHMA IN CHILDREN AT THE SCHOOL, WITH 26% OF THESE BEING PERSISTENT CASES.”

Engen, a major and regular polluter, resumed operations in June 2020 after halting operations during the national Covid-19 lockdown. The brief reprieve for residents living in the South Durban Basin underlined concerns about the health effects of air pollution, even as petrochemical refineries such as Engen and Sapref began chugging away again.

### POLLUTION KILLS

There are about 600 industrial entities in South Durban, including two of the country's largest refineries: Sapref, which is a joint venture between Shell and BP, and Engen, which is majority owned by Malaysian oil and gas company Petronas. There is also a Mondi paper pulp plant, a Tongaat-Hulett sugar refinery, a sewage treatment works, a cluster of chemicals industries, major petrochemical and chemical storage facilities, textile manufacturers, metal smelters, oil refineries, breweries, and paint and motor factories. Many of the smaller industries emit pollutants nearer to the ground. Single Buoy Mooring, 1km offshore of the Bluff, is the main point of entry for crude oil into the country.

A health study conducted in 2002 at Settlers Primary School, which is between the Engen and Sapref refineries, indicated a 52% occurrence of asthma in children at the school, with 26% of these being persistent cases. This massively exceeds the average of 14% to 16% in Europe.

The study's findings provided evidence that current

levels of air pollutants are causing acute adverse effects among susceptible children, who make up a significant fraction of those exposed. Industrial pollution is clearly having a negative effect on the respiratory health of South Durban residents.

Methodologies for determining the relationship between respiratory outcomes and air pollution are well established and studies show that there tends to be a higher incidence of respiratory diseases in working and middle-class communities.

In 2007, pressured by environmental and civil groups, the environment department established a plan for South Durban. Through this plan, the department, led by the eThekweni municipality, would provide strategies for air pollution management. The plan has not come to fruition.

“There were numerous complaints about odours, chemical leaks, flares, visible emissions and health complaints from the [South Durban Basin] community. Ambient SO<sub>2</sub> concentrations in the [area] were also among the highest in South Africa,” reads the report.

A 2017 Lancet Commission on Pollution and Health found that “diseases caused by pollution were responsible for an estimated nine million premature deaths in 2015 – 16% of all deaths worldwide – three times more deaths than from Aids, tuberculosis and malaria combined, and 15 times more than from all wars and other forms of violence”.

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*This publication has been written as part of the CHARM 2020 Media Fellowship and CHARM-Africa's ongoing work to protect and expand the space for civil society organisations and human rights defenders, as well as nurture and enhance the effectiveness of independent media and journalism in the region.*



# INTERSEX SURGERIES RAISING CONCERNS AMONG UGANDANS

THE BIRTH OF INTERSEX CHILDREN IS REAL AND A SOURCE OF CONCERN AMONG A section of Ugandans. While many health and human rights bodies worldwide are against the practice of operating them to become of one sex, the practice still thrives.

Although such surgeries are rarely successful, medical practitioners in the country keep on operating infants of such cases.

“Those intersex conditions which are manageable we do handle but those which are not, we don’t,” said Emmanuel Ainebyoona, the spokesperson for the Ministry of Health before he referred this reporter to Mulago National Referral Hospital medical officials with more information on the subject.

Mulago Hospital Executive Director Dr Baterana Byarugaba, said they carry out surgeries as conditioned by medical code of ethics.

“We perform surgeries that are in line with our medical ethics. We do not perform surgeries to please people. However, if any surgery is in our medical line of ethics, we do carry it out,” Dr Baterana said.

Intersex, which is also known as difference of sexual development (DSD), is an umbrella term that refers to people born with variations in sex characteristics that do not fit a boy or girl. Although some parents may have heard of this term, many who find themselves in a similar situation are shocked to realize that babies can be born with anything other than a male or female sexual organ. Therefore, most parents abandon and deny such children their rights, referring to them as a bad omen.

Intersex children in Uganda have for long been rejected in society and their liberties such as freedom of association and right to health, among others have been denied. This is attributed to cultural beliefs, ignorance and stigma amongst people in various communities.

