



# HOSTILE CLIMATE

FOR ENVIRONMENTAL  
JOURNALISTS

**REPORTERS  
WITHOUT BORDERS**  
FOR FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

## PREFACE

### **Devastating hurricanes**


Journalists who cover environmental issues live in a dangerous climate and are exposed to potentially devastating forces. We are not talking about nature's hurricanes, squalls, downpours or lightning. Overly inquisitive journalists face harassment, threats, physical violence and sometimes even murder.

As representatives from throughout the world prepare to attend the Paris climate talks (COP21), which will be covered by more than 3,000 journalists, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has investigated threats to freedom of information about the environment rather than threats to the environment itself. The journalists accredited to COP21 will in no danger (except the danger of pressure from lobbyists) but the same cannot be said of many of their colleagues, who are often exposed to terrible dangers.

At the intersection of political, economic, cultural and sometimes criminal interests, the environment is a highly sensitive subject, and those who shed light on pollution or any kind of planetary degradation often get into serious trouble. Since RSF's previous reports on this subject – *The dangers for journalists who expose environmental issues* in 2009 and *Deforestation and pollution, high-risk subjects* in 2010 – the situation of environmental reporters has worsened in many countries.

In *Hostile climate for environmental journalists*, RSF highlights the need for much more attention to the plight of these men and women, who take great risks to challenge powerful interests. Their meticulous work of gathering and disseminating information is essential to achieving the badly needed increase in awareness of the dangers threatening our planet.

**Christophe Deloire**  
*Secretary-General*



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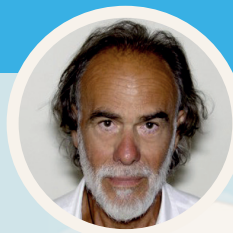
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# EIGHT GREEN JOURNALISTS IN RED ZONES



**TAHAR DJEHICHE**  
(Algeria),  
prosecuted

Algerian cartoonist Tahar Djehiche is opposed to the use of fracking to extract gas from shale and expresses his opposition in articles and cartoons critical of President Bouteflika and his government. In a cartoon posted on his Facebook page in April 2015, he portrayed Bouteflika inside an hourglass collapsing under the sand of In Salah, where residents have been protesting about shale gas production. On 20 April he was charged with defaming and insulting the president, which carries a possible six-month jail sentence. Fortunately, he was acquitted.



**MIMMO CARRIERI**  
(Italy), threatened

A reporter for the online newspaper Viv@voce and active environmentalist in Italy's southern Apulia region, Mimmo Carrieri was insulted and beaten for more than an hour by around 20 campers on 5 July when he photographed them in a nature reserve where access was supposed to be restricted. His camera and mobile phone were taken. Repeatedly threatened by the local mafia, Carrieri has been under police protection since 2012. His boat was sabotaged, his car was set on fire and he has received threatening letters containing bullets. He describes himself as a moving target and has requested better protection.



**RODNEY SIEH**  
(Liberia), held for several months

The founder and editor of the investigative newspaper *Frontpage Africa*, Rodney Sieh was jailed in August 2013 for refusing to pay the colossal sum of 1.6 million dollars (1.2 million euros) in damages in a libel suit dating back to 2010. The suit was brought by a politician in revenge for a story in the newspaper, with supporting evidence, that he was fired as agriculture minister for embezzling 6 million dollars. As well as the damages award, a supreme court judge sympathetic to the former agriculture minister's cause also ordered *Frontpage Africa*'s closure. While imprisoned, Sieh went on hunger strike and had to be hospitalized. He was then paroled on "compassionate" grounds but was confined to his home. He was finally granted a full release on 8 November 2013. Ten days later, the newspaper resumed publishing. "We are coming back stronger than ever," Sieh announced.





**ANNA GRITSEVITCH**  
(Russia), arrested

An environmental reporter for the leading news website *Kavkasky Uzel*, Gritsevitch, 38, has paid a great deal of attention to the ecological damage caused by the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics. She was sentenced to three days in prison in July 2015 on a charge of refusing to obey police instructions while filming a demonstration by Sochi residents in protest against the dumping of rubble near a nature reserve outside the city. Her camera was also confiscated.



