

THE GAMBIA: MEDIA REPRESSION MEANS ELECTIONS WON'T BE FAIR

*From the International Freedom of Expression (IFEX) network communiqué
5 September 2005*

A free and fair election in the Gambia will be impossible as long as the Gambian government continues to attack journalists and independent newspapers that criticise authorities, warns Reporters Without Borders (Reporters sans frontières, RSF).

"The situation of press freedom and public access to information is so catastrophic that it alone suffices to disqualify these elections. There is no way the international community will be able to say that the 22 September elections were democratic," the group says in an analysis of press freedom conditions in the country.

Gambia's privately-owned media are now in the grip of fear, with death threats, surveillance, night-time arrests, arbitrary detention and mistreatment being the norm for journalists who refuse to sing the government's praises. Those who dare report these attacks to international organisations find themselves targets of intimidation by the National Intelligence Agency (NIA), RSF says.

During the recent African Union summit, hosted by The Gambia on 1-2 July, at least nine journalists were arrested and held illegally for several days. The editor of the privately-owned "Daily Express" newspaper, Sulayman Makato, has been forced into hiding since 14 July after getting two anonymous threats.

Another private newspaper, "The Independent", has been regularly targeted by authorities, notes RSF. Its printing press was set on fire in 2004 by men suspected of being members of the National Guard. The paper's headquarters have been sealed and it has been illegally prevented from publishing since 28 March 2006. One of its journalists, Lamin Fatty, was held for more than a month without access to a lawyer and is now being tried under a press law that criminalises press offences.

The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) reports that another journalist, "Chief" Ebrimah B. Manneh of the pro-government "Daily Observer", has been missing since 7 July and is believed to be in NIA custody. Former journalist Malick Mboob has been in NIA custody since 26 May.

Meanwhile, the murder of leading journalist Deyda Hydera remains unsolved nearly two years after he was shot dead in his car on 16 December 2004. Gambian authorities have made no serious attempts to identify either the perpetrators or instigators of his murder, says RSF. The only official statement from the officials responsible for the investigation came six months later. It suggested that the murder could have been linked to his sex life.