

Dangerous Assignments

covering the global press freedom struggle

Fall | Winter 2003

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Behind Bars in Cuba



Exiled Liberian Journalists
Postwar Iraq: Is the Press Safe?
Islam vs. Democracy in Kabul

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Dangerous Assignments

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On the cover: A Cuban beach is viewed from behind bars.

Collage: Mick Stern, Photo: AP/Jose Goitia

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Attention Span

If news coverage is a barometer, based on the last few months of stories, you would think that only journalists in Iraq are under intense pressure. But nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, countries worldwide have taken advantage of attention being focused on the Middle East to viciously muzzle independent voices—and in this issue of *Dangerous Assignments*, we take you there.

In Cuba, dictator Fidel Castro Ruz launched a massive crackdown on dissidents and journalists this spring. In all, 75 people were arrested—including 28 journalists—and sentenced to between 14 and 27 years in prison. In July, CPJ sent well-known Peruvian journalist Gustavo Gorriti to Cuba to meet secretly with some of the prisoners' spouses. What he heard and saw could have passed for a James Bond movie. In "Spy Games" (page 8), he reports on his trip.

Liberia is another country where internal turmoil has taken a toll on the country's media. CPJ learned about the difficulties these journalists face when we visited them in exile in Ghana (page 13). And, in Asia, freelance reporter and photographer Thierry Falise tells us about his ordeal in captivity in Laos (page 24).

Elsewhere in the magazine is a report from Tajikistan (page 19), thoughts on Haiti (page 6), and profiles of journalists from Burma (page 30) and Cambodia (page 16).

Back in Iraq, the dangers of covering the aftermath of the conflict continue, with the death toll, at press time, rising to 18. (Two journalists remain missing.) Again, CPJ felt the loss acutely when veteran Reuters cameraman Mazen Dana, a 2001 CPJ International Press Freedom Award recipient, was killed on August 17 by a U.S. machine-gunner who claimed to have mistaken the journalist's camera for a rocket-propelled grenade launcher. (See "CPJ Remembers" on page 7.)

But as *Iraq Today* editor Hassan Fattah points out in "Occupational Hazards" (page 28), anxious U.S. soldiers aren't journalists' only concern. According to Fattah, unsafe roads and thieves have even veteran war correspondents calling postwar Iraq one of their most dangerous assignments.

While the situation in Iraq remains hazardous, this issue of *Dangerous Assignments* shows that CPJ attention spans the globe—and that our beleaguered colleagues worldwide still desperately need our support. ■

—Susan Ellingwood



AP/José Colita

Spy Games, page 8



CPJ/Alex Lupis

Arrested Development, page 19



CPJ/A. Lin Neumann

A Life in Limbo, page 30



AP/Rodrigo Abd

Guatemala City, Guatemala

For two days in late July, the streets of Guatemala's capital, Guatemala City, swelled with violent supporters of former dictator Efraín Ríos Montt, whom the Supreme Court had temporarily barred from running in the November presidential elections. As journalists covered the massive protests, the crowds quickly turned on them, yelling, "Journalist spotted, journalist dead."

In this July 24 picture (above), Associated Press staff photographer Rodrigo Abd captured an image of the aggressive mob before it could overtake him. Héctor Ramírez, a 62-year-old reporter for Channel 7 TV and

Radio Sonora, wasn't so lucky. That day, Ríos Montt supporters violently beat Ramírez. He managed to escape his attackers and run away but suffered a fatal heart attack soon after.

Other journalists narrowly survived. Juan Carlos Torres, a photographer at the daily *elPeriódico*, and Héctor Estrada, cameraman at the TV station Guatevisión, fled after demonstrators doused them with gasoline in a failed attempt to burn both journalists.

Two days later, 70 journalists filed a complaint alleging that Ríos Montt and other members of the government were responsible for

Ramírez's death. According to local sources, on August 29, the country's Human Rights Ombudsman's Office ruled that President Alfonso Portillo and other high-level officials were at fault because they had failed to control the crowds.

The office further ruled that the riots had "provoked the death" of Ramírez and called for the state prosecutor to take legal action against any government authorities involved. A later court ruling lifted the temporary ban on the candidacy of Ríos Montt, who denies any responsibility for the violence or Ramírez's death. ■

—Amanda Watson-Boles

A look at recent red-letter cases from the CPJ files...

May

2 James Miller (below), a British freelance journalist working on an HBO documentary, is fatally shot in the Gaza Strip, allegedly by Israeli troops, after Miller and his crew had identified themselves as journalists.



AP/Stringer

19 The Indonesian military (below) launches a major offensive in restive Aceh Province, imposing stringent restrictions on the press in the region. The government tells the domestic media that it is their duty as Indonesians to support the military effort.



AP/Trismadi

June

1 Velimir Ilic, mayor of the central Serbian city of Cacak, kicks journalist Vladimir Jesic during an interview on TV Apolo. Jesic had asked Ilic if he is related to a man arrested in connection with the March assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic.



AP



Courtesy NBC

12 A CPJ delegation meets with Moroccan Ambassador Aziz Mekouar in Washington, D.C., and urges the country to release jailed journalists Ali Lmrabet and Mustafa Alaoui.

20 Chinese officials close the weekly *Beijing Xinhao* after it publishes an article titled “Seven Disgusting Things in China.” The move came as part of a wider crackdown during which authorities suspended subscriptions to publications so they could be reviewed for material that the government deems offensive.

25 Ugandan authorities shutter the Catholic Church–owned Radio Kyoga Veritas after it reports on fighting between government forces and the rebel Lord’s Resistance Army. The rebels, who are fighting to turn Uganda into a fundamentalist Protestant republic, have been battling the government for the last 16 years.

July

5 British freelance cameraman Richard Wild (below, left), 24, is shot dead in central Baghdad. The next day, Jeremy Little (below, right), a freelance soundman working for the U.S. TV station NBC, dies of complications from injuries sustained during a grenade attack in central Iraq days earlier.



AP



Courtesy NBC

7 Belarusian officials cancel the accreditation of U.S. government-funded organizations IREX and Internews, both of which provide support to the country’s beleaguered independent press corps.

15 Venezuela’s Supreme Court (below) upholds several *desacato* (contempt) and criminal defamation provisions in the country’s Penal Code, keeping journalists vulnerable to jail time for criticizing public officials.



AP/Leslie Mazoch

25 Dominican President Hipólito Mejía has two radio journalists arrested for conducting an informal call-in poll asking listeners who they would vote for if presidential elections were held that day. One woman states that she would vote for the devil before Mejía, prompting a flood of listeners to call and express their agreement—and raising the president’s ire.

August

8 Armed men claiming to be supporters of Harold Keke, a rebel leader in the Solomon Islands, attack the Bougainville offices of the daily English-language *Papua New Guinea Post-Courier*. The paper had recently published an article alleging ties between Keke’s group and the Bougainville Revolutionary Army, which fought the Papua New Guinean government in a bloody, decade-long civil war that ended in 2001.

22 Noel Ngwa Nguema, a contributor to Gabon’s satirical bimonthly *Sub-Version*, is invited to meet with President Omar Bongo after the paper publishes a critical article about the first lady. During the discussion, Bongo throws a heavy ornament at Nguema and attempts to assault him, saying that he never wants to see the newspaper again.

September

6 Philippine journalist Juan “Jun” Pala is killed in the southern city of Davao, becoming the third journalist to be killed in the country in as many weeks. The motives behind the murder are unclear, but he had repeatedly been targeted for attack before his death.

8 Azerbaijani police beat several journalists who are trying to report on an opposition activist who had been brought to police headquarters for questioning. The deputy police chief tells CPJ that the police were acting legally and that he is “sorry if some journalists accidentally got hit.”

12 Japanese police find the body of freelance journalist Satoru Someya near a pier in Tokyo Bay (below). Though it is unclear whether he was killed for his journalistic work, Someya had recently published a book about Chinese criminal groups operating in Tokyo’s red light district and had written that he might be in danger because of his investigations.



AP

22 An Iranian judge charges an interrogator from the Intelligence Ministry with the murder of freelance photojournalist Zahra Kazemi (below), who was killed in government detention in July after taking photographs outside a prison in the capital, Tehran.



AP

23 CPJ and the Moscow-based Center for Journalists in Extreme Situations send a letter to U.S. President George W. Bush urging him to raise press freedom issues at an upcoming meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

October

8 Exactly six months after the United States shelled the Palestine Hotel in Iraq’s capital, Baghdad, and an air strike hit the Baghdad bureau of the Qatar-based satellite broadcaster Al-Jazeera, CPJ files three new Freedom of Information Act requests about the incidents with the U.S. Defense Department. ■

—Amanda Watson-Boles



AP/Stringer

Talking Freely

By Ann Cooper

When our CPJ delegation met with Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide in late August, in his palatial palace in Haiti's capital, Port-au-Prince, the president turned on his legendary political charm. "This is a place where you are free to talk," he insisted.

In a narrow sense, the president's words may be true. But in Haiti, "free to talk" does not mean "free from consequences" if the "talk" is deemed too critical of the president, or too revealing of official misconduct.

And the consequences, as many journalists have learned, can be dramatic and dire. Verbal threats and physical assaults are now so commonplace for Haiti's independent media that in the entire Western Hemisphere, only Colombia is a more dangerous place for journalists, according to CPJ research.

