



© AFP – Malaysian region devastated by deforestation

The dangers for journalists who expose environmental issues

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Guinean journalist Lai Baldé has been threatened. Egyptian blogger Tamer Mabrouk has been sued. Russian journalist Grigory Pasko has just spent four years in prison. His Uzbek colleague, Solidzhon Abdurakhmanov, has just been given a 10-year jail sentence. Mikhail Beketov, another Russian journalist, has lost a leg and several fingers as a result of an assault. Bulgarian reporter Maria Nikolaeva was threatened with having acid thrown in her face. Filipino journalist Joey Estriber has been missing since 2006... What do these journalists and many others have in common? They are or were covering environmental issues in countries where it is dangerous to do so.

There is a lot at stake in the environment. The first step in protecting nature is to carry out a detailed survey of the state of the resources and the way they are used. On the basis of this analysis – in which the press plays a significant role – political decision-makers can then establish rules and norms for economic actors and the public. The gathering of information alone is threatening for many companies, organised crime groups, governments and the various kinds of intermediaries that profit from misuse of the environment. Environmental concerns complicate their plans. As a result, investigative journalists and environmental activists are seen as an unwanted menace and even as enemies to be physically eliminated.

In many countries – especially, but not only, those that are not democracies – journalists who specialise in the environment are on the front line of a new war. The violence to which they are subjected concerns us all. It reflects the new issues that have assumed an enormous political and geostrategic importance.

The conflicts between journalists and polluters are too many and too varied to be listed. Sometimes a crisis can be sparked by no more than a journalist's arrival at a sensitive location where his presence is not wanted. In southern China, for example, foreign journalists have been chased out of villages where most of the world's discarded computers are stripped apart in an environmentally disastrous manner.

In other cases, it is the publication of a detail-

led press report, with names and facts, that sparks an act of physical aggression or coercion. This is what happened to Mikhail Beketov, who was beaten nearly to death by local government thugs who did not like his coverage of a plan to build a motorway through a Russian forest.

The assailants are not always who you might expect. In most cases, the violence is the work of thugs in the pay of criminal entrepreneurs or corrupt politicians. But in some countries, as Reporters Without Borders has found, the local population paradoxically often supports those responsible for deforestation or polluting factories although it is the most direct victim. The reason is nonetheless obvious. Those who get rich by despoiling resources are able, in the process, to provide work to those in most need. As a result, combating deforestation and pollution is often difficult and thankless work.

The fight is all the more unequal for usually being waged in countries where all the machinery of state seems to be an accomplice to the crimes and where the judicial apparatus, when it exists, does not play its role. Most cases linked to the environment never reach a conclusion in the courts. You can even say that most journalists are on their own when it comes to defending themselves. Hence the importance of making this struggle known and mobilising public opinion in its support.

Depletion of natural resources – a sensitive issue everywhere

Natural resources are not inexhaustible. What is true underground is also true on the surface. The forest can regrow, but the forests that man is replanting today will never be as biologically rich as the primary forests that are hundreds of thousands of years old. Hence the importance of conserving them.

That is what Lúcio Flávio Pinto, the founder and editor of *Jornal Povo*, a Brazilian bimonthly based in Belém, in the northern state of Pará, tried to do. He published a series of reports about deforestation in the Amazon. As a result, 33 lawsuits were brought against him. Lai Baldé, radio *Bombolom-FM*'s

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Lúcio Flávio Pinto has been exposing environmental devastation in Brazil for more than 40 years.

correspondent in Bissora, in northern Guinea-Bissau, took up the same cause. The day after the station broadcast a long report by him on illegal logging, he got an anonymous call offering advice: “Hey, brother! Why are you making such a big deal about this? We know that these people are doing something bad. But we have no choice. Don’t talk about this again. Be nice.”

In Burma, the question is dealt with in a more radical fashion. The military government’s censorship board has suppressed all references to illegal logging, making things easier for the Chinese companies that are logging on a large scale.