**SANDEEP KOTHARI**  
**ET JAGENDRA SINGH (India), murdered**

Jagendra Singh died on 8 June from the burn injuries he sustained when police raided his home in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh. A freelancer for Hindi-language newspapers for more than 15 years, he had recently posted an article on Facebook accusing an Uttar Pradesh government minister, Ram Murti Verma, of involvement in illegal mining. A forensic report concluded that he took his own life. The burned body of Sandeep Kothari, 40, a reporter for several Hindi newspapers, was found 12 days later in the neighbouring state of Madhya Pradesh. The police said local organized crime members had pressured him to stop investigating illegal mining. Three arrests were made.



**NGUYEN NGOC QUANG (Vietnam), stabbed**

The deputy news editor of a provincial radio and TV station in Thai Nguyen, in northern Vietnam, Nguyen Ngoc Quang had been investigating illegal mining by privately-owned companies when he was attacked on 2 September 2015 by two men on a motorcycle, who stabbed him 44 times in a shoulder and arm before taking off. The police are investigating. His house was set on fire a week before the attack.



**AHMED RILWAN**  
(Maldives), missing

This 29-year-old reporter covered politics and the environment for the independent newspaper *Minivan News*. His last story, on 7 August 2014, was critical of oil prospecting in Maldivian waters. He was kidnapped the next day. Several witnesses said they saw a person meeting his description being bundled into a car. Three suspects were arrested a month later and then released. Since then, the investigation has ground to a halt and the family has reported being pressured by the police. A dedicated website has been created to bring together as much information as possible about the case. It shows the days, hours and minutes since his disappearance.

# 1 “WHAT IS WRONG WITH US?”

**For a long time, nobody paid much attention to the environment and nobody paid much attention to journalists who covered the environment. But this is beginning to change.**

“What is wrong with us?” asks Canadian journalist and writer Naomi Klein, referring to our collective failure to react to the urgency of the climate change challenge. “What is really preventing us from putting out the fire that is threatening to burn down our collective house?” Covering environmental issues has never been so important because fossil energy is still responsible for 80 percent of the world’s CO2 emissions and 67 percent of greenhouse gases, because global warming is the 21st century’s biggest public health threat and has already displaced 20 million people and because decision-makers need to agree to limit the global surface temperature rise to 2°C at the Paris conference in December.

“There is no bigger story than the climate,” said Alan Rusbridger, the editor of the British daily *The Guardian*, in an interview for *Le Monde* in April 2015. Before standing down as editor in the summer, he persuaded his staff to take up the fight against climate change. The newspaper is addressing this “this huge, overshadowing, overwhelming issue” by means of its “Keep it in the ground” campaign – by publishing reports on the causes of global warming and by urging investors, banks, foundations and universities not to put their money in the 200 companies that are the leading producers of fossil energy.

## **ENVIRONMENT – “POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC ISSUE”**

The sudden awakening to the overriding importance of this issue has spread to many other news organizations. The stereotypes about environmental journalists are being exploded. No, they don’t just go on about protecting nature, fauna and flora. They also cover deforestation, the exploitation of natural resources and pollution – issues that often involve more than just protection of the environment, especially when they shed light on the illegal activities of industrial groups, local organized crime and even government officials.

Global warming is a “political and economic issue,” Rusbridger said in the *Le Monde* interview. Environmental stories used to be discussed last in editorial conferences but now they jostle with the big news stories for the front page or for the start of TV news programmes. It’s also time to assign the same priority to protecting environmental reporters.

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→ Naomi Klein is a Canadian journalist, author and campaigner against corporate globalization. Her latest book, “This changes everything,” says a major collective effort is now needed to simultaneously combat global warming and build a fairer society.



# 2 COVERING THE “GREEN” WAR

**Environmental reporters are threatened, physically attacked and sometimes murdered because of what they report. The level of violence to which they are exposed has never been so high.**

