SUPPORTING JOURNALISTS IN DIFFICULT SITUATION

ACTIVITY REPORT - ASSISTANCE DESK

ACTIVITY REPORT BY PISCA ORSONNEAU, MARTIAL TOURNER AND ALEXANDRA TRYJANOWSKI

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In 2009, the desks provided “assistance grants” of an average of 400 euros each to around 150 journalists and their families. Many of the grants were to help pay for defense lawyers’ fees when journalists were prosecuted in connection with their work. There is a recent example in Thailand, where a journalist critical of the government was the target of a criminal prosecution on a charge of lèse majesté. In Uzbekistan, the Berlin desk hired lawyers to defend journalists prosecuted for absurd reasons. Reporters Without Borders also helps journalists to obtain medical attention. Financial assistance is often needed to pay for treatment after a physical attack or a spell in a prison where the conditions are very bad. “We have just had the case of a journalist who was detained for several months and did not receive the necessary attention for an illness,” said Martial Tournier, Acting Head of the Reporters Without Borders Assistance Desk. “The

Reporters Without Borders set up an Assistance Desk for journalists at its Paris headquarters in 2004. As its activities have grown steadily, a second assistance desk started operating in Germany, based in Berlin, at the beginning of this year. The desks address a wide range of needs and above all intervene in emergencies, providing legal support and financial aid to journalists in need or to their families, helping journalists in danger to find a safe refuge, helping journalists to apply for asylum, and providing material assistance to news media that have problems. It is a central but still little-known component of what Reporters Without Borders does to help journalists and bloggers in difficulty. The division of work between the two desks is determined by the country of origin of the journalists and bloggers in distress or media under pressure. Requests from Russia, states members of the CIS, and those coming from journalists exiled in Germany are handled by Berlin. Other requests are followed by Paris desk, unless contrary agreement with the German section.

A journalist persecuted in his country has found shelter at the Maison des journalistes (journalist house) in Paris (AFP)
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 Iraq. 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.

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 Azerbaidjan, 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 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.”

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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

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country of origin, evidence of danger, and so on. Despite the danger, resettlement can take a long time, sometimes years, because of the slowness of UNHCR procedures and the “good character” investigations by the embassies of the countries that might be ready to take the journalist.”

Despite the danger, resettlement can take a long time, sometimes years, because of the slowness of UNHCR procedures and the “good character” investigations by the embassies of the countries that might be ready to take the journalist. “The current situation is dramatic and most journalists seeking asylum, who mainly come from Eritrea, Iran, Iraq or Sri Lanka, have difficulty finding a safe refuge,” said Prisca Orsonneau. “The long wait in UNHCR offices and the almost systematic refusal of western embassies to grant them visas force the great majority to risk their lives by resorting to illegal immigration methods.”

Visa requests have been granted relatively quickly by the French authorities when the applications are detailed. Reporters Without Borders also often includes a plan for looking after the journalist in the host country. “Everything we submit is well supported and has a lot of credibility,” Martial said. “When we want to bring someone to France for humanitarian reasons, we always say so when the lawyer in charge of the German desk, said: “We currently have a restrictive climate in Germany as far as the granting of emergency visas is concerned. We applied for visas last November for Iranian journalists who had fled to Turkey. The first Iranian journalist has just arrived. Countries such Germany must provide an effective procedure to grant emergency visas for journalists and media workers in distress in countries outside the European Union.”

The Assistance Desk provides journalists seeking international protection with information adapted to their needs, including a handbook. Journalists fleeing persecution are usually in a state of mental distress if not shock and are completely unprepared for all the bureaucratic hurdles that await them. Lacking information, some take enormous risks and find themselves caught in a trap or the victims of abuse of authority.