Since 2000, two Haitian journalists have been slain: one gunned down in a Mafia-style hit, the other hacked to death by a machete-wielding mob. So-called popular organizations, or gangs of thugs loyal to Aristide's

CPJ Executive Director Ann Cooper, along with CPJ Americas Program Coordinator Carlos Lauría and CPJ board members Franz Allina, Clarence Page, and Paul C. Tash, spent a week in Haiti this summer meeting with journalists and government officials.

government, regularly threaten and attack journalists attempting to cover opposition political events. More than 30 reporters and editors have fled the island, saying they fear for their lives in a country where the government either tolerates or sponsors violence against journalists and those who dare oppose Aristide.

A foreign diplomat in Port-au-Prince told our delegation that the environment, particularly for several radio stations that offer a regular forum for opposition voices, is now so hostile that "it's amazing that journalists are still working."

They are working, though, and in long sessions with our delegation, journalists repeatedly expressed their determination to continue. Some showed us the menacing messages they receive. For instance, one radio station owner presented a fax warning that journalists at several stations would be murdered within days. They were not, but in Haiti's violent atmosphere it's hard to ignore such threats.

The August visit marked the first time that high-level government officials agreed to meet with CPJ in person to discuss their country's dismal record of violence and impunity.

In our first meeting, Prime Minister Yvon Neptune, a longtime aide to President Aristide, argued for patience. Haiti, he sighed, is a "country evolving toward democracy. That evolution involves conflict sometimes."

Justice Minister Calixte Delatour, who has served every Haitian government back to (and including) the Duvalier dictatorships, was more combative, preferring to shift blame for violence and impunity to the United States and other governments that have cut off aid and demanded political reforms.

Aristide—once beloved, now embattled—today rarely meets with local journalists. Some of his sharpest critics in the media were once among his most ardent supporters. Among those who made the transition from

supporter to critic was Jean Léopold Dominique, the outspoken owner and director of the independent Radio Haiti-Inter, who was shot dead by an unknown gunman as he arrived for work in April 2000. Three-and-a-half years later, the masterminds of Dominique's murder remain unidentified and unpunished, a record that Aristide acknowledged must change.

"It's time for [Dominique's family] to see justice," he told us, describing Haiti's judicial system as "broken" and "sick."

Aristide offered a range of excuses for the lack of justice—in Dominique's case, as well as others—including an international aid embargo. And some journalists, he suggested, may exaggerate threats to gain asylum in other countries.

That contention is an affront to exiled Haitian journalists, many of whom choose to live in near destitution in New York, Miami, or across Haiti's border in the Dominican Republic, rather than continue to endure threats in their homeland.

The president assured CPJ that not everyone lies. "I take seriously what some journalists say when they say they fear for their lives," he said. And yes, said the president, among those he takes seriously is Dominique's widow, Michèle Montas, who continued running Radio Haiti-Inter for more than two years after her husband's assassination. Last December, Montas' bodyguard was killed in what was widely viewed as an assassination attempt against her. Within weeks, she had closed the radio station and left Haiti, joining the exile flow.

"We need her," Aristide said of Montas. "Haiti needs her."

Indeed, Haiti does need Montas and all the other independent journalists who could provide this violence-ridden country with what it needs most: a forum for open political discourse where words and ideas—not threats and intimidation—are the norm. ■

Mazen Dana

An unflagging witness to turmoil is honored by his friends and colleagues.

By Joel Campagna

"You can't imagine how many times I've been beaten, wounded, or arrested," Reuters cameraman Mazen Dana told me when I first met him three years ago. We were in Hebron, in the West Bank, and he lifted up his right pant leg to show me an assortment of scars and bruises. A man of courage and confidence, Mazen faithfully documented the political turmoil in his hometown of Hebron for more than a decade.

Mazen, 43, was killed in Iraq on August 17 while filming U.S. forces near Abu Ghraib Prison, just outside of Baghdad. A machine-gunner atop a tank opened fire on Mazen, killing him. (CPJ has demanded an inquiry into the incident. For more information, see www.cpj.org.) His death came as a terrible shock to those who

Joel Campagna is CPJ's senior program coordinator, responsible for the Middle East.

knew him. Professionally, Mazen was one of the finest conflict cameramen of his generation, enduring bullets and physical violence to report the news. Two years ago, Mazen received CPJ's International Press Freedom Award in recognition of his courage amid extraordinarily difficult working conditions. At the awards ceremony at the Waldorf-Astoria in Manhattan, hundreds gave him a

standing ovation after watching a riveting video tribute. Accepting the award, Mazen remarked, "Words and images are a public trust, and for this reason I will continue with my work regardless of the hardships, and even if it costs me my life."

His journalism did cost him his life, but how he lived was about much more than his work. Mazen was a prominent community figure, a friend, and a father of four. The outpouring of sympathy since his death is testimony to how great an impact he had on those who knew him. In Hebron, thousands marched in his funeral procession through the city. In New York, letters of condolence and tributes to Mazen's life and work have streamed into CPJ's office by fax and e-mail.

Mazen once said of his colleagues, "We carry a gift. We film, and we show the world what's going on." Indeed, Mazen was a gift to all of us. ■



Mazen films clashes in Hebron in October 2001.

Cuban police take journalist Oscar Espinosa Chepe (in the middle of the back seat) to court on April 3.



AP/José Goltia

SPY Games

In Cuba, a sinister web of lies and espionage lands dozens of journalists and dissidents in jail.

By Gustavo Gorriti

On March 14, 2003, veteran Cuban journalist Néstor Baguer chaired a seminar on journalistic ethics in Cuba's capital, Havana. Less than a month later, on April 9, during a press conference, Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque showed a videotape featuring Baguer.

"My name is Néstor Baguer," he

Gustavo Gorriti is a journalist in Peru. This article and the accompanying sidebar are based on a CPJ advocacy mission to Cuba in July.

said. "I am a journalist, but I also work for the [Cuban] State Security." During the taped confession, Baguer revealed that he was "agent Octavio," a government spy for more than 40 years who had posed as an independent journalist and had managed to become president of the Cuban Independent Press Association.

Baguer wasn't the only spy to come out of the intelligence closet. Others revealed themselves in quick succession. Odilia Collazo, president of the Cuban Pro-Human Rights

Party, proudly announced that she was "agent Tania"; journalist Manuel David Orrio said he was "agent Miguel"; and Aleida Godínez, the trusted secretary of renowned dissident Martha Beatriz Roque, turned out to be "agent Vilma."

This list of self-confessing moles would have been comical were it not so sinister. With the government's willingness to burn some of its undercover agents posing as journalists, Cuban security forces took advantage of the fact that the

world's attention was focused on the U.S.-led war in Iraq to launch a massive crackdown on dissidents and members of the media, branding them as spies. In March and April, authorities arrested 75 dissidents, among them 28 journalists. The government's strategy was to depict the exercise of independent journalism as an intelligence game of espionage and counterespionage.

In a single blow, the precarious operation of the independent press in Cuba was shattered. Police not only arrested the independent journalists but also raided their homes and confiscated anything that could conceivably be used for communication. At the home of Ricardo González Alfonso, the director of the journalists' association Sociedad de Periodistas Manuel Márquez Sterling, authorities confiscated everything that had been used to publish the 3-month-old bimonthly magazine *De Cuba*—a fax machine, a printer, and a laptop.

At the home of Oscar Espinosa Chepe, in Havana's Playa District, police arrested the journalist after searching his small apartment for nearly 10 hours. They confiscated almost everything of any value: a laptop, money, and his car. The arrest of renowned poet and journalist Raúl Rivero was much quicker. Police broke into his apartment in the run-down neighborhood of Centro Habana, where he lived with his wife, elderly mother, and daughter. The rumor quickly spread that Rivero was being arrested, and people congregated in the street, a mood of protest beginning to erupt. The police only had time for a superficial search; they moved quickly to arrest Rivero and take him away.

Rivero's wife, Blanca Reyes, went to the balcony and shouted: "¡Ahí se llevan a un hombre!" ("There they are arresting a man!"). The neighbors applauded out of respect for Rivero as authorities took him away.

Not Forgotten

In July, I traveled to Cuba on behalf of CPJ to convey to the beleaguered relatives of the imprisoned journalists there that their colleagues worldwide are aware of their plight, and that we admire their fortitude and will increase our solidarity and commitment to help them.

Because some of the previous attempts to contact independent journalists had ended up in arrest, confiscation of records, and expulsion from Cuba, CPJ and I decided that I would enter Cuba as a tourist.

Over the course of three days, I met with the wives of four imprisoned journalists: Miriam Leiva, Oscar Espinosa Chepe's wife; Laura Pollán, the wife of journalist and former president of the Liberal Party Héctor Maseda; Árida Viso, Ricardo González Alfonso's wife; and Blanca Reyes, Raúl Rivero's wife.

Espinosa, who suffers from cirrhosis and needs frequent medical care, is in fragile health. Sitting in her apartment next to an old manual typewriter that somehow escaped confiscation, Leiva looked tired and weary. She said that her 62-year-old husband's health is sliding from bad to worse. He has been moved to and from hospitals and various prisons, including a



AP/José Goltia

Ricardo González Alfonso is seen in January 2003 with copies of his new opposition magazine, *De Cuba*. Two months later, Cuban authorities closed the bimonthly publication and arrested González Alfonso.

period of solitary confinement at the infamous Boniatco Prison, in eastern Santiago de Cuba Province.

In the meantime, Leiva has logged thousands of miles traveling to visit her husband only to be told by prison bureaucrats that she can't see him. When she finally was able to visit Espinosa at the Ambrosio Grillo Hospital, his health had deteriorated so much that, she said, "I left in a state of shock for the first time in my life."

All of the wives mentioned horrible prison conditions. Pollán said that the appalling hygiene conditions have triggered Maseda's allergies, and he has been diagnosed with scabies. Prison doctors have rebuffed Pollán's attempts to bring clean sheets and anti-mange medicines to her husband.

