

Mr. António Guterres
United Nations High
Commissioner for Refugees
UNHCR
PO Box 2500
CH-1211 Geneva 2
Switzerland

Paris, 30 May 2012

Urgent: Situation of asylum-seeking journalists in transit countries

Dear High Commissioner,

Reporters Without Borders, the leading international NGO defending freedom of information, is extremely concerned about the situation of journalists who apply to UNHCR for protection in the first country they reach after fleeing their own country.

By providing information about the situation of their fellow citizens, by interviewing government opponents, and by drawing attention to human rights violations, corruption and misrule, journalists attract the hostility of regimes and influential groups that do not tolerate freely reported news and information.

Because of their work, journalists are exposed to serious reprisals. Many are forced to flee abroad to escape physical violence, threats, arrests and arbitrary jail sentences.

Journalists are easy to identify because they sign articles, appear on TV and speak on the radio. When they flee to a nearby country and register with UNHCR, they continue to be at the mercy of the regimes they are trying to escape because their names, faces and voices are known.

This was seen when Eritrean journalist Jamal Osman Hamad was arrested in Khartoum on 24 October 2011, less than a week after Eritrean President Issaias Afewerki visited his Sudanese counterpart, and 300 Eritrean citizens were deported to their country of origin without UNHCR being able to examine their cases.

Our concern increased when Rwandan journalist Charles Ingabire was gunned down in Kampala on 30 November 2011 in very unclear circumstances. Reporters Without Borders is convinced that an act of political revenge cannot be ruled out.

It is clear that the Rwandan, Eritrean, Ethiopian and Iranian governments, like Somalia's Al-Shabaab and Latin America's drug traffickers, have an ability to do harm that reaches well beyond their own borders.

It must however be recognized that, as things stand, there is no adequate mechanism for protecting asylum-seeking journalists (and other news providers), who are all, by the nature of their work, also human rights defenders. Reporters Without Borders would therefore to like

propose that local UNHCR offices adopt the following dedicated procedures for the protection of journalists.

Reporters Without Borders asks UNHCR to establish an alert mechanism with a designated referral officer within each of its local offices so that cases of persons who are in particular danger can be identified and handled more quickly. As Reporters Without Borders is in regular contact with journalists who have decided to flee abroad to safeguard their safety and freedom, and as it systematically conducts an investigation whenever it is contacted by a journalist seeking its protection, it is in a position to act as guarantor of the identity and background of journalists who approach UNHCR protection officers.

Adequate safety measures must also be adopted for refugee journalists (and other human rights defenders) including a programme of urban shelters (away from the regular refugee camps), safehouses, and emergency alert and protection mechanisms. Reporters Without Borders has been helping refugee journalists for more than 20 years but, although we are in constant contact with them and give them advice and guidance, we do not have the human and financial resources to enable them to meet their daily needs, including their security needs.

It is vital that journalists should have greater access to the emergency resettlement process and to the UN's mechanism for temporary evacuation to a safe third country. UNHCR should work to obtain greater participation in these programmes by countries that can offer safe refuge.

Reporters Without Borders also urges the United Nations to publicly acknowledge that its traditional protection procedure is not appropriate for threatened journalists and to ask member states to help to make up for the shortcomings. This would enable UNHCR to overcome the culpable inaction of certain western government that use the overall quota as an excuse for doing nothing, although more than 260 journalists have been killed in connection with their work in the past five years and 154 are currently detained.

Our organization very much hopes that you will come out in favour of specific and more personalized treatment of resettlement requests by journalists and human rights defenders who are threatened in transit countries. We also hope that our recommendations will help to bring about a more general overhaul of UNHCR procedures.

We stand ready to provide you with any additional information and to meet with you to discuss these recommendations further.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Olivier Basille', written over a circular stamp or seal.

Olivier Basille
Director General