“In First World countries, they manage plants and they reduce their carbon footprint in the industries, yet here it is different. Even the standard set by the World Health Organization is not followed in South Durban by these industries.

*LEFT: Members of the transgender and LGBTQ community prepare their make-up for the Transgender day.*



This reality has condemned intersex persons into isolation from the public, making it hard for them to access services such as education and health thus attracting growing condemnation from some doctors and activists.

Dr Ismail Mugoya, a medical specialist says the victims need all the necessary care and should not be rejected.

“Let people associate with them to feel fit and avoid worries in them because they have a right to life, association, education and medical care,” he said.

Pervasive fear prevents many intersex persons from discussing their gender identities even with members of their families due to fear that they will be rejected.

Amos, a five year old boy is painfully facing such a

situation. He is the son of Mr Andrew Kamulegeya and Rose Kamulegeya, residents of Kkoombe Islands in Mukono District but currently, he is staying with his grandmother Rosemary Zawedde.

Zawedde says people in the community started isolating his grandson at the age of four when he started playing with his age mates and they came to realize that he was not like them.

“My neighbors have stopped their children from playing or associating with my grandson in any way. I have to keep him indoors most of the time to stay at peace with neighbours,” Zawedde says.

She says this situation has forced her to ensure that even when she is bathing him, nobody sees the boy’s sexual organs because people make fun of him which affects him emotionally, mentally and psychologically, hence affecting his entire life.

Amos, whose stature appears to be that of a boy, enjoys doing house chores by way of assisting the grandmother.

He says he has experienced the harsh reality of rejection because of being born different. He adds that the tough times started at the age of three when he was abandoned by his mother due to fear of stigmatization from society.

Ms Zawedde says Amos’ father was the first to abandon him claiming he was travelling to search for a job. However, since 2017, he has never returned to check on his son.

Ms. Zawedde adds that at the time Amos was born in Kawolo Hospital, Buikwe district, they were advised to go for surgery at Mulago Referral hospital, yet the then Shs 10 million procedure was too costly for them to afford.

Dr Musa Owor, a gynecologist, says “it is very important while screening such children to establish where the testicular tissues exist so that they can be removed. For females with ambiguous genitalia, they have a long clitoris and a closed vagina.”

He advises parents to stop worrying when they give birth to an intersex child, noting that the surgery can be done



“THE ROOT CAUSE  
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AS NECESSARILY ILL OR  
DISORDER).”

DR FRANK MUGISHA

successfully. He adds that parents need to get a specialised doctor who understands intersex issues to find a progressive approach.

Dr Frank Mugisha, the executive director of Sexual Minorities Uganda, an organisation that works for sexual minorities, says “some intersex persons may identify with the sex marker assigned to them at birth while others may not.”

He said that he was aware that surgeries are conducted in the country.

He added that “most may feel forced into sex and gender categories that they do not identify with, which may be problematic in their adolescence when they are able to make decisions for themselves.”

He explained that the human rights violators of intersex persons face include forced and coercive medical interventions, infanticide, discrimination in access to education, sports, employment and other services.

“The root cause of human rights violations against intersex people include harmful stereotypes, stigma, taboos and pathologization (which is treating intersex persons as necessarily ill or disorder),” he added.

According to the August 2015 survey by the Support Initiative for People with Congenital Disorder (SIPD), an intersex health and rights organisation, Uganda does not have a laboratory to perform chromosomal tests for children to determine sex and that genital reshaping surgeries are often flawed. It indicates that a few surgeries have

been attempted to alter ambiguous genitalia in infancy but most of these have been unsuccessful. It adds that in such cases, intersex children have ended up developing physical characteristics of the opposed sex at puberty.

The survey also indicates that most intersex children in Uganda are assigned female at birth and raised to identify as women, but for many intersex women, female biological milestones, such as menstruation and breast development do not necessarily follow. Instead, some are faced with changes associated with male puberty, such as beard growth, body hair and voice deepening.

A large number of intersex adults are dissatisfied with the results of childhood genital surgery; the study authors recommend that surgical decisions be postponed until adolescence or adulthood when the patient can give informed consent.

