

ACTIVITY REPORT - ASSISTANCE DESK

# SUPPORTING JOURNALISTS IN DIFFICULT SITUATION

//////// ACTIVITY REPORT BY PISCA ORSONNEAU, MARTIAL TOURNEUR AND ALEXANDRA TRYJANOWSKI //////////////////////////////////////  
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**REPORTERS  
SANS FRONTIERES**  
POUR LA LIBERTE DE LA PRESSE



illness got worse and now he needs analyses that he cannot afford, so we have stepped in.” In Iraq, the Berlin desk works on medical rehabilitation for a journalist who was seriously injured by a bomb during a press conference. Reporters Without Borders also provides “protection” grants in cases of danger, for example, when a journalist needs to lie low for a while. We may pay for an air fare and hotel so that the journalist is able to spend a dangerous period in a safe place. Such a rescue operation is not encouraged. It represents the final option in a graduated series of procedures for protecting journalists. But flight is often the instinctive survival response when a journalist is threatened. “Finally, we may also cover a journalist’s day-to-day living expenses”, Martial Tourneur said. “This has often happened with Iranian journalists who have fled their country. Their bank accounts are systematically blocked by the regime, says Prisca Orsonneau, Head of the Assistance Desk. So we pay for their food and lodging. In some cases we have had to award several grants, one after the other. The funding has to continue to be regarded as emergency aid. This is why the sums involved have to be adapted to each situation.” In Azerbaijan, the German desk assisted

the family of a critical journalist who was arrested and jailed on trumped-up charges. The journalist’s parents have lost their jobs because of the criminal proceedings against him. Coordination with other organisations that defend journalists such as the Committee to Protect Journalists, International Media Support and PEN International is important. “We work in a network”, Martial said. We share information with the other organisations about the requests we receive and coordinate assistance measures with them.” When journalists request financial assistance, it is only granted after their identity and all the details of their case have been confirmed. As well as making them fill out a detailed application form, Reporters Without Borders carries out an investigation using its correspondents in the field. Referring to the heads of the six research desks at Reporters Without Borders headquarters in Paris, who monitor press freedom violations throughout the world, Martial Tourneur said: “In many cases

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the researchers forward the requests to us. We have just had the case of an Indonesian journalist who had to go into hiding after writing about deforestation and illegal logging. It was the researcher in charge of the Asia desk who alerted us.”

**EXILE AND ASYLUM APPLICATIONS**

Journalists who flee their country very often find themselves blocked in a neighbouring country. This is what happened to a Somali journalist who recently fled across the border into Kenya but is still in danger from Islamist militias and has been getting death threats on his mobile phone. “We have asked UNHCR to transfer him to the capital, Nairobi, for safety reasons, and we will assist him in his asylum application process,” Martial Tourneur said. Reporters Without Borders supports applications, verifies the applicant’s identity and background and asks officials to speed up processing and do what is necessary to ensure an applicant is safe. The first step is to write letters supporting the journalist’s request for UN refugee status. “If they are still not safe, we ask for them to be resettled in another country under the UN resettlement programme,” Martial explained. “To benefit from this programme, solid arguments are needed – the threat posed by geographical proximity to the

The department in Paris is managed by Martial Tourneur and Prisca Orsonneau ; the desk in Berlin by Alexandra Tryjanowski.

118 exiled journalists supported in 2009  
130,000 euros in assistance grants  
More than 20 requests for fast-tracked visas for France processed in 2009 (of which around 15 for Iranian journalists and their families) and support for dozens of requests to European governments, the United States, Canada and Australia. The German section is currently advocating 9 visas applications

**New assistance desk opened in Berlin**

With the beginning of this year a new assistance desk started operating in Germany. Based in Berlin, the desk is run by Alexandra Tryjanowski who is specialised in migration and asylum law. The new desk shares the growing caseload with the corresponding desk in Paris. During the first months of its existence, from January to the beginning of June 2010, the German desk has given assistance in 32 cases.