She swelled with pride when she talked about her husband, who is in his sixties and proudly reaffirmed his beliefs in front of his government interrogators. When I met her, she was preparing a care package for her husband filled with phone cards, food, and medicine that she planned to give him on her next trip to the prison. At the same time, however, she expressed concern that her visit with him could be canceled unexpectedly at the last minute.

González Alfonso's wife choked up several times as we talked, her eyes welling with tears. Viso explained that her husband, 53, can receive a "conjugal visit" every five months and a "family visit" every three months. A package with personal items (soap,

food, and medicine) weighing no more than 30 pounds is allowed every four months, but at that time, no visit is allowed, she said. Viso, too, is also worried that her visits will be canceled.

Rivero's wife, Reyes, is an outspoken, brave woman who doesn't mince words. She has suffered much at the hands of the Castro regime and does not hesitate to express her contempt for it. Reyes said that her husband, 57, has lost a great deal of weight in prison. She said he told her, half in jest, however, that he needs to go on a diet.

All four women face daily aggravation and harassment from Cuban authorities. They suffer financially since most of them are not employable because of their husband's status. They worry constantly about the arbitrary disciplinary measures that their husbands face and the inhuman conditions that endanger their husbands' lives. The women themselves have been threatened with arrest.

These imprisoned journalists and their families live with the energy-sapping realization that an attack may happen at any time. As their colleagues, we need to continue to do everything within our power to let them know that we have not forgotten them. ■ —GG



AP/José Collia

Raúl Rivero's wife, Blanca Reyes, speaks with the press in front of the courtroom in the capital, Havana, where her husband was tried in April.

At Villa Marista, the headquarters of the Cuban State Security Department in Havana, authorities interrogated the prisoners and accused them of acting as de facto "agents of the enemy" because of their contacts with foreign diplomats, especially American ones, and because of the sympathy and support they receive from them.

Analysts familiar with Cuban dictator Fidel Castro Ruz's politics explain the Cuban government's decision to initiate a repressive clampdown in different ways. Some suggest that a March wire story by The Associated Press (AP) reporting a growing level of tolerance for independent journalism in Cuba may have annoyed

Castro. In the AP story, *De Cuba's* González Alfonso was quoted as saying that "a lot of people have been amazed that something like this is being put together for Cuban readers on the island." A few weeks later, the magazine ceased to exist, and González Alfonso was in prison.

But perhaps the most striking reason for the crackdown, in which the Cuban government seems bent on portraying the journalists as "mercenaries" and "spies" in the service of the United States, is explained by the fate of five Cuban intelligence agents who were arrested in the United States in 2001 on charges of espionage.

Largely unreported outside the island nation, Castro's campaign to

obtain the release of the five agents has been big news in Cuba—on the scale and intensity of the Elián González story. The campaign began in December 2001, continued through 2002, and today, posters with the photos of the five agents and an over-size title, "Volverán" (They will return), cover walls across the country.

Evidence of how crucial this campaign was in the decision to crack down on dissidents and the media came in February 2003, when U.S. Florida District Judge Joan Lenard denied a motion by the agents' U.S. attorneys for a new trial. A month later, the massive wave of arrests began in Cuba.

A flood of international protests hasn't changed the Cuban regime's

Authorities interrogated the prisoners and accused them of acting as de facto "agents of the enemy" because of their contacts with foreign diplomats, especially American ones.



AP/José Collia

Cuban police block the street near the courthouse where 75 dissidents and journalists were tried as part of a massive crackdown on the opposition in April.

Police not only arrested the independent journalists but also raided their homes and confiscated anything that could conceivably be used for communication.



A crowd gathers outside Raúl Rivero's home in March to protest the journalist's arrest.

AP/Cristóbal Herrera

course of action. Neither have the strong reservations and outright condemnations by formerly stalwart intellectual supporters of Castro, such as Nobel Prize-winning writers Gabriel García Márquez and José Saramago. When the dissidents appeared in court from April 3 to April 5, "all the elements of a Stalinist trial" were put in motion, according to Reporters sans Frontières.

The trials were a complete sham. As journalist and poet Manuel Vázquez Portal observed in his personal diary—which his wife later smuggled out of prison—rather than defending their clients, the defense lawyers fearfully expressed their

commitment to Cuba and to Castro so as not to risk becoming defendants themselves.

Most of the defendants stood by their work and beliefs, unfazed by their bleak personal prospects, but a few, facing the harsh prospect of spending most of their lives in prison under inhuman conditions, broke down. For instance, one of the arrested dissidents, Osvaldo Alfonso, president of the Liberal Democratic Party of Cuba, read a statement saying that he had been "used" by the U.S. government and that "one way or another" he and his fellow defendants had served the "interests of the United States."

At the end of the meaningless trials, 28 journalists were sentenced to jail terms ranging from 14 to 27 years.

Bad as the process was, the short time that elapsed between the arrests, imprisonment, trial, and sentencing was made more bearable by its very compression and intensity. From early April on, however, the dreary realities of imprisonment in a police state would simultaneously trap the prisoners and their families in the perverse web of Cuba's prison system. Its Kafkaesque regulations would mean medieval conditions for the prisoners, forcing the families into a draining struggle for the health—and even the lives—of their loved ones. ■

Forced into Exile



CPJ/Adam Posluns

Journalist Throble Suah reflects on his situation and his future.

For many Liberian journalists, working under former President Charles Taylor's watchful eye was impossible—especially once you were on his "blacklist."

By Adam Posluns

Charles Taylor, former president of Liberia, resigned on August 11, 2003, and went to Nigeria, where he was given asylum. While his departure may have ended a period of conflict and terror, journalists who had previously fled his repressive regime for exile in Ghana have doubts about returning because many of Taylor's loyalists remain in Liberia.

In late August, CPJ's Africa Researcher Adam Posluns traveled to Ghana to meet with some of these displaced journalists.

“What happened recently to me started in July 2002,” says Throble Suah, a 35-year-old Liberian journalist with *The Inquirer*, an independent daily based in Liberia's capital, Monrovia. “I was asked by my editor to go to the Liberian peace talks in Ougadougou, Burkina Faso, because I speak both French and English, and I was knowledgeable about regional politics.”

While at the talks, which then President Charles Taylor of Liberia shunned, Suah reported on the attendance of opposition figures and representatives of the rebel Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD). He followed up with an investigative report on the growing refugee crisis in Guinea and northern Liberia—the result of a mass exodus of Liberians escaping escalating confrontations in

the 3-year-old war between the LURD and government fighters. Taylor took note of Suah's dispatches, which made their way back to Monrovia, and he was not pleased.

“Taylor held a press conference ... and he took me to task,” says Suah. Fellow journalists who heard Taylor speak at the press conference warned Suah that his life was in danger, and that Taylor was out to get him. “My name was at the top of Taylor's blacklist of journalists.”

Being on Taylor's “blacklist” was serious business and a sure sign, according to one Liberian journalist exiled in Ghana, that the president “would eventually get to you, if it took a week, six months, or three years.” Taylor's goal was always to secure his absolute power over

Liberia. After escaping from prison in the United States, where he was held for 15 months on an extradition request by the Liberian government, which accused him of embezzling about US\$1 million, Taylor started a seven-year guerrilla war in 1989. After winning elections in 1997, he systematically purged the country of

“But I had my diary with me, and in it I had my press union ID card and my regular ID card. They seized this from me and took hold of me ... one of them hit me with his rifle in the back of my neck and said that I was the one they had been looking for, and that they had been looking for me for a long time. Then they beat me.”

Taylor’s men beat Suah so severely that he suffered nerve damage and was unable to see or walk for months.

any effective political opposition and human rights activists, leaving the media as the last critical sector of society and putting journalists squarely in his path. Those who criticized the regime were branded “enemies of the state,” and Taylor’s undisciplined security forces went on a rampage of abuse, attacking and arresting reporters and closing publications and radio stations.

Suah had clearly annoyed a man who would do anything to suppress Liberia’s media. Following Suah’s reports on the July 2002 peace talks and the Liberian refugees, Suah went into hiding for the next five months. “I didn’t sleep at home. The regime had planted people near my house and near my office.” But on Saturday, December 14, 2002, five officers from Taylor’s dreaded Antiterrorist Unit (ATU) found him. “I didn’t want to reveal my identity,” recalls Suah.

The ATU agents beat Suah so severely that he suffered nerve damage, temporary loss of sight, and was unable to walk for months. “I don’t know how I got to the hospital ... I was urinating blood, I had no feeling in my body. I was completely numb.”

After three weeks in a Monrovia hospital, Suah was flown to Ghana with the help of several press freedom organizations and received further medical treatment. One journal-

ist who met Suah at the airport on his arrival in Ghana’s capital, Accra, said, “When I saw him, I never believed that he was going to survive. When the doctors came to see him, even they were shaking their heads, as though they were ready to give up.”

According to Suah, who still suffers from memory loss, “it wasn’t until March ... that I came to know how I got to Ghana.”

Liberian journalists say that several factors made Suah a target for authorities. In addition to his critical and independent reporting, some of Suah’s colleagues say that his ethnic background worked against him. Suah is a Krahn from southeastern Liberia, and Taylor is notoriously suspicious of Krahns, many of whom opposed him during the 1989-1996 war and belong to the Movement for Democracy in Liberia, another rebel group that recently emerged to fight for Taylor’s ouster. Because the journalist’s ethnic group had a history of opposing Taylor, and because Suah was one of the first Liberian journal-

ists to travel to and report from rebel-held territories, the government saw him, according to his colleagues, as having connections to the LURD and, therefore, as the enemy.

