



Attacks on the Press 2009: Middle East and North Africa Developments

ATTACKS ON THE PRESS: 2009

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was also blocked on orders of the public prosecutor. Three days after the arrest, police violently dispersed a demonstration by journalists in the capital, Nouakchott, protesting Braham's arrest. Muhammad Ould Muhammad Abdul-Rahman, counselor to Mauritania's ruler, apologized to journalists for the use of violence, according to local news reports. Braham was freed without charge after five days in custody and access to his site was restored, according to local press reports.

SAUDI ARABIA

ALGERIA

Police confiscated a manuscript by journalist Mohamed Benchicou. *The Journal of a Free Man*, seized in February from a printing house in Blida, south of the capital, Algiers, recounted the life of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika. In a statement posted on several news Web sites, Benchicou said security forces ordered the director of the printing house to cease work on the job. Authorities did not disclose the reason for the seizure. Benchicou, former publisher of the French-language daily *Le Matin*, had been released from prison in June 2006 after serving two years on trumped-up charges of violating currency laws.

JORDAN

In June, the government shut the Amman offices of two Iranian government-controlled television broadcasters, the Arabic-language Al-Alam and the English-language Press TV. The two stations had pursued editorial stances highly critical of the Jordanian government. Jordanian officials said the stations had failed to renew their government-required accreditation. Al-Alam disputed the assertion, saying that it had completed required paperwork six months before the expiration of its accreditation. Press TV did not comment.

Parliament voted in June to designate its press office as the sole source for parliamentary access, the government said in a statement. The office was charged with scheduling all interviews with members of parliament, and providing escorts to all journalists seeking to enter parliament. Members of parliament were apparently irked that news stories had not been carrying uniform information, according to the Samir Kassir Eyes Center, or SKeyes, a Beirut-based press freedom watchdog.

MAURITANIA

Police arrested Abbass Ould Braham, publisher of the independent news Web site *Taqadoumy*, in March after he wrote an article sharply critical of military rule, local journalists told CPJ. Domestic access to the site, hosted in the United States,

Authorities detained blogger Raafat al-Ghanim, a Syrian living in Saudi Arabia, on July 29 and brought him to an unknown location, according to online news reports and the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information. Later that day, police raided his home and confiscated his computer hard drive. Al-Ghanim, a regular contributor to multiple forums and online discussion boards, wrote about social and political issues in both Saudi Arabia and Syria. The Arabic Network said that al-Ghanim's last blog entry was deleted shortly after he was detained. The topic of the entry was not clear.

SYRIA

Intelligence agents and police shut the Damascus office of the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression, a local advocacy group, on September 13, according to local and regional news reports. Authorities did not give a reason for the shutdown, the center said in a statement. The center, which also had an office in France, continued to document press freedom cases in late year.

On July 29, authorities shut the Damascus office of the Dubai-based Al-Mashriq satellite channel, according to local and regional press reports. Internal Security agents directed staff to report to a government security office in the capital, according to *Akhbar al-Sharq*, a London-based news Web site. Agents interrogated some employees and forced them to pledge no longer to work for the station, the Web site reported. News reports said the channel, owned by Ghassan Abud, a Syrian businessman, had been shut for filming a Damascus market without permission from authorities.

TURKEY

In February, the Interior Ministry reopened an investigation into the 2007 murder of editor Hrant Dink after a report by the Prime Minister's Service found negligence and potential culpability among high-ranking intelligence officials. The renewed investigation was expected to focus on possible involvement by government officials in the slaying. Editor of the Turkish-Armenian language daily *Agos*, Dink was shot outside his newspaper's offices in Istanbul. Twenty suspects were arrested, and court proceedings were continuing in late 2009, according to news reports and human rights groups. Eight police officers were also being investigated over allegations they failed to act on warnings that Dink was in danger.

Assailants shot Cihan Hayırsevener, founder and editor of the daily *Güney Marmara'da Yaşam*, as he was walking to his office in Bandırma, northeast of Istanbul, on December 19, according to news reports. Hayırsevener died later that day at the Uludağ University Hospital in Bursa. Colleague Umit Babacan told CPJ that the editor had received recent death threats. Hayırsevener had reported on corruption allegations involving the owners of *İlkhaber*, another major daily in Bandırma. Police said they had identified three suspects in late year.

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

The Federal Supreme Court upheld an Abu Dhabi newspaper's 2008 defamation conviction stemming from the paper's coverage of alleged steroid use in horse racing. Under the high court verdict, issued in July, the daily *Al-Emarat al-Youm* was suspended for 20 days and two executives were fined 20,000 dirhams (US\$5,400) each, according to local news reports.

The Federal National Council approved a new media bill in January that would replace the existing 1980 press law. The measure awaited the approval of Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, president of the UAE, in late year. CPJ and other press freedom groups called on Khalifa to reject the measure, which would set harsh penalties for vaguely defined press violations, including criticism of the government, religion, and social mores. Penalties in the bill include six-month suspensions of publications, permanent revocations of publishing licenses, and fines as high as 5 million dirhams (US\$1.36 million).

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