



Journalism in CAR not without danger

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DONATE

In African countries, radio is by far the largest medium. That is also true for the Central African Republic. However, the country also has dozens of newspapers, often with limited editions because of high printing costs, minimal distribution possibilities and a high percentage of illiteracy among the population. In addition, newspapers are passed on from person to person.

By Jeppe Schilder

Le Democrate is one of these dozens of newspapers. The editing team has its office on the ground floor of a small apartment complex in the capital, Bangui. Twelve employees work hard here every day to produce an eight-page newspaper. The print run is 500 copies and the number of readers only a multiple of that.

The journalists at Le Democrate have also been confronted with murder, violence and threats because of the critical pieces they write about the acts of the Séléka rebel movement. One day, a general even showed up in person seeking redress. “When we showed him the evidence to support our article, he backed down. We are still on good terms with him to this day, and he regularly provides us with information,” says editor Bamcako Askin from behind his computer.

The journalists at Le Democrate may have a good relationship with the general, but that doesn’t apply to the rest of the Séléka rebels.

In December 2013, Samba Herve accidentally took a wrong turn on his way home. He encountered a group of rebels, guarding the home of a high-ranking official. They demanded he paid 2,000 Central African CFA francs (about €4). Samba apologised, explained he is a journalist and told the rebels he had no money on him. He suggested returning to the office to pick up the money. The rebels, however, did not agree.

The fact that he is a journalist only made things worse. “They were angry at journalists, and believed we always gave Séléka negative press. They wanted to get back at me for that,” says Samba.

He was tortured for hours with sticks until his executioners grew tired. He owes his life to the general with whom the editorial team are on good terms. Samba also knows him and has his telephone number in his telephone contacts. After he dropped the general’s name, they called him.

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He confirmed Samba's story to the rebels who were holding him. They offered their apologies and let Samba go. Immediately after his release, Samba returned to the newspaper. His colleagues could not believe their eyes and rushed him to the hospital.

Now Samba has fully recovered physically. But the torture has left deep emotional scars. "I was scared to death. I try to forget it but sometimes I have nightmares. If I think about it too much, then it does things to my head."

Free Press Unlimited has been working in the Central African Republic since 2014. We support local partners, for example, with equipment and training in technical, journalistic and management skills. Thanks to our collaboration:

- *The Association of Community Radios (Association des Radios Communautaires) can refurbish local radios across the country,*
- *The Association of Female Journalists (Association des Femmes Professionels de Communication) can make a weekly programme on issues that specifically affect women.*
- *The independent regulator (Observatoire des Médias Centrafricaines) can monitor newspapers, radios and online media. So they can be called to account in case of inaccuracies, false accusations, hate speech and non-compliance with the ethical code of conduct for journalism.*

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