But Suah isn’t the only Liberian journalist that fled the country to avoid Taylor’s wrath. Hassan Bility, editor-in-chief of *The Analyst* newspaper, was arrested in June 2002 and accused of harboring LURD sympathies; he was later labeled an “unlawful



Reporter Wellington Geevon-Smith stands on the street outside the Media Foundation of West Africa’s offices in Ghana.

CPI/Adam Posluns



Vendors sell their wares at the Makola Market in Ghana’s capital, Accra.

CPI/Adam Posluns

combatant.” Bility, who had a reputation for critical journalism, was held for six months, mostly incommunicado, and was tortured repeatedly before being released into exile.

In August 2000, Wellington Geevon-Smith, a former reporter for Star Radio, which Taylor closed that year for “inflammatory comments and radio programming,” was working as a fixer for four journalists from British Channel 4 who had government permission to film a documentary about Liberia. On August 18, Taylor’s security forces arrested the four journalists, who were released seven days later after intense international pressure. But Geevon-Smith, the only Liberian working with the British journalists, fled the country after the Taylor government accused him of being a “collaborator with enemies of the state.” The journalist knew to take this accusation seriously. “Once you have been branded like that, the language is very clear,” he says.

The warning was even clearer for journalists from the *New Democrat*, a Monrovia daily that had suffered repeated harassment by Taylor’s men throughout its seven years of existence. When the paper implied that Taylor was involved in the mysterious death of Vice President Enoch Dogolea in 2000, the enraged leader said he would “personally move” against the *New Democrat* journalists and would get “ferocious” with them. The paper’s entire staff fled into exile. “We remained resolute ... in spite of the repressive circumstances,” recalls Charles Jackson, the paper’s managing editor. “But the situation became untenable—you can’t take your chances with Taylor and his thugs.”

After six years in power, Charles Taylor resigned his presidency on August 11, 2003, and left the country for exile in Nigeria. He stands indicted for crimes against humanity for his role in the 11-year civil war

in neighboring Sierra Leone. In the meantime, Taylor handed over the presidency to his longtime ally, Vice President Moses Blah, who led the country until Gyude Bryant took office on October 14.

In late August, moving slowly to take a seat in the shade on the grounds of a convalescent home in Accra, Suah, who still walks with a noticeable limp, ponders recent developments. “In the future, I wish to return home and continue. I love journalism. But it is not yet safe.” Indeed, Taylor’s departure alone is no guarantee of safety for Liberian journalists. Taylor loyalists and members of his security services still haunt Monrovia, fully armed, harboring grudges against the regime’s perceived opponents.

“Mr. Taylor believed in regime security, not human security,” Suah says. “Until there is a total disarmament in the next two years with the help of the international community, it will be difficult.” ■



CPJ/A. Lin Neumann

An Independent Voice

A Buddhist broadcaster makes waves in Cambodia.

By A. Lin Neumann

On a Friday afternoon in late August, a woman walks quietly through a creaky iron gate and approaches a small table in front of the offices of Beehive Radio in

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Cambodia's capital, Phnom Penh. She hands a small bundle of crisp Cambodian riels, the equivalent of US\$5, to the man at the desk, who records her name in a tattered notebook on a long and growing list of contributors.

In exchange for her money, the man hands her a small sticker bearing the words "Beehive FM 105" and a

printed appeal thanking the public for helping the station upgrade its transmitter and stay on the air. Before she leaves, the man adds a Buddhist blessing, presses his hands together, and bows slightly as she returns the gesture.

"They come every day," says Chom Cha Wan, a station employee

responsible for collecting donations. "Maybe 500 people, maybe 800. They keep coming."

Kon Seak Liu, the housewife and shopkeeper who left the money, was quickly followed by half a dozen more people, some leaving as little as US\$0.25, others considerably more. "We want this radio to grow, to increase," explains Kon Seak Liu. "We want the information to spread."

The man at the heart of Beehive Radio, a focus of devotion for Kon Seak Liu and others, is an iconoclastic French-educated photographer, devout Buddhist, jazz fan, and former politician named Mam Sonando. His Beehive Radio is widely considered to be the only independent radio station in Cambodia and an important platform for contrary voices in a country dominated by longtime Prime Minister Hun Sen's political machine. As a result, during the July 2003 general elections, Beehive was virtually the only station in Cambodia that offered airtime to all major parties. Because of its independence, the station has drawn the anger of the government, attention from human rights advocates, and loyalty from listeners.

Mam Sonando himself is a figure of considerable complexity. When he returned to Cambodia in 1993 after spending nearly 30 years in Paris—first for schooling in 1964 and then to escape the political chaos that engulfed the country when the Khmer Rouge took power in 1975—Mam Sonando wanted to take advantage of the U.N.-supervised elections that year to do something interesting in his homeland.

Mam Sonando obtained a radio license through a personal connection with a government minister and used his station, as so many others use the media here, to launch a

political career. In 1995, he formed the Beehive Democratic Society Party and ran in the 1998 general elections.

His grandstanding on the radio—an odd mixture of Buddhist philosophy and pleas for democracy—was to no avail. The party won no seats in the election, and he decided not to run in 2003. He dismantled the political party and instead turned Beehive Radio into an independent media operation. "The radio is important," he says. "It is not about my politics or party anymore."

Independent media are badly needed in Cambodia. Prime Minister

During the July general elections, Beehive was virtually the only station in Cambodia to offer airtime to all major parties.

Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party has a virtual lock on the airwaves, awarding broadcast licenses to loyalists and comrades through an opaque process managed by the Information Ministry with no public oversight. Opposition forces can rarely find a voice. The royalist National United Front for a Neutral, Peaceful, Cooperative, and Independent Cambodia, the party of Prince Norodom Ranariddh, only last year obtained a license to operate a radio station. The efforts of opposition stalwart Sam Rainsy's eponymous party to open a radio station have never gained a favorable audience from the government.

Political factions bankroll even Cambodia's famously vocal newspapers. "All the media here are affiliated with the government or some politician. They all have their backers," says a local correspondent for the U.S. government-funded Voice of America (VOA).

Because of its independence, Beehive is a natural outlet for international agencies wanting to broaden the scope of democracy in Cambodia. The station rebroadcasts three hours a day of Khmer-language news from VOA and Radio Free Asia (RFA) and also carries programming from a local human rights group, the Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR), which receives funding from the International Republican Institute in Washington, D.C. Airtime is sold on a contract basis, and Mam Sonando admits that the foreign support is a big help to his bottom line.

But it is not about the money, he notes. In recent years, his devotion to Buddhism has deepened, he says, and that is his inspiration now for the radio—and the source of his appeal to the people who donate money to the station. Beehive Radio is part of a Buddhist commitment. It is one way Mam Sonando "makes merit" through doing good works on earth, a tenet of Buddhism.

Two years ago he also constructed Ashram Mam Sonando, a sizable Buddhist temple and meditation hall inside the compound that houses the radio station and his home. The temple has become a center of Buddhist meditation in the city, drawing a regular stream of devotees.

One afternoon, the garish temple, its walls decorated with hand-painted scenes in Day-Glo colors from the life of the Buddha and its altar glowing with twinkling multicolored lights, is being festooned with flowers

and prayer flags in preparation for a ceremony to donate food and clothing to local monks. The ceremony was also timed to coincide with Beehive's public campaign for the new transmitter facility. "Buddhism is also about politics," explains Mam Sonando as work in the temple goes on around him. "If you do good, good will come to you. It is about karma, of course."

doubling (and possibly tripling) the coverage area of Beehive Radio. "Beehive used to have a scratchy signal, even in Phnom Penh," says Andrew Thornley, a CCHR adviser. "With the new transmitter they can be heard all over central Cambodia."

While Mam Sonando still goes on the air with his own pointed harangues against Hun Sen, it is Beehive Radio as an institution that is

allowing listeners to speak their minds on air—got him in trouble.

On January 29, anti-Thai riots erupted in Phnom Penh after local newspapers falsely accused a popular Thai actress of insulting Cambodian culture and claiming that the famed Angkor Wat temple complex should belong to Thailand. The actress denied making the comments, but during the rioting that destroyed the Thai Embassy and inflicted millions of dollars in damages on Thai-owned property, a caller to Beehive falsely said on air that mobs were attacking the Cambodian Embassy in Bangkok.

The next day, Mam Sonando was arrested and charged with maliciously fomenting disinformation during the rioting. One of only two media figures held (the other was an opposition newspaper editor), Mam Sonando was detained for four days before being released, but the charges are hanging over his head and could lead to imprisonment and heavy fines.

"It is because my radio does not support the government," he says of his problems as he sits in his cramped, dimly lit office decorated with a Beehive FM 105 banner. "This is a dictatorship, and they consider me an enemy."

So why does he bother? Again, he retreats to his Buddhist philosophy. "Nothing is permanent. We will all die," he says. "The point is to choose how we will die and how we will live."

At the end of a long afternoon, the quiet stream of visitors is still leaving small bits of cash at the tables outside Beehive Radio. Yee Tam, a minor official with the Phnom Penh City government, brings US\$10, something he has done regularly during the last month. "Why? I give money because this radio tells the truth," he says when asked about his motivation. "It is not afraid." ■



CPJ/A. Lin Neumann

A fan of Beehive FM 105 makes a donation to a representative of the station.

People seem to respond to the message. During his one-month appeal for donations, Mam Sonando says he raised US\$10,000, mostly in very small cash gifts, a remarkable amount in Cambodia. "This is very historic," he notes. "Cambodia is a poor country, and people usually go to politicians asking for money. But here they give money to us just to keep the radio going."