Cambodia has lost half of its primary forest in the past 15 years although millions of dollars in foreign aid have been spent on protecting the Cardamom Mountains. Three journalists received death threats when they tried to follow up reports on deforestation by the NGO Global Witness that implicated associates of Prime Minister Hun Sen in large-scale illegal logging. Hun Sen’s brother Hun Neng said that, if any Global Witness representatives came to Cambodia, he would “hit them until their heads are broken.”

Radio Free Asia, one of the few media to cover this story in detail, was threatened by a man who went to the station’s bureau in Phnom Penh. And one of its reporters, Lem Piseth, had this conversation with an anonymous caller: “Is that you, Lem Piseth?” “Yes. Who are you?” “You are insolent, do you want to die?” “Why are you insulting me like this?” “Because of the business of the forest and you should know that there will not be

enough land to bury you”. Piseth fled across the border into Thailand.

This kind of threat has to be taken seriously. Filipino journalist Joey Estriber, a radio host in Aurora province (northeast of Manila), has been missing since March 2006. He was kidnapped by four men and never seen again. In his programme “Pag-usapan Natin” (Let’s talk about that) on a local radio, he often criticised the intensive logging in Aurora by companies with allies inside the government and he had participated in a campaign to have the permits of nine of these companies withdrawn.



Logging on the Indonesian island of Sumatra

The Indonesian island of Sumatra is being deforested as fast as almost anywhere in the world. One of the logging companies responsible, PT Lontar Papiro Pulp and Papers, is a subsidiary of Asia Pulp & Paper, itself a subsidiary of the powerful Indonesian conglomerate Sinar Mas. So it is not easy for journalists to draw attention to this ecological disaster. Cyril Payen, the Southeast Asia correspondent of several French media, investigated illegal logging by PT Lontar Papiro Pulp and Papers, but he and his crew were arrested by company security guards on 10 July 2009 as they were filming trucks being loaded with timber. The company’s head of security tried to seize their video cassettes before handing them over to the local police, who continued to hold them until they were freed as a result of protests from the local media. Many inter-

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national corporations do business with Sinar Mas without a thought for Sumatra's deforestation. Referring to Sinar Mas, Payen told Reporters Without Borders: "They buy journalists or threaten them with lawsuits. Although the Indonesian media are free, they do not do enough reporting on the rampant deforestation that is taking place."



The Aral Sea

The Aral Sea's destruction is another example of authorities trying to cover up the catastrophic waste of natural resources. Solidzhon Abdurakhmanov, an Uzbek journalist who had written extensively about the Aral Sea ecological disaster, was arrested in Karakalpakstan, a western autonomous region of Uzbekistan, on a drug trafficking charge in June 2008 and was summarily sentenced to 10 years in prison.

The verdict was quickly upheld by the local supreme court on 19 November 2008 despite procedural irregularities and enormous gaps in the prosecution case. The video the police made of the operation that led to Abdurakhmanov's arrest strangely did not show the moment the drugs were allegedly found. The police also failed to say where he was supposedly obtaining the drugs or to whom he was supposedly selling them.

What we do know about Abdurakhmanov is that he wrote for many independent news websites, including *Uznews*, which called him "the last independent voice in Karakalpakstan," and that he specialised in covering the impact of the Aral Sea's disappearance on the local population's livelihoods and health. Everything indicates that his arrest

was deliberately planned in order to punish him for his reporting.

Back in Brazil, Vilmar Berna, the editor of the Niterói-based environmentalist daily *Jornal do Meio Ambiente*, which exposes clandestine overfishing and threats to protected marine life in Rio de Janeiro Bay, is a constant target of threats and intimidation attempts. A bloody, half-burnt body was dumped outside his home in May 2006. As if the meaning of that "message" was not sufficiently clear, an anonymous woman caller then warned him he could be killed soon. He filed a complaint with the Niterói police and hired two bodyguards. But he could not afford to keep paying them and he no longer has protection.

Fabício Ribeiro Pimenta had to flee his home town in the neighbouring state of Espírito Santo after being assaulted on 30 July 2009, apparently at the behest of the owner of an illegal marble factory that he had repeatedly denounced in his reporting as source of toxic dust in a residential district.