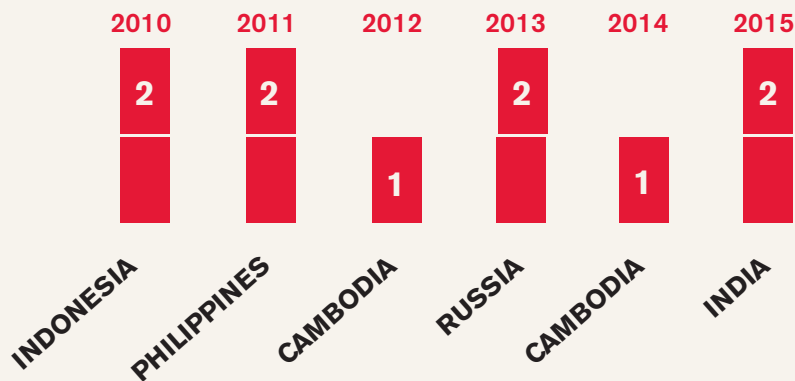
In the course of her 24-year career, Egyptian journalist Abeer Saady has covered many big stories including the war in Iraq, the revolution in Egypt and the war in Syria. But Saady, nowadays also deputy editor of the daily *Al-Akhbar*, was still surprised to have been beaten up by thugs while investigating a story about chemical companies dumping toxic waste in the Nile. The factories hired the thugs, she said.

Of all the challenges in Saady's career, she says “the most difficult was when I decided to report on pollution.” Looking for the causes of environmental problems can lead reporters into hostile terrain. When Klein says “our economy is at war with many forms of life on earth, including human life,” isn't she implying that environmental reporters are working in war zones like war reporters? Stephen Leahy, a Canadian journalist who has won several awards for his articles on the environment and his book *Your Water Footprint*, recognizes that his work often takes him to what are effectively conflict zones. The only difference, Saady points out, is that “war correspondent are always prepared – this is why they are in less danger than other reporters.”

## **INDIA AND CAMBODIA – DEADLIEST COUNTRIES**

Many environmental journalists have paid a high price. Ten have been murdered since 2010, according to RSF's tally. RSF's previous reports on this subject – *The dangers for journalists who expose environmental issues* in 2009 and *Deforestation and pollution, high-risk subjects* in 2010 – did not report any deaths in their ranks.

## MURDERS



In the past five years, almost all (90 percent) of the murders of environmental journalists have been in South Asia (India) and Southeast Asia (Cambodia, Philippines and Indonesia.) The one exception is Russia. Mikhail Beketov, the editor of *Khimkinskaya Pravda*, a local paper based in the Moscow suburb of Khimki. He finally succumbed in April 2013 to the injuries he sustained in November 2008, when he was beaten and left for dead while campaigning against the construction of a motorway through Khimki forest. After the beating, he remained badly handicapped until his death.

The two murders of environmental journalists reported in 2015 have been in India. Jagendra Singh, a resident of the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, had often accused Ram Murti Verma, a minister in the state's government, of corruption in connection with illegal mining and land seizures. He posted an article on his Facebook page in May saying he had evidence to support his claims. But he never produced his evidence because he sustained very bad burn injuries during a police raid on his home on 1 June and died eight days later in hospital. Before dying, he accused Verma in a video. "Why did they have to burn me?" he asked. "If the minister and his people had something against me, they could have hit me and beaten me, instead of pouring kerosene over me and burning me." He was 42.

Sandeep Kothari, a journalist based in the adjoining state of Madhya Pradesh, also covering illegal mining and quarrying and had just filed a complaint against the "sand and manganese" mafia when he was murdered on 19 June. He and a friend were riding a bicycle when they were rammed by a car from which several individuals emerged and abducted the reporter. His burned body was found in a farm a few kilometres away the next day. The police noted that he had been the target of judicial harassment by organized crime members. They had also "threatened" his family, they said. He was 40.

Covering such subjects in India or nearby countries is "always risky," especially for those working living in small towns and villages, says Joydeep Gupta, an Indian journalist who has specialized in covering the environment since the Bhopal disaster in 1984.

A total of four environmental reporters were killed in Cambodia from 2012 to 2014. Two of them were killed while investigating illegal logging, a lucrative activity controlled by persons in high places. Taing Try was shot dead in his car in the southern province of Kratie on 12 October 2014. The police detained three persons suspected of killing him because he had threatened to report their trafficking to the authorities. The body of *Vorakchun Khmer* reporter Hang Serei Oudom was found in the trunk of his car in the northeastern province of Ratanakiri on 9 September 2012. He appeared to have been killed by blows with an axe. His last story accused an army officer of using military vehicles for trafficking in timber.

Fishermen beat local newspaper reporter Suon Chan to death with stones and bamboo sticks outside his home in the central province of Kampong Chhnang on 1 February 2014 because his coverage of illegal fishing had prodded the police into taking measures against some of them.