The fund-raising campaign, coupled with airtime purchases from foreign agencies, has been enough to upgrade the station from a 1-kilowatt to a 5-kilowatt transmitter, effectively

important, according to Thornley and others. Without Beehive, it is almost certain that Sam Rainsy, whose party surged in popularity in the July 2003 general elections, would have had no platform in the broadcast media

Through it all, Mam Sonando seems certain to continue drawing controversy. The government has frequently warned him against airing VOA and RFA news, which Cambodian People's Party loyalists consider anti-Hun Sen. Most recently, another of Beehive's rare features for Cambodia—an open-mike call-in program



AP/Maxim Mermur

This painting of President Imomali Rakhmonov hovers over a police checkpoint in Tajikistan. Images such as this have spread in recent years, leaving observers to question whether Rakhmonov is creating a Soviet-style cult of personality.

Arrested Development

In Tajikistan, a failure to solve the cases of dozens of murdered journalists and an unwillingness to promote media pluralism leave the country in the dark.

By Alex Lupis

The first thing a visitor to Mukhtor Bokhizoda's tiny office at the Newspaper and Magazine Complex in the outskirts of Tajikistan's capital, Dushanbe, notices is a huge poster tacked on the wall. On the poster are tiny photos of the more than two dozen journalists murdered in the mid-1990s during the country's five years of civil war.

"I think that the authorities were involved," says Bokhizoda, who runs the Tajik-language weekly *Nerui Suhan* (Power of the Word) and founded the Fund for the Commemoration and

Alex Lupis is CPJ program coordinator for Europe and Central Asia. This article is based on his July 2003 mission to Tajikistan. CPJ Deputy Director Joel Simon and board member Josh Friedman also traveled with Lupis.

Protection of the Rights of Journalists, a nongovernmental organization dedicated to promoting press freedom, in 1996. He says that many of the murders can be linked to the People's Front, a paramilitary group that later formed the current government. (According to CPJ's records, at least 29 journalists were murdered between 1992 and 1997 in reprisal for their work. The majority were killed by members of the People's Front, as well as by the opposition, a coalition of nationalist and Islamic parties.)

Memories of the violence that engulfed Tajikistan in the bloody civil war are fresh for many journalists in this impoverished, landlocked country that gained independence from the Soviet Union 12 years ago. But it's more than just fear that permeates the media here. For many, the government is to blame not only for failing to take the lead in investigating the murders but also for not promoting

and encouraging the practice of independent journalism.

In fact, even as President Imomali Rakhmonov has slowly expanded his authority throughout the nation, marginalizing the opposition and bringing the countryside under the control of the central government, Tajikistan's press remains economically weak and unable to resist government pressure. The government's lack of transparency and its failure to provide access to information have left the Tajik people in a vacuum with little knowledge about domestic politics. Most Tajiks depend on Russian state television for information about international affairs. As one older Tajik journalist notes, the people of Tajikistan could access more information during the Soviet period.

Looking out the open window in his cluttered office, where every flat surface is covered with neat

piles of newspapers, documents, and books, Bokhizoda breathes in the dry heat of summer and sighs with frustration. The normally mild-mannered journalist and human rights activist has a right to be angry with the government's indifference to solving the cases of all these murdered journalists who stare at him from the poster on his wall. In the spring of 2002, Bokhizoda was preparing to publish a book with biographies of the journalists that included information on how each of them died and who might have killed them. But just as he was finishing the book, he arrived at his office one day to find that it had been ransacked. And his computer, containing all of his research, had been stolen.

Little progress has been made in solving the journalists' murders, despite Deputy Interior Minister Abdurahim Kakharov's claim that in October 2002, the Interior Ministry

and Prosecutor General's Office established an investigative unit in Dushanbe and in other cities to examine the cases. Deputy Prosecutor General Azizmat Imomov, a cautious, slightly withdrawn man, says that investigators reactivate murder cases and spend up to three months formally investigating them whenever they obtain new information or leads. Imomov explains, "Cases are not archived until they are solved by investigators."

The terrible violence perpetrated against journalists hangs heavily over the press. Government officials insist that their citizens have overcome the regional, ethnic, and religious divisions that fueled the war, noting that rural roads are safe to travel and that families now take evening walks along Dushanbe's broad, tree-lined avenues. But journalists tell a different story—one of fear and self-censorship.

"There hasn't been a murder in seven or eight years, but journalists still have this syndrome of fear," says Nargiz Zakirova, a local stringer for the London-based Institute for War and Peace Reporting. "Journalists don't dare to write critical articles because they don't believe the government will protect them and don't even have faith in the court system."

As if to show that the government takes the killing of journalists seriously, several officials point to the trial of two suspects in the murders of Muhiddin Olimpur, head of the BBC's Persian Service bureau, and Viktor Nikulin, a correspondent with the Russian television network ORT, as evidence of the government's commitment to prosecuting these murders. Both Olimpur and Nikulin were killed in the mid-1990s, and on July 29, 2003, the country's Supreme Court convicted two suspects and sentenced them to 15 and 22 years in prison, respectively, for serving as accomplices in the slayings.

The presiding judge in the case told the Russian news agency RIA



CPJ/Alex Lupis

Sharif Khamdamov is the editor-in-chief of Tojikiston, one of Tajikistan's few serious newsweeklies.

Novosti that a field commander with the United Tajik Opposition who died during the civil war ordered the murders. The man suspected of carrying out the killings is serving a prison term in St. Petersburg, Russia, for an unrelated crime, according to Russian news reports, and Russian authorities have rejected Tajikistan's extradition request.

But most local journalists have serious doubts about the government's actions. While they welcomed the July convictions, members of the

prosecute its own members, he adds, but many former People's Front field commanders are high-ranking officials in the Interior Ministry, the KGB, and General Prosecutor's Office.

Unlike Bokhizoda's office in the Newspaper and Magazine Complex, publisher Akbar Sattarov's spacious, L-shaped office, just up the stairs from a cheap marble lobby, is air-conditioned and tidy. And unlike Bokhizoda, who seems aware of his vulnerability, Sattarov is confident, charming, and gregarious.

In Tajikistan, a country of 4 million people without a single daily newspaper, Sattarov—who publishes the respected current affairs weekly *Vecherny Dushanbe* (The Dushanbe Evening) and a handful of general-interest weeklies in both Russian and Tajik—is a media mogul. (Circulation figures in Tajikistan are unavailable. According Rukhshona Olimova, a media analyst with the Dushanbe office of Internews, a U.S.-based media training organization, publishers and editors consider circulation numbers a "commercial secret" and don't release them because the "tax police use them to calculate tax liability.")

"I have had to become an enemy of press freedom," says publisher Akbar Sattarov. "I have to protect my journalists from the government by censoring them."

media are unanimous in their belief that the trials did not represent a larger government commitment to fully investigate the murders.

"Most of the journalists were killed by members of the People's Front, and President Rakhmonov was the commander of the People's Front during the civil war," says a Tajik journalist working for the U.S. government-funded Voice of America. Not only is the government highly unlikely to

But even though Tajikistan is rife with corruption, violence, and drug trafficking, Sattarov covers none of it. If he did, he says, the government would shut him down.

"As a publisher, I have had to become an enemy of press freedom," he explains regretfully. "These are sad times because after the civil war, government-media relations have come down to 'don't touch me and I won't touch you.' ... I have to protect



CPJ/Alex Lupis

A woman sells newspapers at the main bazaar in the northern city of Khujand.

my journalists from the government by censoring them.”

Sattarov’s competitors largely follow the same formula. Aside from *Vecherny Dushanbe*, there are only five other national current-affairs weeklies, and most of them report on politics just as cautiously. There is no national private television station in Tajikistan, and only a handful of local private radio stations. After years of war and deprivation, few Tajiks today have enough money for essentials, much less newspapers. Almost no foreign publications circulate in the country.

Government ministries in Tajikistan have little interaction with the media beyond disseminating press releases, which publications often reproduce verbatim. Despite a decade of independence, President Rakhmonov, Dushanbe’s Mayor Mahmadsaid Ubaidulloev, and other senior government officials remain untouchable.

Indeed, the government has an array of strategies for manipulating press coverage and punishing the few journalists and media outlets that dare to push the boundaries.

The most pervasive method is simply to refuse to disseminate government information except in press releases. Journalists speak with anger and frustration about their interactions with government ministries. While some agencies, such as the Presidential Administration and

The government has been no more forthcoming with the foreign press. “Several times when we contacted government agencies for information, particularly the Health Ministry, government officials said that they were specifically told not to speak with foreign journalists without getting permission,” says BBC journalist Shohdat Zia.

The government also owns Sharki Ozod, the country’s sole industrial-size printing press, and has on occasion rejected or delayed publications of newspapers containing critical articles. “In May, the director of Sharki Ozod refused to print our newspaper because of one article he was not happy with,” says the editor-in-chief of a news-weekly. “He answers to the presidential administration, and I suspect he must have gotten an order from them.” The Sharki Ozod director was not available to comment.

Then there are the tax police, who also have enormous discretion. “There are hungry bureaucrats and

The government has many strategies for manipulating coverage and punishing journalists, the most pervasive of which is simply to refuse to disseminate information.

the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, have appointed press officers in recent years, none have created Web sites, and journalists complain that interviews with government officials are exceedingly rare.

tax police ... everyone wants a piece of the pie,” says another editor-in-chief who refuses to discuss specifics for fear of retaliation. According to Timur Sharipov, an assistant to the Tax Minister, the idea



A vendor sorts newspapers in front of the state-run Sharki Ozod printing house in Tajikistan’s capital, Dushanbe.

that the tax police could be politicized or corrupt “is madness.”