According to SIPD, at least three children are born with an intersex condition at Mulago Hospital every week. The condition also affects up to 1.7 percent of the world’s population, according to the United Nations.

According to the 2019 study by Istanbul University in Turkey where Dr Banu Kucukemre Aydin and her colleagues analyzed data on nearly 14,200 newborns, 18 of them had ambiguous genitalia. That’s a rate of 1.3 in 1,000 births – much higher than the rate of one in 4,500 to 5,500 reported in previous studies.

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# STIGMA STILL KEEPING ALBINOS AWAY FROM HEALTH FACILITIES

## STIGMA STILL KEEPING ALBINOS AWAY FROM HEALTH FACILITIES.

Living with albinism, Sarah Mutesi, a resident of Kayanja Village in Mukono District says when she conceived for the first time, she went to a government health facility in Mukono District for antenatal care but nurses there neglected her.

"No nurse attended to me because of my skin complexion. They wondered the kind of man had impregnated me," Mutesi says.

Mutesi decided to visit another government health facility but the medical personnel she found there allegedly told her to undress before he called in other medical staff to come and see her body.

"This was very disappointing as I couldn't believe medical professionals could act in that way. I decided to go back home and kept away from health facilities until I gave birth, alone in the house without any assistance from any medical personnel," she says.

Mutesi was also abandoned by the father of her child and she has since not seen him two years later. She recalls him telling her they don't accept Albinos in his family and that she was a misfortune. Such cases are some of the push factors that make people with albinism to shun health facilities.

Elizabeth Negesa, another woman living with albinism, also the director of Elgon Foundation for Persons with Albinism, says people like her are isolated and fail to access proper medical care. She recounts how she went to a health facility in Mbale City and she was reportedly denied services.

"When I approached the medical personnel, she was tough as she asked why I had visited the facility," she says, before narrating how she was told to undress and then the medical personnel tipped other nurses to come and see her body.

"I regretted why God created me after nurses laughing at me," Negesa says.

Negesa says she was immediately pushed aside and the medical personnel started working on other patients.





*Elizabeth Negasa one of the people with Albinism who has faced tough times in accessing facilities.*

"This made me cry as I walked out of the hospital premises. I couldn't narrate the ordeal to anybody there since even patients were trying to distance themselves from me," Negesa says.

She went back home and stayed without medication. She had conceived and fortunately, she was able to give birth alone at home. Negesa says even taking a child for medication or immunisation was not easy as health workers kept on ignoring her.

Negesa decided to start up an organisation to fight for the rights of albinos in Uganda.

Besides the stigma they face, people living with albinism also fall victim to people with weird beliefs about them.

"Men have a belief that when they sleep with an albino

woman, they get cured of HIV/Aids. In the process, these women acquire sexually transmitted diseases besides getting unwanted pregnancies. This not only leaves the victims struggling to get medication but also raising children as single parents," Negesa says.

Negesa has so far registered 489 people living with albinism, who have medical challenges in the two regions of Elgon and Ssebi in eastern Uganda.

"We tried to raise our issues to a commissioner in the Ministry of Gender but he didn't give any hopeful reply."

Negesa says they have tried to join groups of different People with Disabilities (PWDs) but the government has failed to come out and help them fight for their rights.



“Even when government is preparing its budget, they do not in any way allocate a budget for us people living with albinism. We feel isolated and this makes us live a miserable life,” she said.

She says given their condition, they sometimes need to make frequent visits to the health facilities.

“As we grow older, the muscles weaken, sometimes a change in the environment affects our eyes thus the need to see an eye doctor so often,” Negesa explains.

Negesa says at least two people living with albinism die of skin cancer every month due to lack of access to proper medical care. She says she has so far registered 30 people living with albinism with skin cancer since November last year.

Doctors and human rights defenders in Uganda have

condemned the act of denying people living with albinism medical care because of their skin colour. They say they have a right to health services just like any other person.

Dr Paul Bukenya, a medical specialist at Kawolo Hospital in Buikwe District, says everybody is entitled to access medical care at any health facility.