Chut Wutty, an environmentalist who worked as a fixer, was killed on 26 April 2012 in the southwestern province of Koh Kong while accompanying two *Cambodia Daily* journalists who were doing a story on wine production in a protected forest region. On their way back, they were stopped at a checkpoint where military police asked them for the memory cards of their cameras. Chut Wutty refused and, when he started the car with the aim of leaving, the police shot him.



←  
Cambodian journalist  
Taing Try, 40, was  
killed in the southern  
province of Kratie on  
12 October 2014.



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## “LACK OF PROTECTION HAS CHILLING EFFECT”

“It tends to be location rather than topic which makes a story dangerous,” says James Randerson, the editor of *The Guardian*’s “Keep it in the ground” campaign. “So we think very carefully before sending reporters into regions of the world where there is unrest or security issues.”

If it had not been for the inertia of government officials, these murders could have been avoided. In response to the murders in India, RSF has repeatedly asked the Indian government to establish a national programme for the protection of media personnel. Journalists who get death threats have never been given police protection.

“The lack of protection from the government and the unresolved attacks on journalists have a chilling effect on most journalists,” *Philippine EnviroNews* editor Imelda Abano says.

↑  
The Cambodian  
judicial authorities  
closed the Chut  
Wutty murder case  
in October 2012  
after botching the  
investigation.

The level of impunity is disgraceful in India, ranked 140th out of 180 countries in RSF's World Press Freedom Index, and in Cambodia, ranked 144th. RSF has urged the authorities in both countries to conduct serious and transparent investigation into these barbaric murders of journalists with the aim of bringing those responsible to justice. The families of the victims often face a judicial apparatus that is not worthy of the name. A former Philippine governor was arrested in Thailand in September for the January 2011 murder of a radio journalist who had publicly accused him of corruption. But most of these murders never come to court.

In the case of Jagendra Singh, who had blamed a minister in the state government in a video, his relatives filed an initial complaint. But the autopsy report concluded that Singh set himself on fire, thereby ending the judicial investigation. In Cambodia, the judicial authorities also closed the Chut Wutty case after botching the investigation.

A climate of violence combined with complete impunity leaves journalists feeling very unsafe and undermines freedom of information. Stephen Leahy says he didn't pursue several stories in this region because he thought the location was "extremely risky." Environmental reporters "should not be on the frontline," says Imelda Abano. They face the possibility of physical attacks or threats and "in most extreme cases, some have been killed," she said.

↓  
Tia Maria is an open-cast copper mine in southern Peru's Moquegua Region that is scheduled to begin producing soon.

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## ATTACKED BY LOCAL RESIDENTS

RSF has also monitored many threats and attacks against environmental reporters in Latin America. Of the 11 cases registered by RSF in 2015, eight have been in Peru, Ecuador and Guatemala.


At least six journalists reported being harassed and roughed up during a wave of protests in the spring of 2015 against the proposed Tia Maria open-cast copper mine in southern Peru that is scheduled to open in 2016. The country is split between those concerned about the environmental impact on local agriculture and the project's supporters, who want new investment to revive the stalled economy.

Some reporters were targeted by the project's opponents in the neighbouring Arequipa region who thought their coverage was one-sided. Carlos Zanabria, the correspondent of the daily *El Comercio*, said he "felt in danger" when residents posted his photo on Facebook and accused him of reporting falsehoods.

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RSF is disturbed to see such aggressiveness from members of the public towards journalists whose sole aim is to contribute to the public debate. This is not unique to Latin America. In Italy, Mimmo Carrieri, a journalist and environmentalist who monitors protected areas in the southern Apulia region, was badly beaten in the summer of 2015 by a group of tourists who were camping in a restricted area. Under police protection since 2012 because of repeated death threats, he is now seeking additional protection.

Chinese bird hunters threatened to kill photoreporter Li Feng after his documentary about the illegal slaughter of migratory birds in the southern province of Hunan was broadcast in December 2012. Abusive comments were posted on his Weibo account and he received anonymous threatening phone calls. "Some of those anonymous callers said they would shoot me with their homemade shotgun, which they use in poaching," he said. "The most scary fact was that they were able to find out private information, such as how old my child is and where my wife works."