Sharif Khamdamov, editor-in-chief of *Tojikiston*, one of the country’s few serious newsweeklies, provided another more subtle example of government pressure. On April 26, the state power company shut off electricity in a Dushanbe auditorium during an event organized by the newspaper. This incident followed an article published in March accusing the power company of mismanagement.

“They left the entire audience, including the minister of culture, international officials, and a group of performers, stranded in a pitch-black theater,” Khamdamov says.

The government has also kept Dodojon Atovullo, an exiled Tajik journalist, from using the Internet to publish articles that criticize Tajikistan’s government. For most of the last decade, Atovullo has published his banned opposition newspaper, *Charogi Ruz*, in exile. In 2002, the ban was lifted, thanks in part to pressure from CPJ and other international press freedom groups. Although *Charogi Ruz* is no longer in circulation, in March 2003, Atovullo, who lives in Moscow, launched the Web site *Tajikistantimes.ru*. His new Web site has become one of the few venues where people in Tajikistan can access critical articles about President Rakhmonov.

But in April, private Internet service providers (ISP) in Tajikistan blocked access to the site, and ISP employees told journalists that they had done so at the request of “a government agency.” Government officials deny that they blocked the site and say that *Tajikistantimes.ru* is unavailable in the country for technical reasons.

With the print media forced to censor themselves and the Internet selectively blocked, the government has also been determined to obstruct the development of the independent broadcast media. While authorities issued broadcast licenses to several independent radio stations in the northern city of Khujand—most likely to counter the influence of powerful media in neighboring Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan—officials stalled in Dushanbe.

The first truly independent radio station to operate in Dushanbe, Asia-Plus, had to wait four years before finally receiving a broadcast license in July 2002. Its request for a television broadcast license was rejected this September, allegedly for lacking proper personnel and technical equipment.

“We’re not sure why we were turned down,” says Asia-Plus director Daler Nurkhanov. “No one from

the licensing commission ever came to the station to look at our equipment or meet with our staff.”

Asia-Plus radio has become popular with a mix of Western-style programming, pop music, and brief news updates. Government officials are still clearly uncomfortable with the station. “Their Western music is not correct, they use slang, and they don’t promote our Tajik poets and writers,” sniffs Muhammad Goibov, the chairman of the secretive commission that finally granted Asia-Plus its license. “I’ve told them that I’ll help them because I know Tajik music, it’s better, that’s what I like.”

When asked why it took so many years for Asia-Plus to get its radio license, Committee for Television and Radio Broadcasting Director Ubaidullo Radjabov, a heavyset man who doesn’t take kindly to those who challenge his authority, is dismissive. “I don’t understand this question, it’s inappropriate,” retorts Radjabov. He believes that the government has no obligation to explain its rationale to the public for refusing to grant broadcast licenses.

Tajik government officials consistently blame the country’s timid news reporting on the “outdated” mentality of journalists, claiming that civil war-era self-censorship “remains in their minds.” Other officials insist that bureaucrats only withhold information from journalists to prevent political instability, suggesting that news coverage of crime, corruption, and poverty could lead to war. “One wrong phrase could start the fighting again,” says Radjabov.

But the argument that Tajik journalists are cowed by an irrational fear is belied by the work of journalists like Bokhizoda, who refuses to

publish his paper with the state-run Sharki Ozod printing press for fear of government interference. Instead, Bokhizoda relies on a small, private company, despite their slower and poorer quality printers.

But his willingness to test the waters and speak his mind continues to attract negative attention from authorities. The March 6 edition of his newspaper, *Nerui Suhan*, reprinted a BBC interview with the head of the country’s Islamic opposition, Said Abdullo Nuri, who criticized a forthcoming referendum extending President Rakhmonov’s term. A week later, on March 14, the journalist was called to the city prosecutor’s office and dressed down for publishing the interview with a photo showing



Mukhtor Bokhizoda displays the notes he salvaged after assailants ransacked his office and stole his computer.

Dushanbe Mayor Ubaidulloev standing behind Nuri, suggesting a possible alliance between the mayor and the Islamic opposition against Rakhmonov.

Independent journalists are watching *Nerui Suhan* closely. They see it as a test case for the government’s tolerance of media pluralism. “We just want to publish a newspaper so that journalists can start to feel like journalists again,” says Bokhizoda. “We have gotten phone calls from government officials complaining about articles in our newspaper, but now is not the time for journalists to be quiet. ... I simply cannot be silent anymore.” ■

Adventure in Laos

When two Western journalists tried to do a story on the Hmong people, they got more than they bargained for.

By **Thierry Falise**

I had always wanted to do a story about the Hmong, an ethnic minority group in Laos that has been engaged in an antigovernment rebellion for decades. So, on May 22, with tourist visas in hand, Vincent Reynaud, a French television journalist with whom I had been working in Bangkok, and I stepped off a plane in Vientiane, the Laotian capital. We were ready for our adventure—or at least we thought we were.

The ruling Communist Lao People's Revolutionary Party has long suppressed the Hmong's anticommunist rebel movement, whose members are the survivors and descendants of the famous "secret army" that the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency recruited during the Vietnam War. The guerrilla war that the Hmongs have been waging held little interest for me. I was attracted to documenting their plight and lifestyle in Laos, which has become a popular destination for budget travelers. And I was drawn to the Hmong people's crazy hope that their one-time American ally will arrive and deliver them from the "yoke of communism."

Thierry Falise is a Belgian freelance reporter and photographer based in Bangkok, Thailand. A version of this article, which was translated by CPJ's Alexis Arieff, was first printed in the Belgian daily Le Soir.

Two nights after our arrival, we began filming along a road about 25 miles (40 kilometers) from the city of Phongsavanh in the remote northern corner of Laos. We were with two civilian Hmong guides and Naw Karl Mua, a U.S. pastor of Hmong origin, who was our interpreter. Our situation was precarious not only because the government denies the existence of the Hmong rebellion but also because the ruling party, which owns all of the country's media outlets, does not look favorably upon the foreign press.

For the next two nights, we bumped blindly against roots, barbed wire, ditches, creeper vines, and branches, crossing a succession of hills and groves occupied by herds of cattle and Laotian soldiers, whom we were desperate to avoid. At least four or five times, we barely missed colliding with troops. These narrow misses should have alerted me to what the rest of the trip held in store, but my 15-plus years of reporting on Asian guerrilla fighters—who had always protected me, even at risk to themselves—had no doubt softened my vigilance.

On May 27, after reaching the relative safety of the jungle, 15 or so Hmong resistance fighters from the community we were going to visit joined us. The rebels were thrilled to see us and seemed honored that we cared to document their story. And it



AP/Sakchai Lalit

Upon arrival at Thailand's Bangkok airport, French cameraman Vincent Reynaud talks on his cell phone after being released from prison in Laos.

wasn't just the rebels who greeted us warmly; hundreds of men, women, and children in rags—scrawny, sick, wounded, and crippled—came out to

meet us and enveloped us with hugs and cries of welcome.

"They think you are Americans who have come to save them," whispered one of the rebel leaders.

Chong Toua Moua, an older man, summed up the grievances of his companions in misery. "Our grandfathers, our fathers, and some of us worked for the Americans. Today we are paying the price of their defeat, and we are hunted by communists who want to wipe us out. The Americans must come and reconstruct our country, and our lives, to make them as they were before. If they cannot do this, then they should relocate us somewhere else." For five days, this same sentiment was repeated over and over to us.

After spending a few days interviewing and photographing the Hmongs, we started our journey back to Phongsavanh. Six armed members of the resistance offered to escort us out of the jungle.

On June 3, while we waited in the dark along the road to Phongsavanh for the vehicle that was to take us back to Vientiane, a Laotian soldier drove up on his motorcycle. Our escorts became nervous and started shouting to each other. The soldier heard the noise, stopped his bike,

and pointed his flashlight to where we were hiding. Suddenly, a volley of machine-gun fire erupted. Vincent and I threw ourselves flat on our stomachs in the mud, just in time to see the shadows of our Hmong protectors fleeing the scene.

We waited for the soldier to shoot us. The best I could hope for, I thought, was that he would arrest us. But nothing happened. We hid for three hours, hedged in by the lights of the soldiers' pocket lamps and the crackling footsteps of others who arrived as reinforcements. They didn't find us.

The next day at dawn, we made it back up to the top of the hill, where we were reunited with our six Hmong guards. They had our bags and our film, but Karl, our translator, and our two civilian guides were missing. The guards were in a hurry to get home and had no desire to stay around. They said their goodbyes and took off, leaving us alone again.

Vincent and I headed back down to a village in the valley where we pretended to be lost tourists. But as we continued along the road to Phongsavanh, soldiers stopped us at a checkpoint and questioned us about the previous night's gunfire. As it turned out, the shooting we heard had been instigated by our Hmong guides, who had shot and killed the soldier on the motorcycle. There began an agonizing drama that would last five weeks. As we were arrested and taken into custody, we managed to evade police supervision long enough to meet a Canadian tourist who promised to contact our friends in Bangkok.

On Sunday, June 8, after three days of being cooped up in an empty shed, the police ordered us to kneel down before handcuffing us and covering our heads with black hoods. I thought for sure they were going to kill us, but instead, they put us on a plane, chained us to our seats, and flew to Vientiane. There, Vincent and I were placed in separate prison cells

and charged with immigration violations. Our hope was that we would simply be expelled from the country. It would have been the easiest option for the Laotian government, allowing them to confiscate our film while sparing themselves an international scandal coupled with extraordinary publicity for the Hmong.

The prison conditions were daunting: nothing but heat, humidity, stagnant air, mosquitoes, neon lights that stayed on 24 hours a day, and infernal acoustics that rendered any cross-cell conversation exhausting. True, we were never subjected to physical brutality because of our stature as Western journalists. Our two civilian Hmong guides, who we later discovered had been picked up the night of the shooting with our translator, were not so lucky. The two men were tortured and beaten with sticks and bicycle chains.