Threatened for exposing pollution



Télé Pour Tous report on the dumping of oil-drilling waste in the village of Tchicamou

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There is no shortage of examples. In 2008 in the Republic of the Congo, residents of the village of Mbodji (60 km from Pointe-Noire) complained about the build-up of drilling waste at a nearby oilfield where the Italian company Eni Congo is drilling. After going there and doing a report, *Télé Pour Tous* (TPT) immediately found itself being pressured and threatened by the local authorities. But this time, the local population demonstrated in support of the journalists and samples of the drilling waste were finally taken for laboratory analysis. They are still waiting for the results.

In Egypt, Trust Chemical Industries has for years been dumping unrecycled water into Lake Manzalah and the Suez Canal, near Port Said, while the government, out of fear or as a result of corruption, refused to intervene. Tamer Mabrouk, an ordinary blogger, investigated the issue and then took the risk of posting the results of his enquiries online. He was sued for libel in June 2008.

“I brought a lawsuit against the company myself, requesting its closure as a source of pollution,” Mabrouk said. “The court ruled that it was not competent to hear the case. At the same time, Trust Chemical Industries asked me to withdraw my suit in return for a sum of money. When I refused outright, they demanded that I issue a retraction.” A Port Said court fined Mabrouk 6,000 euros on 26 May 2009 – a fairly dissuasive message for someone who takes more than a year to earn that kind of money. He was then fired from his job.



© Tamer Mabrouk

Pollution on Lake Manzalah, after the dumping of untreated waste water by the Trust Chemical Industries. Port-Saïd, Egypt.

In Côte d'Ivoire, people no longer seem to remember that large amounts of toxic waste from the Probo Koala, a tanker chartered by the Dutch company Trafigura, were dumped in and around Abidjan in September 2006. Gases emitted by the waste reportedly killed 10 people and injured 7,000. It was a big story for a while but now there is nothing in the newspapers. Concern about the environment seems to have evaporated. The Yopougon industrialists who pump chemical products into Abidjan's lagoon are suspected of keeping the subject off-limits by slipping “envelopes” into some journalists' pockets.



Pollution of Lake Taihu near the city of Wuxi, in Jiangsu province

In China, Wu Lihong was sentenced to three years in prison in 2007 for alerting the Chinese and international media to the pollution of Lake Taihu, the third largest in China. In Internet posts, he blamed the uncontrolled dumping of industrial waste for the lake's asphyxiation. Another example, China's Propaganda Department, which is in charge of censorship, waited 10 days in 2005 before allowing the media to report that the Songhua River had been contaminated with benzene, thereby endangering the lives of millions of people living on its banks.

Critics of nuclear power are also liable to be punished in China if they try to take their case to the media. Gansu province anti-nuclear campaigner Sun Xiaodi and his daughter were arrested in June 2009 on charges of “divulging state secrets abroad” and “spreading rumours” for disseminating information

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about radioactive contamination at uranium mine No. 792. Sun was sentenced the following month to two years of reeducation through work. His daughter was also sent to a camp.

In information posted online and provided to the foreign media, they had also accused officials in the Gansu district of Diebu of exaggerating the impact of the May 2008 earthquake in their district in order to obtain more state aid. A former worker in mine No. 792, Sun has been campaigning tirelessly about the dangers of radioactive contamination for the past 20 years



The Peruvian city of La Oroya, the site an enormous smelting complex, is one of the world's 10 most contaminated places.

Peru is another glaring example. The Andean town of La Oroya is the fifth most contaminated place in the world because of a smelting complex operated by Doe Run Peru. Its 35,000 inhabitants are permanently exposed to heavy metals and gases. But you will not hear anyone talk about this scandal because the company has developed an effective method of surveillance using a network of "health workers" who patrol the town. Anyone talking to independent journalists risks losing their job and social benefits. The impoverished inhabitants are very hostile towards the press, which is seen as posing a threat to their only source of work. Doe Run Peru's employees rejected an ecological rescue plan in order to be sure of keeping their jobs.