←  
A dwelling in Nukus,  
a city in western  
Uzbekistan.

© MARK MAYO

## UZBEKISTAN



### SOLIDZHON ABDURAKHMANOV, TEN YEARS FOR NOTHING

**Freelance journalist Solidzhon Abdurakhmanov has been held for the past seven years in Uzbekistan on a trumped-up charge of drug trafficking. His arrest was carefully orchestrated, the evidence was falsified and the trial was arbitrary.**

RSF has been following the case ever since his arrest. A specialist in the Aral Sea ecological disaster and its impact on the local population and on public health, Abdurakhmanov was arrested in Nukus, the capital of Uzbekistan's western autonomous republic of Karakalpakstan, on 7 July 2008. The police said they found six grams of opium and 14 grams of marijuana under a seat in his car, which he had just collected from a repair shop. They detained him on a "drug use" charge, which he has always denied, insisting that the police planted the drugs. When tests showed that he was not a drug user, the charge was changed to drug trafficking.

Despite the incoherence of the prosecution's case, he was given a ten-year jail sentence that was upheld by Karakalpakstan's supreme court in November 2008 without any grounds being given. In the course of seven years in prison in appalling conditions, he has been hospitalized several times with a stomach ulcer and his health has worsened in recent months. RSF calls for his immediate release.

Many other environmental journalists have been detained on questionable grounds. Seven have been placed in detention this year, twice as many as in 2014 and 2013, according to RSF's tally. These arrests, which took place in Latin America, Africa and Central Asia, were designed to neutralize overly inquisitive or troublesome reporters for varying periods.

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# 3 EVERY KIND OF CENSORSHIP

**When journalists point out the harm caused by pollution, talk about global warming or blame the authorities, when the environment becomes a sensitive issue, countries such as China, Ecuador and even Canada resort to censorship in order to gag them.**

On the environment, China has always said one thing and done other. The government seemed to be opening up in February 2015 when it allowed *Under The Dome*, a had-hitting documentary about air pollution in China, to be posted online. In this film, its director, former TV presenter Chai Jing, describes how doctors had to operate on her baby immediately after birth to remove a tumour and how this personal tragedy, which she blames on air pollution, led to her decision to make the documentary. Copying the style Al Gore's 2006 film *An Inconvenient Truth*, she uses statistics, charts, tough interviews and shock photos to explain the causes and consequences of the thick brown smog that covers China's cities, blaming coal-fired power stations, industry and automobile traffic in the process.

The documentary immediately went viral. It was viewed more than 155 million times during the first weekend and was widely commented on social networks. Environment minister Chen Jining even said he hoped it would "encourage efforts by individuals to improve air quality."

←  
Chai Jing presents  
"Under The Dome," her  
documentary about air  
pollution in China and  
its impact on public  
health.





© AFP PHOTO

## “WHEN WILL CHINA FACE THE CRITICISM OF ITS OWN PEOPLE?”

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After seeing the massive impact it was having, the government quickly went into reverse and had the film removed from the main Chinese video websites, including the best-known ones, Youku and iQiyi, while Internet users condemned the U-turn on social networks. “When will this country decide to face the criticism of its own people,” one post said.

In a crisis, China seems to succumb to its old demons and automatically resorts to censorship whenever it is blamed for pollution or global warming. When toxic chemicals exploded in the port city of Tianjin killing more than 100 people on 12 August, the authorities did not hesitate to turn off the flow of information. The Chinese Communist Party issued a string of directives to online media and Internet users. Newspapers had to focus on covering the bravery of the firefighters and the heroic rescues. Not a word about the cause of the blasts, the number of rescue personnel killed, or the fate of the missing.

Western reporters in Tianjin also ran into the wall of silence. While reporting live from outside a hospital that was receiving victims the next day, *CNN* correspondent Will Ripley was harassed and jostled by aggressive men, who told him to stop filming and forced him to cut short his report. Police looked on without intervening. Ripley’s aggressors were later identified as relatives of victims.

Seth Doane, a reporter for the US TV network *CBS*, and his crew were prevented from filming the same day by policemen who put their hands over the lens of his camera. Officials also confiscated the memory card of a Taiwanese reporter for *Eastern Multimedia* when he went too close to the site of the blast.