For Vincent and me, the ordeal was mostly psychological. We spent three weeks in the prison, including 10 days in total isolation, before we were able to meet with our wives and with French and Belgian diplomats during closely observed 10-minute sessions.

On June 30, in a two-and-a-half hour trial that was clearly rigged, we were each sentenced to 15 years in prison for possession of explosives, weapons, and opium, among other charges. The next day, a van delivered us to the gates of the foreigners' prison, which is just outside the capital and well-known for its frequent human rights violations.

We felt very much alone. We knew almost nothing—except for the bits of information gleaned during our brief visits with our wives—of the amazing solidarity campaign launched by our friends, families, colleagues, and thousands of strangers.

And then it all ended as quickly as it had begun: On July 9, guards dragged me, Vincent, and Naw Karl Mua from our cells and put us on a plane headed to Bangkok. Sadly, our Hmong guides remain in prison. ■



AP/Bernard Center

Thierry Falise, a Belgian journalist based in Thailand, is seen on assignment in Cambodia in 1990.

Battle Lines

In the struggle for power in Afghanistan, conservative Islamic forces are determined to control the press.

By Danish Karokhel

An article titled “Sacred Fascism” about alleged atrocities committed by mujahedeen fighters in the name of Islam was bound to be controversial in Afghanistan. Sure enough, just days after the weekly *Aftab*, based in the capital, Kabul, published the article on June 11, 2003, editor Mirhassan Mahdawi and his deputy, Ali Payam Sistany, found themselves jailed, accused of blasphemy. Afghanistan’s Supreme Court ordered the newspaper closed, and hundreds of protesters—mainly religious students from the ultra-conservative Islamic madrasa Darul-loom al-Arabia—took to the streets. When the journalists were finally released a week later, they went into hiding in fear of their lives.

But that is only part of the story in Afghanistan, a country emerging from one of the world’s most censorious regimes where the future state of media law—and the place of Islam within it—is currently up for debate. What the *Aftab* case really illustrates is the bitter divide between different secular and religious authorities in this 99 percent Muslim land, where vaguely worded press laws can be stretched to practically any ends by those with power.

Danish Karokhel is a local trainer and reporter for the Kabul office of the Institute for War and Peace Reporting.

On one side of the divide are the Ministry of Culture and Information and President Hamed Karzai, the head of the interim administration, who eventually released the two journalists on June 25. On the other side are the conservative Islamic groups that dominate the Supreme Court and the Attorney General’s Office.

This tussle for power was previously highlighted when the Supreme Court—in a move eerily reminiscent of the Taliban, which banned all



An Afghan man arranges newspapers at his roadside newsstand in the capital, Kabul.

television—attempted to outlaw cable television despite the fact that the Ministry of Culture and Information had ruled otherwise.

Currently at issue is the Justice Ministry’s review of the draft press laws, which has resulted in only the smallest of proposed changes—and even those changes have yet to make it into the books.

Ahmad Zia Siamak Heravi, the respected editor of the government daily *Anis* and the only journalist personally consulted on the new draft press laws, is, however, delighted that a proposed provision decrees that no government authority may detain a journalist accused of breaching media rules without permission from a yet-to-be created media commission. He also notes that articles of the current law ordering punishments to be carried out under Shariah, or Islamic law, and another article banning stories that could “weaken” the Afghan army have been dropped.

But other journalists think that the proposed press laws look just as vague in scope as the current rules. They say that the new laws can be easily turned against almost any writer or editor out of the authorities’ favor. The articles that remain on the books and that are most open to interpretation include those banning stories that “insult holy Islam and other religions” or “dishonor an individual.” Another prohibits “provocative

writings and pictures which cause general immorality.”

It was this article that the Attorney General’s Office cited as part of an effort to shut the office of family magazine *Saba-woon* after it published photos of a female basketball player in a tracksuit and a short-sleeved T-shirt in August 2002.

Press laws aside, former soldiers continue to exert influence over the media. After the weekly newspaper *Pamir* published a story condemning the continuing role of strongmen in Afghanistan’s politics, the Kabul municipality—which is headed by former military commanders—tried to impose a censorship regime in which local authorities would vet all articles.

In the provinces, the situation is even worse. Radio Free Europe reporter Ahmad Behzad was forced to flee after airing a report that human rights were routinely violated in Herat, a province famous for being the country’s cultural and intellectual center. And local security forces in eastern Afghanistan threatened Amrullah Omed, editor of the government paper *Nangrahar Daily*, when he tried to get a quote from antigovernment warlord Pacha Khan Zadran.

Since the fall of the Taliban, local authorities have banned or closed at least four publications in Afghanistan after controversial stories appeared.

The Supreme Court’s Fatwa Department is now attempting to assert its authority over the media, insisting on the supremacy of religious law and demanding death sentences in the *Aftab* case. As this article went to press, Kabul officials had yet to decide what the two journalists will be charged with, but Karzai, when releasing the men, directed the case to a lower court.

But many journalists are convinced that such suppression in the name of Islam is about power, not religion. For instance, in the *Aftab*



In January, Afghanistan’s Chief Justice Fazl Hadi Shinwari declared a ban on cable television, arguing that some broadcasts violated Islam.

case, the head of the Itihad-e-Islami Afghanistan Party, Abdul Rab Rasool Sayaf, was explicitly denounced by the newspaper as someone with “blood on their holy hands.” And it just so happens that the leader of the Supreme Court, noted conservative Chief Justice Fazl Hadi Shinwari, is a member of the very same party, a group involved in the years of factional fighting that destroyed swaths of Kabul between 1992 and 1996 following the withdrawal of the Soviet army.

Shinwari was not available for comment. But the Supreme Court’s acting head, Fazl Wahab, calls the *Aftab* article an act of “open aggression.” When queried about the right to free speech and press freedom, he

The Supreme Court’s Fatwa Department is insisting on the supremacy of religious law and demanding death sentences for the two journalists.

insists that in countries where most of the population is Muslim, press freedom is different than elsewhere. “People abuse freedom of the press and they use it to insult Islam,” he says. “Freedom of speech has gone beyond reasonable limits when [journalists] attack leaders of Islam, the jihadi leaders.”

Most Afghans, however, complain

about the behavior of some of those fighters after they drove out the Soviets. While many mujahedeen were indeed respected leaders, others became corrupt and power hungry, they say, pointing to the ruins that still litter Kabul. And Kabulis resent how some soldiers of the Northern Alliance, who called their fight against the Taliban a holy war, have abused the authority that they gained after their December 2001 victory.

Although various factions use Islam as an excuse to resist criticism, Habiburrahman Ahmadzai, a law professor at Kabul University, points to a famous Islamic story where a man stands up in the middle of a sermon by the second caliphate to accuse him of taking more than his share of war booty. The caliphate successfully argues that he didn’t. The point of the story: It is quite acceptable under Islam to challenge those in authority publicly.

The two journalists’ fates may well determine whether or not that is true in Afghanistan. But in the meantime, the final issue of *Aftab* is teaching the people of Afghanistan a lesson in supply and demand. After the paper was banned, the price of

the last controversial issue skyrocketed—far exceeding its price tag of 5 Afghanis (US\$0.10)

Paper seller Sayed Ahmad Saeed says that people can’t get enough. Immediately after the ban, he sold the newspaper for 120 Afghanis (US\$2.40), and, “since then, if we find a copy we can charge up to 500 Afghanis (US\$10.00).” ■

Occupational Hazards

For journalists in Iraq, the occupation may prove more dangerous than the war.

By Hassan Fattah

Atheer Hameed, a Baghdad-based cameraman for CBS News, is no stranger to conflict. He was conscripted into the Iraqi army and sent to the front lines of the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s and was later one of thousands of Iraqi troops sent to Kuwait when Saddam Hussein invaded the country in 1991. While covering the most recent war, Hameed came within seconds of being killed and even prepared himself for execution after Saddam's dreaded secret police paid him a visit days before the regime fell.

But despite the years of danger that Hameed has endured, nothing shook him quite like the August bombing of the U.N. headquarters in Baghdad. Hameed and soundman Maitham Baghdadi had gone to the U.N. building to cover a mundane press conference but were soon climbing out of rubble, taking stock of their lives and their careers. The truck bomb that had exploded outside killed 25 people, including the U.N. secretary-general's representative in Iraq, Sergio Vieira de Mello, as well as many in the room where Hameed and his colleagues had been.

"I realized just how dangerous things were. And suddenly, I realized

Hassan Fattah is editor of the Iraqi, English-language weekly Iraq Today and is a correspondent with Time magazine and The New Republic.

that I could get killed anywhere, anytime," says Hameed. "Now I find myself thinking twice about where I am and what I'm doing."

It's no small admission for a man like Hameed. But it's also a sign of just how dangerous things have become for journalists in Iraq since Coalition troops took control of the country in April. From bombings and restive crowds to nervous soldiers and unsafe roads, even veteran war correspondents have come to find postwar Iraq one of their most dangerous assignments. As this article was going to press, a bomb exploded outside a hotel housing NBC News staff, killing a security guard and injuring a soundman. The attack, which investigators

The Coalition's often uneasy relationship with the press—especially with the Arab press—has added to the risks reporters here face.

think may have targeted NBC specifically, has increased fears among journalists in the city.

