

2 February 2007

Zimbabwe Paper Hits 'Big Nerve'

Criticism of Military Pay Brings a Threat to Editor

By Craig Timberg

JOHANNESBURG — A single bullet and a threatening note arrived in a package delivered to one of Zimbabwe's last independent newspapers in what journalists said Thursday was the latest sign of the dangers to press freedoms in that country.

The .303-caliber bullet, used in rifles once popular with the British military and those of its former colonies such as Zimbabwe, dropped from the package when Bill Saidi, deputy editor of the Standard, opened it on Wednesday, he said.

The package, addressed simply to "editor," contained a cartoon from Sunday's paper mocking low pay in the military. According to Saidi, the handwritten note said: "What's this editor? Watch your step."

The issue of military pay is sensitive because President Robert Mugabe, in power since the end of white-minority rule in 1980, relies on the army's support to stay in control of a restive country seven years into economic collapse. Zimbabwe has rampant unemployment, chronic food shortages and the world's highest inflation, topping 1,200 percent a year.

The Standard, a weekly newspaper based in the capital, Harare, published an article Jan. 21 reporting that low pay was leading to mass desertions and resignations from the military.

The cartoon, which ran a week later, pictured three baboons laughing at a soldier's pay stub. A formal letter from the military arrived Thursday complaining about the article and the cartoon.

"We hit a big nerve of people at the top," said Saidi, speaking from the Standard's newsroom.

Reporters Without Borders, a journalists' advocacy group based in Paris, said in its annual report Thursday that a record number of journalists worldwide were arrested or killed in 2006, and six journalists already have been killed in the first month of 2007. That includes Hrant Dink, a Turkish journalist of Armenian descent who had clashed with his government.

"When you think about things like what happened to that Armenian journalist, you get worried," Saidi said.

In Zimbabwe, press freedom has been under pressure since the 1999 arrests of four newspaper journalists, two of whom later reported being tortured. Saidi also has been arrested.

In 2000, a bomb exploded in an empty art gallery one floor below the office of the top editor of the Daily News, which at the time was Zimbabwe's only independent daily. That paper's printing presses were bombed the following year, and a restrictive new press law led to its closure in 2003.

Reporters Without Borders said in its report that the Zimbabwe government, under Mugabe, is "one of the most vicious on the continent in its treatment of journalists. Surveillance, threats, imprisonment, censorship blackmail, abuse of power and denial of justice are all brought to bear to keep firm control over the news."

All of Zimbabwe's television and radio stations and daily newspapers are owned by the government, and of the handful of weekly newspapers still publishing, only the Standard and its sister publication, the Independent, are regarded as free of government control.

"The two papers that I own stick out like a sore thumb," said publisher Trevor Ncube, speaking from his office in Johannesburg, where he owns another weekly paper.

Ncube said that it was not known who sent the bullet to the Standard on Wednesday but warned that the last vestiges of Zimbabwe's press freedoms face imminent threat.

"It's this whole climate of intimidation and harassment in the hope that we're going to back away," he said. "The pressure is on to try to soften us."

Copyright 2007
The Washington Post Company