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**Contribution on freedom of information in Yemen
by Reporters Without Borders,
an NGO with special consultative status**

The plight of journalists in Yemen is very worrying. The country's political instability is one of the main reasons for the situation. It is aggravated by the security forces, which – far from trying to protect journalists – go out of their way to intimidate them and suppress freedom of information.

So journalists still fear the authorities, as they already did under deposed President Ali Abdallah Saleh. But now they also have to cope with the threat posed by the armed groups operating all over the country.

During the first five months of 2013, Reporters Without Borders has registered at least 21 physical attacks on journalists, resulting in serious injuries in some cases, and five kidnappings. Many journalists and their families have also been threatened.

Journalists targeted by armed groups

Yemen is prey to grave internal unrest. The number of separatist or insurrectional groups is growing throughout the countries. Journalists are often the targets of threats by these groups, which are mostly well armed. The threats are varied in nature, but the aim is to intimidate and silence. The journalists are usually threatened with mutilation (with having their hands cut off or their tongue cut out),

or threats are made against their families (such as abduction of their children) or their possessions (blowing up of their home or car).

The threats are sometimes carried out. Reporters Without Borders has learned of various murder attempts since the start of the year. The journalist Mansoor Noor had to have a leg amputated after three gunmen tried to kill him on 17 April 2013. Reporter Mohamed Al-Hudhaifi's 13-year-old son narrowly escaped an abduction attempt in the southwestern city of Taiz on 21 April 2013. After failing to snatch him, his would-be kidnappers gave chase and tried to run him down with their car. The headquarters of newspapers, TV stations and news agencies have also been the targets of threats. On 17 April 2013, 400 grams of explosives were found in a building that houses the *Al-Masdar* media company. The police managed to defuse the device just 15 minutes before it was due to go off.

Journalists are also often targeted by crowds because of their work. During demonstrations in Aden on 27 April 2013, dozens of people surrounded *Al-Jazeera* and *Sky News* correspondents, insulted them and roughed them up. The insults alluded to the fact that they were journalists and to the stations they worked for, leaving no room for doubt about the targeted nature of the attack.

Journalists are sometimes also taken hostage by tribal groups seeking thereby to draw their demands to the attention of the authorities. They may also be kidnapped for ransom. This was the case with five journalists who were abducted on 15 May 2013 and were held for 10 days before being released.

Security forces also responsible for abuses

Journalists are also the victims of threats and intimidation by authorities and senior officials. Soldiers and members of the civilian security forces are responsible for many abuses against journalists, which drastically restrict freedom of information.

Three TV journalists, for example, were insulted and beaten by soldiers while covering student demonstrations in Dhamar, a town to the south of Sanaa, in early May 2013. Members of the national army also fired shots around them in order to scare them. It was just one among many cases of intimidation. Soldiers often confiscate audiovisual equipment from journalists, thereby preventing them from doing reports.

It is the same with members of the government and parliamentarians, who do not hesitate to resort to intimidation either. Journalists who dare to report proven cases of executive or legislative corruption or corruption in other entities are liable to be the targets of many threats, sometimes uttered while they are being held for questioning.

The authorities meanwhile continue to detain Abdul Ilah Haydar Shae, a journalist who has been held in Sanaa's main prison since August 2010 and who was

sentenced by a special terrorism court in January 2011 to five years in prison followed by two years of house arrest on a charge of “participating in an armed band and having links with Al-Qaeda.”

The government announced on 1 February 2011 that he was to be released by presidential decree but, following immediate direct pressure from the White House, the release order was rescinded. His continuing detention violates Yemen's international obligations.

Vague and inappropriate legislation

Reporters Without Borders is concerned about the existence of a special court that has been tasked with trying all press offences since May 2009. It is still there two years after President Ali Abdallah Saleh's departure. Such a court can have only one purpose – to gag journalists. On 6 June, the special court convicted the *Al-Oula* daily newspaper of defaming Judge Mohamed Al-Hakimi, the president of the Supreme Commission for Elections and Referendum, in an article published in October. The court ordered the newspaper to pay a fine of 10,000 rials (35 euros) and 100,000 rials (350 euros) in damages to Judge Al-Hakimi.

A thorough overhaul of the press and publications law is needed. As things stand, a judge can apply the criminal code to press offences. The broadcast media need a legislative framework that is fair and non-discriminatory (state and privately-owned media) and respects the international instruments that Yemen has signed and ratified.

Reporters Without Borders' recommendations

Reporters Without Borders is aware of the enormous challenges that the government has had to face since President Ali Abdallah Saleh's departure 18 months ago. Nonetheless, the situation of the media has kept on deteriorating.

The authorities must:

- Release the journalist Abdul Ilah Haydar Shae in accordance with the presidential decree of 1 February 2011.
- Take measures to protect journalists from all the threats and physical attacks to which they are exposed.
- Train the security forces in respecting the work of journalists.
- Combat the impunity systematically enjoyed by those who threaten and attack journalists (including members of the security forces, politicians, rebel groups and tribal organizations).

- Establish a legislative framework for the media that respects the international instruments signed and ratified by Yemen, and repeal all legislative provisions that contradict this framework.

At the same time, armed groups and tribal groups must stop targeting journalists.