The desk has provided direct support in the countries of origin in four countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and in Irak. Secondly, the desk assisted journalists from Iran and Eritrea who had to flee to neighbouring countries where they are not able to live in safety. Many Iranian journalists for example who looked for refuge in Turkey are insufficiently protected and supported. The desk applied for exit visa for them in safer European States – one of the most challenging tasks for the new assistance desk. Recently the German government announced that some of the Iranian refugees from Turkey will be received in Germany. Another important area of operation is aid to journalists who live in Germany as refugees, coming from countries such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. We assisted in legal questions concerning migration law, residence status or asylum matters.



## PORTRAITS OF EXILED JOURNALISTS



Agil Khalil

### AGIL KHALIL - AZERBAIDJAN

A young man of around 30 with long hair and a checked shirt outside his jeans, Agil does not draw attention among the students at the Sorbonne, where he is studying French civilisation. His story is nonetheless worthy of a novel, a story of violence that exposes one of the darkest sides of his country, Azerbaijan, a former Soviet republic on the Caspian Sea. After ending up in France almost by chance, Agil is slowly rebuilding his life: "Now I have a girlfriend and plans for the future... I did not choose France. I am here because it was the first country to offer me refuge. What mattered was to get out of Azerbaijan at all cost."

Azadliq was Azerbaijan's first independent daily when it was launched in 1991 and has been targeted by the authorities for years because of its investigative reporting and revelations. Fines, judicial harassment and imprisonment have all been used in an attempt to beat it into submission. "It now has a print run of 20,000 copies. My editor spent time in prison. Several of the people I worked with are still detained."

A price was put on Agil's head in Baku after he stumbled on something that was particularly embarrassing for the intelligence services and government. When he joined the staff of Azadliq in 2007 everything was fine at first. He liked his work and did lots of reporting in the field, covering corruption in the judicial apparatus, criminal gang activity and cases of embezzlement by local officials. All that changed in January 2008 when he went to cover an apparently anodyne story about a state forest a few kilometres from the capital. It turned out the government had secretly donated the forest to an intelligence agency for services rendered. "When I went there, I found that trees were being felled and the intelligence agency was trafficking in timber. I was attacked by two men who were not pleased to see me. It turned nasty. They hit me, breaking a finger. They threw me to the ground and kept kicking me."

Agil filed a complaint. The police dragged their feet, sensing they were up against something too big for them to handle. "One day, a man offered me money to drop the proceedings. I refused outright. Then I received death threats. I was asked: why don't you take money in exchange for withdrawing the complaint?" But Agil refused to give up. He wanted to see justice done in a country where too many cases are resolved by means of payments. He would pay dearly for his obstinacy. One evening in March 2008, he left the office rather late. Night had fallen and he began walking to the metro station

## Athula and Manjula

It was not easy in Sri Lanka to extricate oneself from the Tamil-Sinhalese conflict, to rise above the ethnic and even racist considerations. Either you were Sinhalese and you therefore had to subscribe to the bellicose discourse of the government in Colombo, or you were Tamil and the LTTE wanted you to be a Tamil Tiger and be ready to take up arms and die for an independent northern Sri Lanka.

There was no room for those who wanted to reject the leaders of both opposing factions and try to bring the two communities together. Athula and Manjula, two Sinhalese journalists who tried to promote a Tamil-Sinhalese rapprochement for years, learned this to their cost and have been refugees in France since July 2009. Working with Tamil journalists, they dared to conduct training workshops in Jaffna, the Tamil people's historic capital, on the problems of investigative journalism, human rights and trafficking in humans, and they did this in a completely independent manner.

"Working for a free press became our main activity in 2008," Manjula said. "As members of the Free Media Movement, we organised cultural events and press freedom demonstrations and we defended journalists who had been physically attacked. That might have been all right in peace time, even if risky, but when the war really resumed in 2006, our position became untenable. The time for restraint and dialogue between the two communities was over. There was too much prejudice and nationalism in both camps."

Athula, Manjula and other journalists entered a sort of safe house



Athula and Manjula during protests

in January 2008 because of the danger of reprisals. By day it was the premises of the Free Media Movement, the Sri Lanka Journalists Association and other NGOs. And by night, with the furniture pushed to one side, it became a dormitory. Athula, Manjula and their colleagues never went out at night and only in a group by day.