The solution we prefer and want to develop are mechanisms for protecting journalists in their own country, offering those in difficulty the possibility of temporary internal exile until the situation abates. In such circumstances, Reporters Without Borders would pay living expenses and provide the equipment the journalists need to continue working. (Prisca Orsonneau)

LA MAISON DES JOURNALISTES
Located on Rue Cauchy in Paris’ 15th district, the Journalists Residence can accommodate 15 exile journalists at any time for stays of up to six months. More than just accommodation, it offers journalists from many different countries the possibility of gradually rebuilding their lives while waiting to be granted refugee status by the French authorities. They are able to share with each other their stories of repression and exile, their concerns and their hopes for the future.
http://www.maisondesjournalistes.org/index.php

HEALTHY TO PROTECT EXILE JOURNALISTS BETTER
Reporters Without Borders met European Commission vice-president Jacques Barrot in November 2009 and asked him to urge the 27 European Union ministers responsible for asylum policy to do more to protect journalists and free speech activists who have been forced into exile. “The current situation is dramatic and most journalists seeking asylum, who mainly come from Eritrea, Iran, Iraq or Sri Lanka, have difficulty finding a safe refuge,” said Prisca Orsonneau. “The long wait in UNHCR offices and the almost systematic refusal of western embassies to grant them visas force the great majority to risk their lives by resorting to illegal immigration methods.”
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

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.”

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

PORTraits Of Exiled Journalists

Agil Khalil

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.”

Ayala Khatir

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.”
that was just 100 metres from the office in order to catch a metro train home. Two men were waiting for him at an intersection. They cornered him and one of them stabbed him. Miraculously, the blade of the knife missed his heart by just few millimetres.

“The murder attempt was widely reported in the media,” Agil said. “At the hospital I received visits from ambassadors and NGOs. The police internal affairs department took control of the investigation.” Not for long. Files disappeared and the case bogged down. “A few weeks after I left hospital, I was resting at my father’s when police came and took me to a police station. They held me there against my will and tried to force me to identify two men as my killers, two men whom I had never seen before and who had nothing to do with case. I refused, of course. Nonetheless, one of them was arrested, tried and sentenced to two years in prison. He was released after three months.”

After Agil went back to work, a second attempt was made to kill him while he was at the metro station. “They pushed me on to the metro track. The train managed to stop one metre short of me.” From that day on, the young journalist stayed at home and no longer dared to go out. “I was frightened all the time. It was then that Reporters Without Borders contacted my editor and persuaded him I should leave Azerbaijan.” Two bodyguards were hired to stay with him at all times. “I got a visa thanks to Reporters Without Borders, which helped prepare my application. But there were more complications at customs. The authorities did not want to let me go. Someone sneaked cocaine into my bag. I was arrested and held in transit for 24 hours. I thought it was all over. I thought I would never be able to leave. But thanks to diplomatic pressure, I was finally able to board a plane. I remember that I was so afraid in the plane I did not want it to land. Someone from Reporters Without Borders was at the airport to welcome me. After staying at the Maison des journalistes, I found a small studio apartment in the 15th district. Now I am learning French. I am rebuilding my life and I have no intention of returning to Azerbaijan in the near future as I am a dead man there. I continue to write for my newspaper for free. Reporters Without Borders has become a second family for me. When I go to the office, I am always welcomed there. I always have someone to talk to. It was very important psychologically at the beginning.”

for something. Several journalists were accused of having links with international organisations but nothing specific was said. Friends of mine were arrested. That was when my boss started giving me a hard time, criticising my articles and suggesting I did not support the government line. “No, I want the real information,” he kept saying. I remember writing an article about Reporters Without Borders, which had been criticising the situation in Eritrea for a long time. He accused me of supporting Reporters Without Borders, of liking its ideas. “It was the first step towards dismissal and I had no desire to end up in prison like some of my friends. I thought it over and decided to leave. I paid a re-

Amanuel Ghirmai has been living at the Journalists Residence in Paris since January 2010, after fleeing his grotesquely oppressive country, Eritrea, last year. “I’d decided studying English at the beginning of the past decade when I was told by the military government to go and work for the information ministry. At first I worked for Radio Dimtsi Hafash, then for the daily Hadas Eritrea. All the newspapers are controlled by the government. There is no independent or privately-owned press. After a few months I joined the ‘Horn of Africa’ unit and became its head. My job was to gather information and do analyses that I sent to TV stations and newspapers for them to use. I was responsible above all for Somalia.”

