

URGENT ACTION

JOURNALIST SENTENCED FOR “HARASSMENT”

On 24 December 2019, investigative journalist Ignace Sossou was sentenced to 18 months in prison and fined for “harassment” by a court in Benin for posting tweets quoting Benin’s Public Prosecutor during a conference hosted by the French media development agency CFI. The Public Prosecutor alleged that his remarks had been taken out of context and issued a complaint against Ignace Sossou at the Court of First Instance, leading to his arrest, prosecution and sentencing. He is being arbitrarily detained and must be immediately and unconditionally released.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODELLETTER

Patrice Talon, President of the Republic of Benin
Palais de la Marina
Cotonou, Benin
Email: patricetalon@hotmail.fr

Your Excellency,

I am concerned about the sentence passed on investigative journalist Ignace Sossou, for “harassment through electronic communication”. On 18 December 2019, Ignace Sossou posted tweets quoting the Public Prosecutor during a conference hosted by the French media development agency CFI. In his tweets, he stated that the Public Prosecutor had described Benin’s digital code as “a weapon” that can be used against journalists and questioned the government’s decision to shut down the internet during elections in April 2019. The Public Prosecutor alleged that his remarks had been taken out of context by Ignace Sossou and issued a complaint against him at the Court of First Instance in Cotonou.

On 20 December 2019, the Central Office for the Repression of Cybercrime (OCRC) arrested Ignace Sossou, without a warrant, supported by the Central Police Station in Godomey, southern Benin. His home was searched in his presence and his phone was analyzed by the technical and scientific police.

On 24 December, Ignace Sossou appeared before a judge. He acknowledged having written the tweets but not to having harassed the Public Prosecutor. He was sentenced to 18 months in prison and received a fine of 200,000 FCFA (approximately 300 euros). He is being detained in Maison d’Arret Prison, Cotonou, southern Benin. He has appealed his conviction and is waiting for the appeal to be scheduled.

Amnesty International considers that Ignace Sossou’s detention is arbitrary and in violation of the peaceful exercise of his right to freedom of expression. Amnesty International is concerned about the repressive climate and undue restrictions on the right to freedom of expression in Benin. The authorities must respect, protect, promote and fulfil the rights journalists, bloggers, activists and human rights defenders, in accordance with the country’s international human rights obligations.

In view of the above, I urge you to ensure:

- *The immediate and unconditional release of Ignace Sossou who is arbitrarily detained solely for peacefully exercising his right to freedom of expression;*
- *The amendment of Law No. 2017-20 of 20 April 2018 on the Digital Code, bringing it into conformity with international standards on freedom of expression, particularly by decriminalising press-offenses and the publication of false information and online press crimes.*

Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

In Benin at least 17 journalists, bloggers and political activists have been prosecuted in less than two years under 2018 Digital Law, some of the repressive provisions of which undermine the right to freedom of expression and media freedom in the country.

After declaring that it "distances itself from publications and from these types of practices which are unethical and give a bad name to the profession as a whole", CFI has publicly presented "an apology for the unfolding of the events in which he [Ignace Sossou] was a victim".

In another case, Ignace Sossou was prosecuted in August 2019 for publishing "false information" in connection with two articles on tax evasion in Benin. He had been sentenced by the Cotonou First Class Court of First Instance for defamation to a suspended month in prison and a fine of 500,000 FCFA.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: [French]

You can also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: [20 March 2020]

Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

NAME AND PREFERRED PRONOUN: Ignace Sossou (he/his)

LINK TO PREVIOUS UA: n/a