

## **CAR reporters flee for their lives**

by: Jeppe Schilder

Two radio journalists in the Central African Republic were severely intimidated by opposing factions during the civil war in their country. The Reporters Respond fund, which is run by Free Press Unlimited, provided them with much-needed assistance. Until a year ago, Fidel Ngombou and Bienvenue Matongo were colleagues at Radio ICDI in Bouali, a two-hour drive from Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic (CAR). Radio ICDI is the only short-wave radio station in the country. However, though the studio and the radio antenna are still there, broadcasts have ceased.

On two occasions, Ngombou and Matongo's reports on the civil war in CAR proved nearly fatal to them. In 2013, Séléka forces targeted them. In 2015, they barely escaped from a local Anti-Balaka militia. Now they both live in Bangui.

### **A highly volatile situation**

Ngombou recalls: "I still remember it clearly. Séléka was in power. On December 16, 2013, mercenaries from Chad and Sudan rode in on motorbikes and surrounded our radio station. They hardly spoke French, let alone our local language, Sango, and they were drunk, which made the situation even more volatile."

"They accused us of negative reporting and of cooperating with an Anti-Balaka militia. They threatened to murder us. What saved us was two Anti-Balaka men who were walking down the road a little further up. The mercenaries went after them and forgot about us," Matongo explain.

### **Fleeing into the jungle**

The journalists fled and camped in the jungle for two nights. They eventually reached Bangui via a long detour, and hid there for four months. When Séléka was driven out of Bouali and the area came under the control of an Anti-Balaka militia, they resumed their work. Gradually, as the Anti-Balaka appeared guilty of increasing levels of murder and theft, Ngombou and Matongo began reporting on their crimes.

"We are journalists and we do our work professionally and independently," Ngombou explains. It was not appreciated. One day, on his way to church, Matongo discovered he was being shadowed. "They wanted to kill me, I was told later by others. But there were too many people around."

### **Terrorized**

Ngombou was not so lucky when he returned to Bouali from the capital one day. "I was captured by the Anti-Balaka. They were not pleased with what we reported in our radio broadcasts." The Anti-Balaka took him into the jungle and terrorized him by shooting in the ground between his legs. Thanks to safety training courses he had followed, Ngombou knew how to respond. He stayed calm. "I was not afraid. I had the courage to speak out and knew how to act. I had done nothing wrong."

However, the local Anti-Balaka leader remained unconvinced. The guerilla rolled a joint and said he would kill Ngombou once he had finished smoking it. He never got to that point. The fighter's telephone rang and he was called away. Meanwhile, the shots fired between Ngombou's feet drew the attention of one of the sons of the village elder, who was also Anti-Balaka. He rushed to the village, assuming it was under attack. Once there,

he heard that the militia had captured a journalist and taken him into the jungle to be executed. He called on a young fighter to take him to where Ngombou, who was his friend, was being held.

### **Finally freed**

After hours of kneeling on the ground with weapons pointed at him, Ngombou was freed, thanks to the intervention of the village elder's son. "Immediately after I was freed I called Matongo to warn him. He had to flee for his life."

When Ngombou himself returns to Bouali a year later, the tension is written all over his face. This is where guerillas shot between his legs. He is safe now, but it is clear he does not feel comfortable here. The Anti-Balaka leader is in prison, other rebels have resumed their normal daily life and peace seems to have returned. But it is a fragile peace. There are still plenty of weapons around, even though they are out of sight for now.

### **No after care**

What bothers the radio reporters is that they feel abandoned. "Afterwards, no one asked what happened; it was as if no one cared what we went through," says Ngombou. Matongo adds: "ICDI called me after they heard about it. They didn't ask how I was, they only asked if the equipment was still intact."

It was only after Jean Ignace Manengou, director of the Association of Central African Community Radio Stations (ARC) and the main partner of Free Press Unlimited in CAR, broadcast the story that attention was given to the reporters' experiences. Free Press Unlimited came to their aid financially. Each of them received \$ 2,000 from the emergency fund for journalists, Reporters Respond. "Since we were no longer working, we were no longer being paid."

Ngombou does not want to go back to Bouali to work for Radio ICDI. The events have left a lasting impression on him.

### **Help within 48 hours**

Members of the press worldwide face increasing repression, violence and intimidation by governments, militias and other parties. Unfortunately for many journalists working in troubled areas, such threats are a daily reality. Many lose their equipment, their workspace and sometimes their lives.

### **Direct assistance**

To help reporters continue their vital work, Free Press Unlimited launched Reporters Respond. This international emergency fund provides direct assistance to journalists in danger or distress, enabling them to resume work as quickly as possible when faced with obstruction, legal action, vandalism or intimidation. Support is provided irrespective of the medium or the area covered by the journalist.

The assistance is mainly financial in nature, but Free Press Unlimited also has a database of professionals who can assist with things like legal advice, trauma support and cross-border evacuation. "Even if we ourselves do not have local contacts, we always manage to find an organization in our network that has," says Leon Willems, director of Free Press Unlimited.

The fund cooperates with other national and international organizations, including the Journalists in Distress (JID) network which is mainly used for the (secure) exchange of information on cases during the initial vetting stage.

### **Helping injured, threatened and fleeing journalists**

Reporters Respond receives a growing number of requests for assistance. Several years ago the emphasis was on confiscated, broken or stolen equipment. Now, the number of journalists who are injured, threatened or on the run has risen notably. That is why Free Press Unlimited is currently drafting a new safety policy and is developing training programs, including material for digital security trainers. Free Press Unlimited already offers tools which make communication safer, like the NetAidKit for secure use of the internet. It is a main contributor to the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and aims to redouble its activities to advocate safer conditions for journalists worldwide.