“People living with albinism should not be discriminated against in medical facilities because they are human beings like others and it is their right, guaranteed by the Constitution of Uganda,” he says.

He says by denying people living with albinism medical services, Uganda will not know or get the right statistics of people with different kinds of needs.

He says when that happens, some of the victims end up getting what is not right for their health as they resort to self-medication.

He adds that this hampers general healthcare service delivery. “Discrimination and stigma will always lead to an increase in HIV/Aids as people will fear to go to health facilities,” he says.

Hassim Magumba, the chairperson of Mpungwe Sub-county in Mayuge District and a leader of people living with albinism in the district, says: “When the government is designing sexual health programmes, people living with albinism are not always included, yet they are always sexually harassed. Some are raped, defiled, and infected with HIV/Aids by heartless men who lure them into sex.”

He appeals to all stakeholders to pay attention to people living with albinism since they too are sexually active like other people.

“They are entitled to proper medical care just like any other person,” he says.

The Gender ministry spokesperson, Frank Mugabi, says: “People living with albinism are included under the PWDs and are not supposed to be discriminated against because it is against the law. They should report to local authorities so that their issues are addressed.”





## ABOUT ALBINISM

Albinism is a congenital disorder characterised in humans by the complete or partial absence of pigment in the skin, hair and eyes.

It is associated with a number of vision defects such as photophobia (intolerance of light) and nystagmus (a vision condition in which the eye fails to achieve normal visual activity).

Lack of skin pigmentation makes for more susceptibility to sunburn and skin cancers.

Hassan Mulondo, the general secretary of Association of Uganda (Africa Albino Foundation) says Uganda has about 250,000 people living with albinism.

In Uganda and other parts of Africa, albinism is still profoundly misunderstood, socially and medically.

For a number of years, the United Nations (UN) has underlined the extreme discrimination faced by people living with albinism. In 2013, the UN Human Rights Council called for the prevention of attacks and discrimination against people living with albinism.

In December 2014, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution proclaiming June 13 each year as International Albinism Awareness Day.

In 2017, the International Bar Association proposed universal standards for the protection and promotion of rights for people living with albinism.

According to a June 2020 UN report, it is estimated that in North America and Europe, one in every 17,000 to 20,000 people have some form of albinism.

The condition is much more prevalent in Sub-Saharan Africa, with estimates of one in every 1,400 people being affected in Tanzania and the prevalence as high as one person in 1,000 across Africa.

In some countries, majority of persons living with albinism aged between 30 and 40 years die from skin cancer. Skin cancer is highly preventable when persons living with albinism enjoy their rights to health.

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# UGANDAN JOURNALISTS PAYING PRICE OF POLICE BRUTALITY AGAINST CAMPAIGNING POLITICIANS

ON DECEMBER 27, MR SAIF-LLAH ASHRAF KASIRYE, A RADIO ONE JOURNALIST AND an online Ghetto TV cameraman was rushed to Masaka Hospital in critical condition after he was allegedly shot in the chaos that ensued as police tried to disperse supporters of presidential candidate Robert Kyagulanyi, also known as Bobi Wine, in Masaka District. According to another journalist, NTV's Ali Mivule, Kasirye was hit by a projectile on the head and started bleeding profusely. Mivule says he too was shot in the thigh at close range.

This is not the first time Kasirye was attacked while doing his job. Just over a month ago, on November 18, Kasirye was assaulted by security operatives, as he was taking photos on the campaign trail of Bobi Wine, in Luuka District. During the assault, Kasirye's camera, phone, and recorder were damaged, and his eyes pepper-sprayed, leading to his collapse and eventual admission at Jinja hospital.

"I tried to tighten my jaws but they forcefully opened it and pepper-sprayed me. I now feel a lot of stomach pain and my camera, phone, laptop, and recorder were taken by the officers," Mr Kasirye recounted his ordeal to officials of the Human Rights Network for Journalists (HRNJ).



