

Zimbabwe Paper Wins Defamation Suit

Information Minister Ordered to Pay Damages for Comments

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Washington Post Foreign Service

Friday, July 30, 2004; Page A16

JOHANNESBURG, July 29 -- The High Court of Zimbabwe ruled this week that Information Minister Jonathan Moyo defamed the country's only independent daily newspaper by saying that its journalists were agents of British intelligence services bent on provoking anarchy.

The court, in a decision issued Wednesday, ordered Moyo to pay the Daily News about \$470 in damages. The state-controlled daily newspaper in Harare, the Herald, and its editor were ordered to pay about \$1,000 for publishing Moyo's comments last year.

Zimbabwean journalists called the ruling in the lawsuit a rare victory in their battle against Moyo and President Robert Mugabe, who have restricted press freedoms, closed newspapers and criticized the few remaining independent editors and publications.

"It's not about money," said Sam Nkomo, the publisher of the Daily News. "It is about justice. It is about the freedom of the press. It is about people who abuse their authority."

In several articles published in the Herald in May and June of 2003, Moyo criticized the Daily News for what he called inaccurate reporting on political matters and for its supposedly close relationship to the Movement for Democratic Change, the country's main opposition party. The government shut down the Daily News in February.

Moyo and Mugabe have frequently contended that the opposition party is a front for British efforts to reestablish Zimbabwe as a colony and that journalists at the Daily News support that effort. Nkomo said the Daily News is owned by Zimbabweans who have no relationship with the British government.

In an article published in the Herald on May 17, 2003, Moyo said a story in the Daily News was "self-evidently false" and "a typical case of a reporter without a soul or mind of his own being used to peddle not so clever anti-Zimbabwe British intelligence propaganda."

In another story, on June 10, 2003, Moyo said the Daily News was seeking to "promote lawlessness and invite anarchy" by reporting on efforts to have Mugabe replaced as president.

Justice Yunus Omerjee said in the ruling that Moyo's comments were defamatory in tone and lacked any basis in fact.

Moyo, the Herald and its editor, Pikirayi Deketeke, intend to appeal the ruling to the Supreme Court, said their attorney, Johannes Tomana.

Journalists say Moyo is behind the crackdown on press freedoms, including a two-year-old law criminalizing the reporting of inaccurate information and requiring registration of newspapers and journalists.

"Minister Moyo, he has for a long time trusted and used viciously his weapons of insult," said Dumisani Muleya, spokesman for Zimbabwean Journalists for Human Rights.

The case is one of several involving the government and the Daily News. Nkomo and three other officers of the paper face criminal charges for publishing against government orders.

