

Fake Journalism at Home Helps Cameroonian Asylum-Seekers Abroad

*By Asong Ndifor**

Newspaper “editors” take bribes from relatives of immigrants to publish stories that wouldn’t normally pass basic journalism standards. The stories dwell on the alleged “persecution” of activists, and include the name indicated by the person paying the bribe.

The immigrant then uses the fake news story abroad as evidence to request political asylum. Frequently, these “activists” are portrayed in the articles as members of the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC), a group that campaigns using non-violence for the restoration of the independence of Southern Cameroons, the English-speaking minority part of the bilingual country. Its objective irritates the government and police occasionally arrest demonstrating activists.

The Cameroon Express, publishing from Buea, Cameroon’s Southwest Region, ran a headline on April 23, 2010: “Government continues persecution of SCNC activists.” From the article:

“The Yaounde regime under Mr. Biya is said to have continued with the persistent violation of the basic rights of Cameroonians. ... William Diony was recently arrested in Kumba on grounds that his son, Mayer Diony, who fled the country, is an SCNC activist. In April 2002, he was arrested on the instruction of the Ministry of Internal Security and detained alongside other members during a public manifestation. ... Family members of some SCNC activists on self-exile abroad told this reporter that they are being manhandled and molested by security operatives.”

The article is not signed and exposes itself by attributing the persecution to a “Ministry of Internal Security” that doesn’t exist in Cameroon. Also, historically, relatives of demonstrators are not incriminated in such protests in the country. Asked about it, publisher Kingsley Ako declined to comment.

Nonexistent Warrants

In another example, *The Guardian Post*, based in the capital city of Yaounde, published “Sad Tale of SCNC Activists”:

“Take the case of Chi McLewis Ndikum, a frontline SCNC member who is also highly wanted by Biya’s repressive forces. The forces of law and order have mounted a search for him but are unable to fish him out from his hideout. ... Several warrants of arrests are in

circulation for his apprehension. ... Everybody from mother to children is on permanent threat of elimination. His family members have experienced the excruciating pains of specially designed torture methods. ... If he did not escape he would surely have been subjected to more detention, torture and other inhuman treatment that other SCNC activists have gone through before.”

There’s no evidence that such arrest warrants, allegedly in public circulation, exist for anyone with that name. The author of this report asked the newspaper’s publisher, Ngah Christian, to provide the warrant, but he declined, refusing to make any statements.

When questioned, the police public affairs office responded that it didn’t find this warrant.

For the purpose of this report, this author inquired from an editor how much he would charge to write and publish an asylum article for a relative abroad. He asked for 200,000 francs (US\$400). Asked if he thought it would be professionally unethical, the editor snapped, “I do not eat professional ethics.”

The reporters and editors behind these asylum stories are locally known as “Hilton journalists,” a name that derives from their constant presence at press conferences usually held at the Yaounde Hilton Hotel — press conferences about which they hardly ever publish stories. While not trained, the Hilton journalists usually own their small newspapers and publish for a fee.

Charlie Ndi Chia, editor-in-chief of *The Post* and president of the Cameroon Union of Journalists (CUJ), considers this a very disturbing phenomenon. “It has even gotten to the extent of ordinary crooks re-designing and reprinting copies of particular editions of newspapers to feature similar stories, as would fetch asylum sympathies in Western countries,” he said.

Nonsense Journalism

“Falsehood by a handful of our colleagues,” says Zachee Nzoh Ngandembou, publisher of Eden Media Group and president of the Newspaper Publishers Association of Cameroon (NEPAC), “debases our profession and make nonsense of its practitioners.”

But many editors, faced with choosing between professional ethics and professional solidarity, dare not openly criticize their erring colleagues, but regard the press as a mirror that does not reflect itself.

Paul Nkemyang, publisher of the Limbe-based Star newspaper, broke ranks at an executive meeting of NEPAC in Bamenda in June 2009. He picked on an edition of The Guardian Post that carried no dates on the inner pages. “To really portray professional

abuse, the purported issue of the newspaper carried the same number (0336) as the previous issue,” Nkemanayang said.

