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Haiti: Journalists pay a high price for freedom of expression

Intimidation and violence appear to have become a professional hazard for journalists in Haiti, while the authorities are taking insufficient action to investigate incidents and ensure the protection of media professionals, Amnesty International said today.

"This jeopardises the gains made in freedom of expression since the return to democratic order eight years ago," the organization added.

In a new report published today, Amnesty International details cases of recent threats and acts of violence against journalists, some of whom have been forced to leave the country or go into hiding.

Cases include those of journalists Jean Robert François and Henry Fleurimond, who were said to have gone into temporary hiding after receiving threats from members of pro-government groups in Gonaïves accusing them of biased reporting; and of Joseph Claudy Milord, director of Radio Saca in Grand Goâve, who was reportedly struck by the local mayor, incensed at the station's coverage of his alleged involvement in local land deals.

"The numerous reports of threats, harassment and attacks, together with blockages of investigations into high-profile murder cases involving journalists, indicate a deterioration in the level of respect for freedom of speech and the critical role of journalists in Haiti," Amnesty International said.

The investigation into the killing of Radio Haiti journalist Jean Dominique and station guard Jean Claude Louissant in April 2000 has only recently restarted after coming to a standstill due to confusion as to who should carry it forward. Similarly, in spite of two recent arrests since this report went to print, investigations into the 2001 killing of Brignol Lindor, news director for Radio Echo 2000, have been incomplete. His relatives have appealed the decision not to indict the then local mayor who had publicly called for "zero tolerance" against Lindor on the grounds that he supported the opposition party.

"Failure to investigate thoroughly these and other serious attacks, and to bring those responsible to justice sends a dangerous message that journalists are legitimate targets and contributes to the climate of open hostility and violence against them," Amnesty International said.

"This climate in turn has serious negative repercussions for the overall level of respect for human rights in Haiti," the organisation added.

Although the Haitian authorities have repeatedly stated their commitment to upholding freedom of expression, they have begun to condition their support in a way which casts doubts as to the sincerity of this commitment and could be interpreted by those challenging the critical role of journalists as an encouragement.

"The Haitian authorities must take a firm, unconditional stance in favour of freedom of expression and publicly condemn all acts of physical or verbal violence against journalists. This should be supported by concrete action to investigate all incidents and ensure justice is done," Amnesty International said.

Public Document

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