The war itself was one of the deadliest for journalists in recent decades; the occupation has not proved any safer. At least three journalists have been killed in action since major fighting ended in April; countless others have been injured or

threatened when they found themselves suddenly in the wrong place at the wrong time. On the streets of Baghdad, in Falluja, and even in the once docile holy town of Najaf, journalists have experienced everything from thieves and muggers seeking their cash and equipment, to resistance fighters and terrorists trying to wreak havoc in the beleaguered country. And much like the Coalition troops patrolling the streets of Iraq have discovered, separating friend from foe is the hardest part.

"During the war, there was a front line and you knew where it was. People knew who you were and what your job was," says Polish TV correspondent Maciej Woroch. "Now when

people see foreigners, they don't know which side you're on. You're always suspect and always at risk."

Woroch himself was less than 100 yards (91 meters) away from the entourage of cleric Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim when a car bomb killed al-Hakim and 125 worshippers at the Imam Ali shrine in August. Woroch was saved by a massive wall that surrounded the shrine but soon found

himself targeted by an angry mob shortly after the incident. "Suddenly, someone screamed that we were responsible for this, and the crowd turned on us," Woroch recounts. "If not for a policeman there [who saved us], it would have been a terrible scene."

The Coalition's often uneasy relationship with the press—especially with the Arab press—has added to



People walk among the wreckage of a car bomb that exploded in August next to the Imam Ali shrine in the southern city of Najaf.

the risks reporters here face. In August, Mazen Dana, a Palestinian cameraman with Reuters, was shot and killed by a soldier who claimed to have mistaken his camera for a weapon (see also page 7).

In numerous other instances, Arab journalists with poor English have been arrested by U.S. soldiers or hassled at checkpoints. (Requests for comment from the military were unanswered.) "The soldiers are a double-edged sword," says one CNN correspondent. "You think you can run to them for help, but if you do, you're labeled a collaborator and they really can't protect you anyway."

But no network has borne the brunt of the political complexities in Iraq quite like Al-Jazeera, whose reporters have found themselves at odds with both Iraqis and Coalition troops. On at least four different occasions, Al-Jazeera journalists have been detained for questionable

reasons, notes May Ying Welsh, a Baghdad-based producer with the satellite channel.

One of the biggest risks in covering Iraq is getting there. The highway leading from Amman, Jordan, to Baghdad is known as one of the most hazardous sections of the country, where thieves and muggers roam freely and have discovered the foreign press corps' deep pockets. Everyone from *The New York Times'* Thomas Friedman to CNN's well-protected crews have been held up, part of an almost daily log of attacks. According to Pilgrims Group, a U.K.-based security firm, crews have been shot at and injured in



The U.N. humanitarian coordinator speaks with journalists outside U.N. headquarters in Iraq's capital, Baghdad, which were bombed in August.

more than 10 different instances. These dangers say more about the lack of basic security in the country than anything else.

"If you're looking for a soft target, we're a pretty big one," admits Colin Soloway, a contributing editor at *Newsweek* magazine. Indeed, the threat of terrorism has never been bigger. After a series of car bombings in August killed almost 200 people,

journalists began to realize that they are potential targets in the hotels and restaurants they frequent. Hotels have scrambled to provide better security, but little can stop a suicide bomber from causing real damage.

"There have been relatively few journalists injured and killed here so far, but that's mainly because the terrorists aren't attacking the journalists yet," admits one Pilgrims Group security officer. "My biggest concern these days is a secondary attack after a terrorist bombing, when the journalists show up."

All that has had a marked effect on the news that reaches audiences. With danger levels rising, many stories may be left uncovered, journalists admit. Whether it's the growing resistance in Iraq or the fundamental

A Life in Limbo

For a man who can't return home, journalism becomes a sustaining force.

By A. Lin Neumann

When Burmese journalist Min Zin was 14, he and his friends made newspapers by hand, literally. They etched characters into inked wax paper and rolled fluorescent light tubes over the impressions in a crude home-made duplicating process. The results, distributed free of charge on the streets of Burma's capital, Rangoon, were the only independent publications in the country.

The year was 1988, and Min Zin was involved in the deadly serious business of revolution against a dictatorship. As one of the youngest and most prominent leaders of Burma's pro-democracy rebellion, Min Zin was printing underground political broadsheets and risking his life for democratic change.

"Of course, we were naive," Min Zin says now of his days as a street-corner propagandist. "All we knew was that these were bad guys and we wanted new leaders."

During those heady months of the 1988 uprising, the country was shaken to its foundations by students, some even younger than Min Zin, who took to the streets daily, almost toppling dictator Ne Win's regime. But in September of that year, a military junta took power, brutally

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suppressed the popular movement, and killed thousands of people.

Fast-forward to 2003, and Min Zin is still at it—only he is anything but naive.

Now a veteran journalist, the lanky, good-humored Min Zin is one of a handful of exiled Burmese journalists pointing the way toward a future in which the press might thrive again in his home country.

He is a regular correspondent for Radio Free Asia and a staff editor at *The Irrawaddy*, a respected exile magazine and Web site (www.Irrawaddy.org) that covers Burma from Chiang Mai, a city in northern Thailand near the Burmese border. He has been a visiting fellow at the University of California journalism school in Berkeley, and his essays on topics ranging

The path Min Zin took to become a journalist has been arduous and threatening, sad and inspiring.

from political strategy to popular culture in his homeland are thoughtful, independent, and influential.

His work as a writer, scholar, and journalist is an inspiration to many. Christina Fink, a U.S. expert on Burmese affairs, calls Min Zin a key strategist of the student movement and says that his commentaries are

followed closely inside Burma via Radio Free Asia and through smuggled copies of his writing. "Min Zin focuses on the role of youth in society and seeks to inspire young people to develop themselves outside the regime's tightly controlled, top-down education," she says.

The path he took to become a journalist has been arduous and threatening, sad and inspiring. Following the suppression of 1988, Min Zin left school and went underground for nine years, dodging the military regime's efforts to track him down and toss him into prison, along with thousands of others.

Throughout the years in hiding and exile—he narrowly escaped Burma and sought refuge in neighboring Thailand in 1997—he was never sure what would happen to

him. "I saw friends, girls and boys, 12 years old and even younger, killed by soldiers in front of my eyes," he says. His immediate family members were all arrested at one time or another, usually on suspicion that they were aiding Min Zin.

During his odyssey, he taught himself English and contributed essays

on political issues to underground journals that circulated among students and dissidents. He even contributed nonpolitical scholarly articles under a pen name to the few legal magazines published in Rangoon. "I had a lot of time to read, in those days," he remembers with a laugh. Friends brought him books from the libraries at the U.S. and British embassies, and he began expanding his political thinking. Life on the run in Burma gave Min Zin the time to think and begin writing seriously about change.

Irrawaddy's office on a quiet street in Chiang Mai. "In the West, you can take for granted that your rights are established. But here, the immediate goal is to remove the repression. So in terms of our values you can say we are activists. But in terms of affiliation, I am not an activist. I have never joined a political party."

Using *The Irrawaddy* as a platform, Min Zin and his colleagues constantly work the phones and networks of colleagues and friends inside Burma, searching for information on one of the most closed



Exiled journalist Min Zin in front of *Irrawaddy* covers at the magazine's office in Chiang Mai, Thailand

Min Zin's exposure to fresh ideas has not diminished his outrage at the junta that rules his country, but he jealously guards his independence and his credibility as a journalist. Neither Min Zin nor any staff at *The Irrawaddy* belong to political organizations. "We are independent and free to think and criticize anyone," maintains the magazine's founder and editor, Aung Zaw, himself a political dissident in exile. "It is important for our future that we develop independent journalism for Burma."

When asked if he is an activist or a journalist, Min Zin bristles, insisting that it is not an either-or proposition. "We need to define first the word activist," he says, sitting in *The*

regimes in the world. For example, when pro-government thugs attacked opposition icon and Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi and her supporters in a remote part of the country on May 30, *The Irrawaddy* was among the first to get the news. Using sources inside Burma, they pieced together the events that most observers say ruling authorities staged to tarnish Suu Kyi's image and justify her arrest and continuing detention.

Min Zin, however, does not confine himself to writing about Burma's long struggle for change. He is equally at ease covering popular singers in his homeland or discussing Burmese literature. He has interviewed one of Burma's few hip-hop stars and

recently wrote about a popular film actress who is also a devout Buddhist. "It is not all about politics," he explains. "The society is changing, and I want to see how our culture can adapt to new realities."

His work is noticed in seemingly odd places. Earlier this year, Min Zin appeared on an MTV-produced documentary hosted by singer Beyoncé Knowles celebrating the life of Nelson Mandela. The music channel sent him to South Africa for a taped dialogue with Mandela, an experience of a lifetime, he says, even though he admits that friends kidded him about appearing on MTV.

Min Zin is realistic about what it may take to change Burma's dictatorship, which has been in power in one form or another since 1962. He praises U.S. efforts to boycott the regime and impose sanctions on it. "The United States is the hegemonic power in the world," he argues. "They can make things happen if they will be serious about change." And he wants to see the U.S. twist the arms of China, Japan, and Thailand—regional powers that have all done business with the dictatorship for decades—to force change on the generals in Rangoon.

Eventually, he believes, democracy will come and his long sojourn will end. "Being in exile builds a rift between reality and your own life," he notes. "Literally, my dreams are still confined to my neighborhood in Rangoon." His father, a political activist and teacher from an earlier generation who was also jailed for his beliefs, died a few years ago, but Min Zin says he cannot accept that reality because he cannot go home.

His dream is to return to Burma and help establish *The Irrawaddy* as an independent news magazine in a free country. "We are not immigrants. We are refugees, forced to resettle somewhere foreign. I think about my life in Burma. ... My mind is always back home." ■

RUSSIA



"It was more fun channel-surfing when we had other channels."