

Reporters without Borders (RSF) Reporters sans frontières

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Written submission by Reporters Without Borders on the state of freedom of information and media circulation in DJIBOUTI

Overview of the press freedom situation

Djibouti is ranked 159 out of 179 countries listed in the 2011-2012 worldwide index (a drop of 49 places in comparison with the previous year)

There is no media freedom in Djibouti. This is one of the few African countries without any privately-owned or independent media.

President Ismaël Omar Guelleh began a third term in April 2011 after an election boycotted by part of the opposition. The NGO International Democracy, which had come to observe the election, was expelled in March 2011.

Under Ismaël Omar Guelleh's rule, the country has increasingly cut itself off from the world and suppressed criticism. Foreign journalists are turned away and the government maintains a monopoly on domestic news and information by means of state-owned media. One after another, all the opposition newspapers have been closed. *Le Renouveau*, a newsletter published by the *Movement for Democratic Renewal and Development* (MRD), had to close in May 2007 after months of harassment.

Only four national media are permitted: *Radio Télévision Djiboutienne*, *La Nation* and *Al Qaran* (La Nation's Arabic-language version), which are controlled by the culture and communication ministry, and *Le Progrès*, a newsletter published by the ruling *Popular Rally for Progress* (RPP). All four take a pro-government line.

The 1992 *Freedom of Communication Law* itself poses a challenge to freedom of expression, investigative journalism and media pluralism. It provides for prison sentences for media offences and imposes age and nationality limits on anyone wanting to launch a news outlet. The creation of a *National Communication Commission* with the power to issue radio and TV broadcasting licenses has been on hold since 1992.

While RFI's FM transmitter has been shut down since 2005, the BBC and Voice of America can be received in Djibouti but they are rarely carrying any sensitive reporting on the country. The percentage of the population that has an Internet connection is still very small

but Facebook is very popular among those that do.

Internet Censorship of *La Voix de Djibouti*

La Voix de Djibouti is a former opposition radio station that used to broadcast from Europe on the shortwave and Internet. It has become a news bulletin / information website available on the Internet. Outside Djibouti, Internet users can visit *La Voix de Djibouti's* website at the following address (www.lavoixdedjibouti.com). From inside the country, the access is blocked, but Internet users there can nonetheless have access to it by going to the Reporters Without Borders mirror site (www.lavoixdedjibouti.rsf.org), which was launched on 4 April 2012, in order to help circumvent the government's censorship and allow the population to have some access to news sources.

Growing number of arrests since February 2011

The government arrested dozens of its political opponents in February 2011 following calls for protests circulating on social networks, which the authorities are struggling to control. Those detained included six people who provided reports or information to *La Voix de Djibouti*. They were arrested as a preventive measure ahead of the demonstrations and were held in Gabode prison for four months without trial for “participating in an insurrectional movement.” One of them, Farah Abadid Hildid, was tortured by intelligence officials before being transferred to the prison.

Reporters Without Borders wrote on March 21, 2012, to the U.N. Special Rapporteur on torture, Juan E. Mendez, to inform him of its deep concern about the persecution of journalists in Djibouti.

Farah Abadid Hildid

In March 2012, RSF asked the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Torture, Juan E. Mendez, [to intervene urgently](#) on behalf of journalist Farah Abadid Hildid, who works as a correspondent for *La Voix de Djibouti*.

Hildid, has been detained twice in 2011 and was tortured and mistreated both times. This was confirmed by medical examinations after both periods in detention. The first time he was arrested, in February 2011, he was held for more than four months in Gabode prison on a charge of “participating in an insurrectional movement.” The second time he was arrested along with another journalist from *La Voix de Djibouti*, Houssein Robleh Dabar Hildid, on 21 November 2011, and was charged with encouraging an illegal demonstration and insulting the president. They were released four days later after being placed under the supervision of an investigating judge attached to the Supreme court.

Reporters Without Borders requested the U.N. Special Rapporteur's urgent intervention on behalf of Farah Abadid Hildid. The agents responsible for his torture must be brought before the courts. The proceedings undertaken against him must be dropped. The arbitrary arrests and the intimidation and violence to which he has been subjected must stop in order to safeguard his physical and mental wellbeing.

At the most recent torture session, he was reprimanded for articles he had written criticizing the security services and he was asked to supply the names of his colleagues.

Houssein Ahmed Farah

An appeal court was due to issue a ruling on 9 September 2012 on *La Voix de Djibouti* correspondent Houssein Ahmed Farah's appeal against a 16 August order refusing his request to be released provisionally. After he was heard for 15 minutes by judge Lamisse Mohamed Saïd on October 4, 2012, his request for temporary release was again denied by the court on October 7. Arrested on 8 August, Farah has been languishing in the capital's Gabode prison since 11 August 2012.

Farah, who is also a member of Djibouti's Human Rights League and the MRD, an opposition party has been hounded by Djibouti's authorities for nearly 10 years, previously arresting him in 2003, 2007 and 2011.

After being held for more than 72 hours at Djibouti's police headquarters, he was brought before investigating judge Lamisse Mohamed Saïd on 11 August 2012, and was then immediately transferred to the capital's Gabode prison.

Farah was not able to see a lawyer while in police custody and was not represented by one when he appeared before the judge. Nor has he been allowed any visits or medical attention although his health is poor and he needs treatment.

Reporters Without Borders wrote on 18 September 2012, to the Chair-Rapporteur of the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, Malick EL Hadji Sow, to draw his attention on Houssein Ahmed Farah's plight.

Recommendations

Reporters Without Borders urgently calls upon Djibouti's authorities and judiciary to:

- Release Houssein Ahmed Farah currently held in detention in the capital's Gabode prison since 11 August 2012, in connection with his professional activities. In the meanwhile, provide information on his detention conditions.
- Release all journalists and citizens currently imprisoned, in connection with their professional activities and their freedom of expression.
- Lift the restrictions on national and foreign media activities, allow independent and critical coverage of the government's actions, and ensure full compliance of the national law and practices with Article 19 of the ICCPR.
- Allow the circulation of independent and opposition media, unblock information websites.