↑  
More than 100 people  
were killed when  
chemicals exploded  
in the Chinese port  
city of Tianjin on 12  
August 2015.

## ECUADOREAN JOURNALISTS REINED IN BY LEGISLATION

Censorship is sometimes hard to evaluate but RSF has enough evidence to denounce egregious examples in certain countries. In Ecuador, for example, President Rafael Correa's government curtailed freedom of information by adopting a major piece of legislation called the Organic Law on Communication (LOC) in June 2013. Article 23 forces journalists to "correct" any piece of information that is disputed by a third party. Article 77 allows the authorities to decree the "suspension of the right to freedom of information" whenever deemed necessary.

With such restrictions in place, it is hard for journalists to address what is currently Ecuador's most divisive environmental issue, the plan to begin oil drilling in the Yasuni National Park, which is internationally recognized as one of the planet's most biologically diverse regions. *Teleamazonas* presenter Maria Josefa Colonel wanted to refer to the censorship surrounding this issue on 16 June 2013 but was immediately interrupted by a government communiqué. In the *Radio Revista Democracia* political debates broadcast by *EXA FM* and *Democracia FM*, Gonzalo Rosero was cut short by three communiqués in the space of a week for criticizing the plan to drill for oil. He said he felt "psychologically hounded" by the communication ministry, which issues these communiqués.

Journalists in Ecuador have nonetheless found ingenious ways to circumvent the law. An *Ecuavisa TV* presenter announced during its 20 May 2014 news programme that a human rights groups had alleged that there had been a violation of civil rights

© AFP PHOTO/PABLO COZZAGLIO



in the northern Itag region involving the local authorities and the national mining company. The presenter then carefully added: "Because no formal evidence of the allegation was provided, because the national mining company's representatives did not respond to our queries and because our journalists could not go there, we are refraining from covering these allegations in order to respect the Organic Law on Communication." This time there was no government communiqué.

## TAR SANDS OFF LIMITS IN CANADA

While Ecuador and China use legislation to censor, RSF has noted that other ways of restricting freedom of information can sometimes be even more pernicious. Canada is an example. The annual report that Canadian Journalists for Free Expression (CJFE) published in April 2015 voiced concern about "the Canadian government's continued muzzling of Canada's federal scientists," who have been prevented from talking to journalists about their research into the climatic and environmental impact of extracting oil from Canada's extensive tar sands.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper, whose decade in office has just ended, was a big fan of increasing oil extraction from the tar sands. His administration made it much harder to get accreditation for interviews with government scientists. This resulted in an 80 percent fall in media coverage of the important subject of climate change, according to a study carried out in 2010. Four well-known scientists who had often been interviewed gave only 12 interviews in 2008, as against 99 in 2007, the study noted. "It makes investigative journalism impossible and frustrating," CJFE executive director Tom Henheffer said. "The government's culture of secrecy is extremely harmful to Canadian society, which is maintained in obscurity."

The Harper administration also put direct pressure on environmental reporters by trying to discredit them. The Energy Resources Conservation Board tried by every means possible to prevent the publication of Andrew Nikiforuk's 2010 book *Tar Sands*. This government agency was tasked with claiming that the book contained many factual errors. Nikiforuk responded by posting a letter online with information that supported all of his research and, when published, the book received an award from the Society of Environmental Journalists.

As well as government censorship, the media also have to resist the influence of various interests, especially industrial concerns that try to bribe them to ignore threats to the environments.



←  
Ecuador is split  
over plans to drill  
for oil in the Yasuni  
National Park, one  
of the world's most  
biologically diverse  
regions.



← Iranian women walking on a dried-up part of Lake Urmia, one of the world's biggest salt-water lakes. It has lost more than half of its surface area in the past 20 years.

## NASSER KARAMI

### UNDER TEHRAN'S LEADEN SKIES



An enthusiastic environmentalist, Iranian journalist Nasser Karami wrote about climate and pollution-related issues in Tehran for more than 20 years, until the day he was fired for no reason. After four years without a job, he realised he had no choice but to seek a new life elsewhere. He left Tehran on 7 December 2013 and is nowadays experiencing a cleaner and freer environment in Norway.