“I liked my work a lot at the start of the decade, but everything changed in 2003. National Security officials carried out a raid and scanned all the computers and everyone’s emails. They were looking

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Amanuel Ghirmai
Interview with Delbar Tavakoli

It was Delbar Tavakoli, one of the first journalists to flee Iran in July 2009, who prompted Reporters Without Borders’ decision to launch a campaign for visas for Iranian journalists in exile. After trying to arrange for her to join her uncle in Sweden, Reporters Without Borders asked the French authorities to give her visa in October 2009. During the weeks she spent in Turkey, the country to which she initially fled, we sent her money several times to help her find a safe place to stay.

When did you begin your career as a journalist?
I began working in journalism in 1995, after getting a degree in physics. I had not studied journalism but I seized the chance when I was offered a job at the newspaper Zaman. I went on to work for several newspapers covering such subjects as business, politics and society. I particularly like writing about Iran’s social problems such as the situation of women, street children or prison conditions. Covering business and tourism enabled me to travel abroad, something that is usually impossible for women in Iran.

You were threatened by the Iranian authorities because of your journalistic activities. When did the threats begin? Before or after President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s reelection on 12 June 2009?
The authorities were already harassing critical journalists before President Ahmadinejad’s reelection but things got worse afterwards. It was difficult to work at the newspaper Sarmayeh [which, as the main source of criticism of the government’s economic policies, was subsequently closed in October 2009]. I was forced to flee because of my links with Neda Aghasoltan, the young woman who was murdered by the Revolutionary Guards in June 2009, and because of the information I had provided to the BBC.

You managed to get to Turkey in July 2009. Could you tell us about your day-to-day existence there and about UNHCR?
When I went to Turkey, I thought I would just spend a few weeks there and then go back to Iran. After a month, I saw that the situation was getting worse and then I would not be able to return. I spent nine months in Turkey before travelling to France. The last three months were terrible. We were not allowed to leave Ankara. Although UNHCR had granted me its protection, I had to present myself twice a week to the Turkish police. UNHCR officials know that refugees are being mistreated by the police but they turn a blind eye. I think the UN emblem at the entrance to UNCHR’s offices should be withdrawn. UNHCR collaborates with the Turkish police. The information I gave to UNHCR should have been confidential but one day a police chief threatened me, saying he was well aware who I was and which media I had worked for. Fellow journalists told me that the Turkish police had asked them to provide information about me. UNHCR knows all this is going on.

After several abortive attempts to leave the country, which failed because the Turkish police repeatedly refused to authorise your departure, you were finally allowed to fly to France. Tell us what your first few days in France were like?
For the first few days I felt I was being followed. I was afraid of the police. Now it is June 2010, I am an Iranian and I am in France. I remember when we organised a green human chain almost a year ago. I was among those who wanted change. I have been cheated. The government betrayed us. I am not the first person to go into exile and I won’t be the last. Nowadays I am staying at the Maison des Journalistes. There are people of many different nationalities there and I see that other countries have the same problems as Iran. Reporters Without Borders is doing an important and difficult job. We are talking about the entire world. Reporters Without Borders is providing support. Knowing there was someone I could count on meant a lot to me.

Although you are now safe in France, do you have a feeling of powerlessness? How do you follow the situation in your country?
I get a lot of information via Facebook, from the Internet. I get news of my friends and my fellow journalists. Facebook allows me to keep up with developments. I am in France and I had no choice about that. I am a refugee. I am here for being the voice of those without a voice in Iran and Turkey, because there are still a lot of Iranians in Turkey.
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.

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 to that their plight can be improved.

• 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.

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.

• 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.

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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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