Credit: flickr /youngrobby





“MANY JOURNALISTS, MOSTLY THOSE WHO COVER OPPOSITION CAMPAIGNS, HAVE FOUND THEMSELVES VICTIMS OF THE ATTACKS METED OUT WHEN SECURITY FORCES TRY TO BLOCK OR STOP THE CANDIDATES AND THEIR SUPPORTERS.”

### CAMPAIGNS, A TROUBLESOME PLACE

Ever since presidential campaigns were flagged off in November, the activities have been marred by the arrests of mainly opposition presidential candidates. They are accused of holding mass campaign rallies and yet the Electoral Commission (EC) has called for the candidates to have a small number of people addressed, and for them to conduct their campaigns on television and radio plus other media platforms in a bid to curb the spread of Covid-19.

Many journalists, mostly those who cover opposition campaigns, have found themselves victims of the attacks meted out when security forces try to block or stop the candidates and their supporters.

Damalie Mukhaye and Abubaker Lubowa, both journalists attached to Nation Media Group-Uganda who are trailing various presidential candidates have their own narrative.

“I have been covering candidate Kyagulanyi and lately, I have realised that whenever I go close to security to take photos, the men in uniform start cocking their guns threatening to shoot us,” Lubowa says, adding: “We have for long been beaten, intimidated, threatened and equipment including computers, cameras, radio recorders vandalised, but no step has been taken by lawmakers, that’s why we have become reluctant to report to police because there is no justice in most cases.”

Mukhaye reveals that police have fired live and rubber bullets at them putting their lives at risk. She also says they are always pepper-sprayed, making them worry about their health.

Likewise, Moses Mukama a journalist attached to Baba FM in Jinja District says he was assaulted by supporters of a candidate contesting to be a member of parliament. Mr Mukama says he continues to seek medication as he has not completely recovered from the assault.

There is an outcry of journalists to the government to allow them to exercise their freedoms to act professionally and also an appeal to other bodies including civil society organisations to push for an end to brutality towards journalists. The cases keep rising as the current election campaigns get into their last lap.

### ATTACKED, BEATEN, AND HARASSED

Cliff Wamala a journalist of NTV-Uganda was left nursing injuries inflicted on him by police during a standoff with presidential candidate Robert Kyagulanyi that lasted several hours in Alebtong District on December 11.

“We were working and showed them our identification cards and documents but then they continued beating us as we tried to record events during the standoff. We need police to understand that we are doing our work just as they are doing theirs,” Mr. Wamala said.

Another journalist, Stephen Otaga a reporter with Monitor Publications Ltd, says he was beaten by a soldier



Getty Images/ Luke Dray

*Members of the press take shelter during a student protest.*

“MUKHAYE REVEALS THAT POLICE HAVE FIRED LIVE AND RUBBER BULLETS AT THEM PUTTING THEIR LIVES AT RISK. SHE ALSO SAYS THEY ARE ALWAYS PEPPER-SPRAYED, MAKING THEM WORRY ABOUT THEIR HEALTH.”

on December 15 at the Electoral Commission offices over photos. Despite identifying himself, the soldiers instructed the journalist to surrender his camera, phone, and later arrested him.

“I was slapped by a soldier and driven to UPDF fuel station in Mbuya, blindfolded using my own facemask amid interrogation of how long I have been a journalist, my age and place of residence,” Otage said.

Moses Balikowa a journalist at City FM Jinja was beaten and pepper sprayed as he was trying to record Robert Kyagulanyi in Luuka District on November 18 as police was arresting him.

“Security officers beat me up as I trying to record and my recorder and phone were damaged. I was seriously injured and up to now my right leg is not yet okay,” Balikowa said.

## A LONGTIME PROBLEM

The coordinator of the HRNJ, Uganda, Robert Ssempala, says they have so far registered 33 cases of journalists being brutally attacked during this election period. Ssempala says the government has interfered a lot in media freedoms during this pandemic and election campaign period. Some journalists have lost jobs, others have been ordered not to give space to some opposition candidates and other media houses have been threatened with being shut down should they fail to follow orders.