Two decades ago, his ecological interests led him to become the first journalist in Iran to specialize in the environment. "It was in 1993 when I was working for *Hamshahri Daily*," he recalled. "I wrote an article on pollution and gave it to my editor. He said he would print it but couldn't give me a column on the environment." But there was so much interest in the article that the editor changed his mind. "He decided to create a special environmental column and put me in charge of it" Karami, who was also a lecturer and researcher in climatology, sustainable

development and ecotourism at Azad University and Allameh Tabatabai University, was delighted with this development. But it proved harder than he expected. His editor kept on rejecting his articles. "I would write three articles to make them accept one. If my article pinned the blame on people, it would be published. But if it put the blame on the government, I could be sure it would not be published."

His career as an environmental reporter came to an abrupt end after a wave of opposition to President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's reelection in 2009 triggered a crackdown. "The regime got much more authoritarian and I was fired from the newspaper, which belongs to the municipality of Tehran, because of my articles. Not one in particular but all of them. They did not explain why. They just said, 'we are not going to work together anymore.'"

He also lost his positions at both universities and was dropped by the publisher who had previously published

several of his novels although they "were not politically related." The years passed and he couldn't find a job. He found all doors closed, even when he tried to branch out into other academic areas. His only option was to leave the country.

"Four years later, a friend of mine, an environmental journalist who lives in Oslo, helped to find me a job at the University of Bergen and I accepted." He is now also in demand from the media outside Iran. At the same time he is alarmed about the situation back home. "Today, there is a climate emergency in Iran. The main problem is water because of climate change and the mismanagement of water resources. The landscape is changing and some specialists are comparing Iran to Somalia or Sudan. I am worried for my country's future."

# 4 CORRUPTING THE MEDIA

**Like political and business reporters, some environmental reporters acknowledge that they have been approached by companies trying to protect their image. To avoid being associated with an environmentally harmful project, these companies have tried to buy their silence.**

"To a greater or lesser degree, we regularly receive pressure over which stories we cover and how we cover them," says James Randerson, the editor of *The Guardian's* "Keep it in the ground" campaign. The attempts to manipulate and even bribe usually come from the private sector, from big and small companies. RSF has identified several kinds of pressure, all more or less insidious.

Canadian journalist Stephen Leahy recalls being the target of a bribery attempt in 2008 while investigating a Canadian company accused of polluting the water where it was mining for silver in Mexico. "In a phone interview I asked an executive of the company about the allegations and he immediately said something like, 'How much is this going to cost me to make this story turn out right?'"

In Canada, even the police have tried to bribe the media. In 2013, Mike Howe, a reporter for the *Media Co-Op* news website, was arrested three times during anti-fracking protests in New Brunswick without initially being charged. "The funny thing about this situation is that one week ago they were offering me money to inform for them and now they are charging me with an incident that allegedly occurred two weeks ago," he told the press after he was finally charged.

## **"HE PUT 100 DOLLARS ON THE TABLE"**

Corruption methods are more direct in Democratic Republic of Congo. In the east of the country, there is opposition to British oil company Soco International's concession to explore for oil in Virunga National Park, a region with more biodiversity than anywhere else in Africa. A *Radio Omara* journalist in Kyondo, a town near the exploration area, told RSF: "A Soco agent came to our radio station and gave us 100 dollars [90 euros] to broadcast an audio clip singing the company's praises. And then he gave us another 50 dollars so that we wouldn't talk negatively about Soco."

There has been a great deal of controversy about Soco's practices in connection with this project. Global Witness, an NGO that campaigns against destruction of natural resources, accused Soco in June 2015 of paying tens of thousands of dollars to a Congolese army officer implicated in a series of violent incidents against the opponents of oil exploration in Virunga. The company denies all these charges and says it has pulled out of the park after completing the exploration phase.

"Our job is to report accurately and stand firm in the face of such pressure," Randerson says. RSF notes the increasing strength of environmental journalists' associations opposing governmental and corporate attempts to restrict freedom of information.



← Democratic Republic of Congo's 7,800-square-kilometre Virunga National Park is home to a quarter of the world's remaining Mountain Gorillas. It is now classified as an "endangered" UNESCO World Heritage Site.