The Guardian Post publisher-editor, Ngah Christian Mbipngo, snarled: “It’s just jealousy, you do it, too.” No newspaper reported the exchange.

Tim Finian, editor of Life Time newspaper in Bamenda, admits that “several newspapers publish asylum stories.” Asked to name some, he teased, “You know them.” In Cameroon, everybody knows them.

The newspapers have been known to be sent to asylum seekers in Europe and the United States as exhibits to support their claims of being persecuted in Cameroon. “Even Francophone (French-speaking) Cameroonians as well as children and wards of the ruling party have been and continue to be beneficiaries of such fraud,” Chia notes.

SCNC membership is restricted to the Southern Cameroonian, English-speaking minority, but Francophones claim to be activists when seeking political asylum.

Little Internal Oversight

There is no media self-regulatory authority in Cameroon, where for a population of 19.4 million, there are only five dailies of about 600 registered newspapers. Only six more are weekly or bi-weekly and, to some extent, adhere to professional ethics and circulate nationwide. The rest practice mainly “yellow” journalism and are published occasionally. It takes just a 1,000-franc stamp (\$US2) and two “journalists” to register a newspaper in any of the 58 divisional offices in the country.

Criminal libel is used to hammer erring journalists but, surprisingly, not those mired in the publication of asylum stories. The prosecutors focus their searchlight on critics of government officials and power barons.

Corruption has also infected the wholly owned government media, whose reporters boldly demand “transport” costs from event organizers to write their reports.

“At the level of NEPAC, we have always condemned unethical journalism in unequivocal terms and are currently debating on the nature of punishment to be meted out to culprits. ... Weeding out the bad eggs in every human setting has never been easy. The task is even more complicated in a country rife with similar vices like corruption, embezzlement and unaccountability,” Nzoh Ngandembou says.

In 2010, the CUJ (Cameroon Union of Journalists) submitted a comprehensive memorandum to the government covering what could be done to clean up the communication sector and how the media could be harnessed to achieve the best in good governance. The proposal included good training for journalists, enforcement of the code of ethics, empowering a self-regulatory authority, and good working conditions for journalists.

“Unfortunately, the government, which thrives in pocketing the press as much as it practically can, ignored it,” Chia explains.

Communication Minister Issa Tchiroma Bakary says there “are bogus journalists, and (the government) takes responsibility for allowing the current mess in Cameroon.” in a May 2010 report by the African Federation of Journalists entitled “Journalists Under Fire: Report of Solidarity Mission to Cameroon.” The ministry gives yearly financial aid to “private communication” (newspaper publishers, FM radio stations, journalist associations, advertising agencies and Internet service providers), but the criteria for distribution doesn’t exclude “bogus journalists.” One Hilton journalist convicted for libel and sentenced to two months in prison regularly gets aid, even when beneficiaries are expected to tender non-conviction certificates.

Corruption Competition

Corruption is so pervasive that government officials, often involved in all areas of illegal activity, compete with each other to prove their affluence and influence by purchasing expensive cars and building luxurious mansions, despite their modest salaries averaging 250,000 francs (US\$500) per month.

The impunity seen in widespread corruption in Cameroon can give the impression that the government does nothing to combat it, despite Operation Sparrow Hawk, the anti-corruption crusade that forced many top government officials into jail.

Kondengui prison in Yaounde, for instance, was built for only 800 inmates, but is home to around 4,000, including Atangana Mebara, former secretary general for the president, charged with using public funds to purchase a presidential jet.

Finance Minister Essimi Menye revealed in an April 2010 press conference that about 15,000 government workers were believed to have taken bribes in public administration in order to receive undeserved benefits, such as double salaries and travel allowances. Some pretended to have non-existent children so they could receive special incentives. The result? The minister says prisons are too congested, so the workers are all still at their jobs. Instead of prosecution, they are expected to repay the money, according to weekly *L'Effort Camerounais*.

In his 2010 annual message to Cameroonians, President Paul Biya upgraded the anti-graft campaign to a “merciless war against corruption” that “will continue to the very end.” Journalists would have been ideal soldiers for that war, but, as Nzoh Ngandembou argues, “when the media shun the truth and glorify in falsehood, they lose their raison d’être (to be society’s watchdog).”

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