Recently in northern Uganda, one of the presidential candidates Patrick Amuriat Oboi of Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) paid for space on radios in Gulu and Lira, in the month of November to talk to the voters but was later switched off without delivering his messages. Amuriat says he was also blocked from Etop, Kyoga and Delta Radios in Soroti District after he had booked for talk shows, with the radios declining to host him, citing intimidation from the government.

Bobi Wine has not been given a chance to access any radio stations and has been constantly blocked whenever he tries to appear at anyone. In many of these situations, journalists find themselves unable to host candidates to interview them. Some find themselves harassed by security or being detained and interrogated for hours over why they were allowing opposition candidates to go on air.

The police spokesperson Kampala metropolitan area, Mr. Patrick Onyango however, denies harassing journalists noting that their relationship is usually smooth but gets rocky especially when it comes to riotous situations where their principles and ethics of journalism is lost and they become political activists.

“Journalists prevent us from arresting suspects during such situations, some block us from doing our lawful duties thereby rendering them vulnerable to arrest and any other acts,” Onyango says.

Ssempala says press freedom in the country has not improved since last year’s World Press Freedom Day.



## THE HRNJ PRESS INDEX REPORT ALSO INDICATED THAT 46 MEDIA HOUSES WERE AFFECTED BY PRESS FREEDOM VIOLATIONS IN 2016.

He says last year (2019), HRNJ documented over 260 cases of abuse and violations on press freedom in Uganda which if left unchecked will hinder good journalism. Previous years show that the situation has generally been in decline. HRNJ documented 135 cases of violations against journalists in 2016, a slight decline from 143 cases reported in 2015. Of the 135 violations recorded, 16 directly involved female journalists. Male journalists continue to be the targets as they are the majority in many newsrooms.

The HRNJ press index report also indicated that 46 media houses were affected by press freedom violations in 2016. Of these, *Daily Monitor* was most affected, with 14 journalists suffering violations. The part-government owned *New Vision* did not escape attack, with 12 cases of abuse of its journalists reported. In third place was *NBS Television* where nine cases of violations against journalists were recorded.

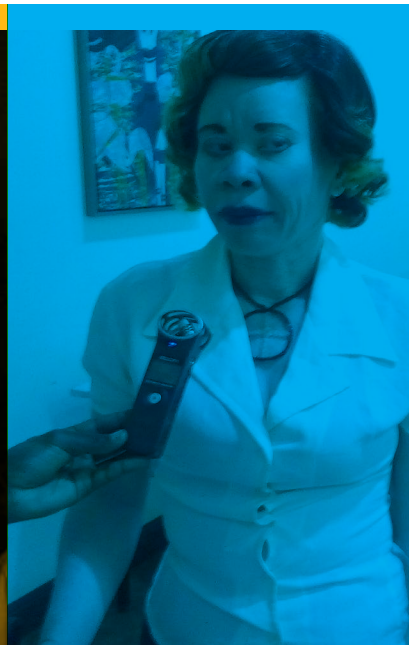
### A GLOBAL TREND

According to the “Safety of journalists and the danger of impunity”, a report by the Director General of UNESCO 2020, only 13 per cent of the cases globally involving




crimes against journalists were reported as resolved in comparison to 12 per cent in 2019 and 11 per cent in 2018. The agency tasked with defending press freedom has reported that even though 2020 saw a slight decrease in the rate of impunity for crimes against journalists, 87 per cent of such cases worldwide were still not resolved. While casualties related to countries experiencing armed conflict have declined, fatal attacks against journalists covering stories related to corruption, human rights violations, environment crimes, trafficking, and political wrongdoing have risen in other countries, the report indicates. In her remarks last year, on May 3rd, during the World Press Freedom Day National Dialogue, the former US Ambassador, Deborah R. Malac said: “In Reporters Without Borders’ 2019 World Press Freedom Index, Uganda dropped eight places to a ranking of 125 out of 180 countries in the world, compared to 117 the previous year. As the report noted, acts of intimidation and violence by security forces against reporters are an almost daily occurrence in Uganda. The situation is even worse outside of Kampala, where security officials routinely prevent journalists from covering events and often arrest and rough them up.” A year later and the situation has not changed at all.

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