They were tireless in their defence of balanced, non-partisan news reporting. When a minister sent his thugs to attack Rupavahini TV, because it was not broadcasting his interviews, Athula and Manjula served as intermediaries in negotiations. When the Sunday Leader's editor was murdered, they were the first ones to organise demonstrations to press for a proper investigation. One day, nonetheless, a price was put on their own heads and it was time to flee, first to India, then Nepal, and finally to France, where they have lived for the past year. Athula is currently working for a Tamil radio station based in Paris. Manjula has gone back to being a writer. "As soon as things calm down in Sri Lanka, we will go back. But for the time being, it is still too soon."





fugee smuggler 1,500 euros and fled to Ethiopia. I stayed in a camp run by UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] near the border but it was too dangerous. The Eritrean army often sends thugs to settle scores or bring dissidents back. After a month, I moved to Addis Ababa, where I shared a house with other Eritreans. I had to wait only six months to get a visa for France. During the application process, I was supported and advised by Reporters Without Borders, which had been aware of case. Reporters Without Borders requested an ex-

press visa because I was to join *Radio Erena* in Paris, because I had journalistic work to do. I arrived in France in January. My wife has meanwhile fled the country. I hope she will be able to join me soon." Reporters Without Borders has funded the creation of an independent radio station that broadcasts from Paris in Tigrinya, the Eritrean language. The well-known journalist Biniam presents it. Amanuel joined him this year. ●

## RECOMMENDATIONS

BY PRISCA ORSONNEAU - HEAD OF THE ASSISTANCE DESK

- In partnership with local NGOs, governments in the countries of origin should implement or facilitate internal procedures for protecting their journalists when they are threatened in connection with their work. A journalist's flight into exile always means the loss of a valuable observer and chronicler of a country's situation. The authorities in these countries must do more to combat impunity for those who oppress journalists. In particular, they must facilitate local investigations so that those who use violence against journalists do not continue to go unpunished.
  - In cases in which the safety of journalists cannot be guaranteed and they have to flee in order to survive, it is vital that the consulates and embassies of safe countries should be open to these human rights defenders and ready to offer them refuge when they are exposed to imminent danger. Even when it is recognised that these journalists are threatened, they are not granted any facility for obtaining visas for third countries. It is appalling to see them denied an effective refuge by bureaucratic barriers and scepticism about their plight.
  - The refusal of certain western governments to take any action is incomprehensible when the toll of journalists killed or imprisoned is steadily rising in countries such as Iran. Western governments cannot continue to evade the issue by referring to UNHCR resettlement because UNHCR procedures are extremely drawn-out, no effort is made to protect the refugees while they are waiting and the outcome is very uncertain.
- UNHCR must facilitate the rapid reinstallation of journalists. If the High Commissioner is unable to provide adequate protection to journalists and human rights defenders in general, he must adopt a clear position on this issue so that their plight can be improved.
- What the High Commissioner should be doing now is propose a revision of the Geneva Convention that provides for a real emergency procedure in cases of individual and targeted threats against human rights defenders, or to ask third countries to create protected entry procedures outside the standard resettlement procedures and quotas.
  - It is imperative that the countries of Europe, North America and the Arab world establish effective policies for receiving journalists who have had to flee their own countries. Centres like the *Maison des Journalistes Residence* in Paris should be created in other countries. Some universities and foundations already offer a temporary refuge where journalists can receive protection and training until the situation improves in their homeland. Journalism schools, foundations, corporate sponsors and media must get involved and take more initiatives of this kind, creating alternative solutions that offer threatened journalist both protection and training or internships for a few months, while the situation settles down in their country. A temporary shelter combined with training allows journalists to continue working in exile, so that their voice can continue to be heard. ●

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**REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS** is an international press freedom organisation. It monitors and reports violations of media freedom throughout the world. Consisting of a team of 12 journalists and a network of 140 correspondents worldwide, Reporters Without Borders analyses the information it obtains and uses press releases, letters, investigative reports and recommendations to alert public opinion to abuses against journalists and violations of free expression, and to put pressure on politicians and government officials.

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