## "THEY TRY TO PUSH OR SPIN OR BULLY US"

**James Randerson, editor of The Guardian's "Keep it in the ground" campaign**

### **Have you ever faced censorship or pressure when covering environmental topics?**

To a greater or lesser degree, we regularly receive pressure over which stories we cover and how we cover them. All journalists do. It is not unique to environmental journalism but the response has to be the same. We evaluate what people from all sides of environmental stories are telling us on their merits and against the facts. Then we tell the story as we see it. From time to time, press officers, large and small companies, campaign groups and even governments try to push or spin or bully us into changing what we cover and how. Our job is to report accurately and stand firm in the face of such pressure.



### **Has any industrial group ever boycotted you because of your environmental articles?**

From time to time, companies we write about refuse to answer questions relating to a story, particularly if it will show them in a negative light. One company, ExxonMobil, has refused to speak to the Guardian about climate/environment related matters because we are running an editorial campaign called Keep it in the Ground backing fossil fuel divestment (i.e. advocating institutions move their assets out of oil, coal and gas companies). In our experience they were not the most loquacious of companies on these matters in any case.

### **Which topics are the most dangerous to cover?**

In terms of the personal safety of journalists, it tends to be location rather than topic which makes a story dangerous. So we think very carefully before sending reporters into regions of the world where there is unrest or security issues. Obstructive officialdom in countries such as Russia can also pose dangers. We still send reporters but only after mitigating the risks.

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## STRENGTH

## THROUGH UNITY

**More and more environmental journalists are forming associations with the aim of improving the quality of their stories and protecting their members in the field.**

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“When I was a journalist uncovering how oil and petrochemical companies were dumping mercury into the Gulf of Thailand, I could not get the Thai minister of industry to respond to my questions,” said James Fahn, a US journalist who has worked a lot in Southeast Asia. “I would send interview requests and call up his office, but he felt free to ignore me. When the Thai Society of Environmental Journalists – made up of journalists representing most of the country’s print media, along with some radio and TV reporters – sent in a request that he come speak with us, however, the minister somehow was able to find the time.”

Fahn’s account, which was posted on the Columbia Journalism Review website, is a good illustration of how environmental reporters can improve their access to information by forming a common front. It is an important way “to improve the quantity and quality of environmental coverage,” Fahn told RSF.

### WORKING TOGETHER

The first organization of this kind was formed by a small group of established environmental reporters in the United States in 1990. Among its goals, the Society of Environmental Journalists (SEJ) includes the provision of “vital support to journalists of all media who face the challenging responsibility of covering complex environmental issues.” Many other journalists have taken note. Today the SEJ is one of the biggest associations of its kind and similar groups have been formed in around 20 other countries.

While their overall aim is more and better environmental reporting, these groups also help to protect journalists “especially in countries where freedom of information is in short supply and when they are threatened by big influential companies or politicians,” said Imelda Abano of the Philippines Network of Environmental Journalists. Turning to these associations helps the individual reporter to escape isolation. “Covering environmental issues in remote and isolated areas (...) is the most dangerous part of the job,” Abano adds.

“Co-work with others” to avoid dangerous situations, Stephen Leahy recommends. “When environmental reporters are working on difficult issues, it’s important to share information, to share tips. The important thing is to cooperate. That doesn’t mean a freelance can’t do his own story. There are plenty of stories out there not to think themselves as competitors.”

## IMPROVING ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Networks of this kind can also improve access to information in developing countries. “The Vietnam Forum of Environmental Journalists has helped me to have more opportunities abroad, to develop my network [of colleagues, scientists and experts] and to increase my knowledge about the environment and climate change,” *Hanoi TV* reporter Tran Thuy Binh said.

These specialist networks also help to train the youngest reporters. More and more journalists are turning to the environment as a speciality but they often have little initial awareness of the forces in play. A journalist lacking the relevant skills can go into the field without being aware of the danger. RSF welcomes the work of associations that help journalists to become better acquainted with a subject and to be able to evaluate the risks.

James Fahn set up the Earth Journalism Network, an international network of environmental journalists, in 2004 with the aim of helping to create and fund local organizations, especially in Southeast Asian countries such as the Philippines. “Thanks to these grants, they can hold training workshops or carry out other activities to build capacity or produce content,” he says.

In the course of ten years, EJNI has acquired 8,000 members in associations throughout Southeast Asia and has trained more than 4,300 journalists, who wrote around 5,000 environmental stories at the end of their training before going back to their regular jobs. Not a bad way to help preserve freedom of information.





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