Even more emblematic is the case of Grigory Pasko, a former reporter for the Russian

navy's in-house newspaper *Boevaya Vakhta* who went on to write for the ecology magazine *Ekologiya i Pravo* about the neglect of the navy's nuclear submarines and the resulting pollution. While still working for *Boevaya Vakhta*, Pasko had filmed footage of the Russian fleet dumping radioactive waste in the Sea of Japan. It was eventually aired by the Japanese TV station *NHM*, causing an international outcry.

After spending 20 months in prison from 1997 to 1999, he was tried and sentenced to four years in prison in 2001 on charges of spying and high treason. He was accused of illegally attending a meeting of the navy high command in order to gain access to classified information and pass it to Japanese news media. He appealed against his conviction before the Russian supreme court and then took his case to the European Court of Human Rights. In 2002, he was awarded the Reporters Without Borders-Fondation de France prize for his fight against censorship.

Even defending protected natural areas is risky

The Sofia-based weekly *Politika* ran a story by Maria Nikolaeva on 9 February 2007 about an illegal real estate development project in the Strandzha national park, Bulgaria's largest nature reserve. The same day, two men went to Nikolaeva's office and told her: "You know full well you shouldn't write things like this. And you know what happens to curious journalists, they get acid thrown at them."

A journalist based in Khimki, a satellite town outside Moscow, Mikhail Beketov has criticised the local authorities for years and has established a reputation as a defender of Khimki Forest, which is threatened by the construction of a motorway between Moscow and St. Petersburg. His car was set on fire in May 2007. Local prosecutors brought a criminal libel case against him in February 2008. At the start of November 2008, he had been drafting a letter to the Russian authorities to accompany a petition signed by Khimki residents opposing the motorway, but he never posted it. He was beaten and left for dead outside his home on

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13 November 2008. He survived, but only after spending days in a coma and having a leg and several fingers amputated.

One of Beketov's lawyers, Stanislav Markelov, was murdered in the centre of Moscow on 19 January of this year. The Moscow-based daily *Novaya Gazeta* published Beketov's letter on 18 February. But the inhabitants of Khimki never saw the issue. Someone bought up all the copies that were meant to be distributed there. Khimki mayor Victor Strelchenko, the originator of a real estate project that Beketov had opposed, was reelected in March.



Demonstration in Khimki in support of Mikhail Beketov

In Sri Lanka, Tamil journalists have been prevented from investigating the impact of the military presence on the Jaffna Peninsula's natural areas and in some cases have been threatened for trying to do so. An environmentalist writer called Ayngaranesan said: "Since 2006, I have been seeking information about the deforestation in certain military-controlled areas. The military have totally disrupted the ecosystem for security reasons. I recently wanted to write an article about the environmental impact of the refugee camps set up by the government but the editor said the subject was too sensitive."

Finally, in Namibia, where very attractive nature reserves are available to tourists, some things are not meant to be seen. Jim Wilckens, a British investigative journalist working for the Eco-Storm news agency, and his South African cameraman, Bart Smithers, were arrested on 16 July 2009 while filming the culling of baby seals on the coast. They were eventually released after being fined 5,000 Namibian dollars (443 euros) each on charges of violating the maritime resources law by entering a restricted area without permission.

A long-term struggle

French photographer, filmmaker and ecologist Yann Arthus-Bertrand and a 10-member crew were doing a report for the programme "Seen from the sky" about the controversial construction of a dam at Yacyreta, near Posadas (the capital of the Argentine province of Misiones) when they were arrested at Puerto Iguazú airport on 20 February 2008. The suspicions of the Argentine police had been aroused by their meeting with inhabitants of the village of El Brete who opposed the dam. The helicopter they had chartered was forbidden to take off and they ended up being held for five days before finally being released on bail.

Journalists everywhere take risks into order to make others more aware. They must keep going, despite all the various kinds of harassment to which they are exposed. This aim of this report is to denounce the indifference of authorities and governments that too readily neglect the protection of journalists who are defending the right of their fellow citizens to be informed about attacks on the environment.