



INVESTIGATIVE REPORT ON JOURNALISM AND ENVIRONNEMENT

HIGH-RISK SUBJECTS  
**DEFORESTATION  
AND POLLUTION**

////////// INQUIRY LED BY **VINCENT BROSSEL** ASSISTED BY REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS CORRESPONDENTS // **JUNE 2010** //

**REPORTERS  
WITHOUT BORDERS**  
FOR PRESS FREEDOM



Forest fire in Brazil

**Journalists have no difficulty covering global warming. Last year's international conference in Copenhagen was accompanied by unprecedented coverage of environmental problems, even in those countries that are the most hostile to media freedom. But investigating the causes of global warming, which include deforestation and industrial pollution, continues to be much more dangerous. The main obstacle to quality independent coverage of these two issues is to be found in the complicity between the private sector (such as companies involved in logging and mining) and local authorities. Together they use "a carrot and a stick," as one Indonesian journalist put it. In other words, they threaten and buy journalists who try to cover their deplorable practices.**



vering the environment is not as dangerous for the press as covering wars, electoral tension or corruption. The number of abuses recorded by Reporters Without Borders continues to be relatively marginal, even if there has been a significant increase.

In an earlier report entitled *The dangers for journalists who expose environmental issues* ([http://www.rsf.org/IMG/rapport\\_en\\_md.pdf](http://www.rsf.org/IMG/rapport_en_md.pdf)) in September 2009, Reporters Without Borders cited some 15 cases of journalists or bloggers who had been arrested or threatened or who had disappeared because of their reporting on the environment. On the initiative of Reporters Without Borders, an international appeal for better protection for environmental journalists was launched at the Copenhagen conference. Pointing out that "*without a free press, efforts to combat global warming will be in vain*," the appeal urged governments, international organisations and the private sector to "undertake to show more respect for the work of environmental journalists and to do more to protect them." It also called for the release of all journalists who were being held for covering stories related to the environment.

There was a need to update the information and expose new abuses against journalists by corporations and governments, some of which were at the Copenhagen conference. Reporters Without Borders therefore decided to carry out detailed investigations in Vietnam and Argentina in order to better identify the nature of the dangers that ➤

- ☛ await environmental journalists, who have been called the “planet’s guardians.”

### THE PLANET’S UNWANTED GUARDIANS

The fate of environmental journalists has not improved since September 2009. Uzbek journalist Solidzhon Abdurakhmanov is still in prison for writing many articles about the human and environmental impact of the Aral Sea’s disappearance. He was given a ten-year jail sentence in 2008 on a trumped-up drug trafficking charge. In Russia, journalist Mikhail Beketov has still not obtained justice for the brutal attack at the end of 2008 in which he lost a leg and suffered other lasting physical consequences. He and his friends had criticised



Bauxite mines in India (DR)

**« The conflicts between journalists and polluters are so many and varied that they are impossible to enumerate »**

a highway project through Khimki Forest, outside Moscow. In Brazil, Lucio Flavio Pinto, the founder of the independent magazine *Jornal Pessoal*, is still the target of one lawsuit after another over his coverage of deforestation in the Amazon.

Wu Lihong, a Chinese ecologist and writer who alerted local and international media to pollution in Lake Taihu, has finally been freed after three years in Yishing prison in the eastern province of Jiangsu. He told the French daily *Le Monde* that he was held in a windowless cell. “If the other prisoners dared to speak to me, they were given ten slaps to the face as a punishment,” he said. “It was forbidden to read books or newspapers. I was not allowed to have a pen or paper.” Wu was convicted on the basis of a confession extracted by force at the behest of the local authorities, who feared that his campaigns would drive industrialists away.



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### VIOLENCE IN ALL CORNERS OF THE PLANET

In the past few months, Reporters Without Borders has noted several incidents indicative of the hostility towards journalists who expose environmental degradation. In Turkey, local TV cameraman Ertugrul Yilmaz had his nose and several ribs broken when he was assaulted by the owners of an illegal waste dump near the coastal resort of Marmaris. In Brazil, French-Spanish filmmaker José Huerta has been sued over a documentary about the ecological and human impact of an Austrian consortium’s mass tourism project. A total of eight lawsuits, one of them for criminal

defamation, were brought against him by these unscrupulous investors.

Repression has been stepped up in Tibet. Kunga Tseyang, a Tibetan photographer and environmentalist also known as Gangnyi (Snow Sun), was sentenced to five years in prison by a court in the western province of Gansu in November 2009. He got this heavy jail sentence for helping to disseminate information about environmental issues and the lack of democracy. In the neighbouring province of Sichuan, environmental blogger Tan Zuoren was sentenced to five years in prison in February 2010 on a charge of “inciting subversion of state authority.” He had investigated the many ecological issues raised by the May 2008 earthquake in the province.

### CHINESE GOVERNMENT’S DOUBLE GAME

Singled out for its intransigence during the Copenhagen conference, China pursues a very ambiguous policy on environmental issues. It advocates sustainable development to the Chinese and international public, as it is doing at the moment at the Shanghai World Expo, of which the slogan is “better city, better life.” At the same time, it jails environmental journalists and censors important information about the environment.

For forcing journalists to obtain a special permit to visit Tibet, the Chinese government drastically limits investigative coverage of the consequences of global warming in the Himalayas, regarded by scientists as the world’s “third pole.” It is also very hard for the media to investigate the pollution of Tibetan rivers by Chinese industrial projects, especially mining operations. Journalists who follow these issues complain about the lack of reliable official information. “It is clear that information about the pollution of rivers has not been released,” a Guangzhou-based reporter said.

A Chinese journalist who has been covering the environment for years described the level ➤



**SOLIDZHON ABDURAKHMANOV**

was arrested on 7 June 2008 on a charge of “drug use” when policemen supposedly found drugs inside the car in which he was travelling. As medical tests showed that he had never consumed drugs, the charge was changed to “possession of drugs with the intention of selling them.”

of government censorship on these matters to Reporters Without Borders. He said defence of the environment has always been regarded as a potential threat by the Chinese authorities. Environmental journalism is carefully monitored and the Propaganda Department, the Communist Party’s censorship wing, keeps a very close eye on everything that is published on the subject in the print media. The government’s Information Office performs the same function with online publications.

The central government is more tolerant than local officials as regards information about the environment. The Propaganda Department rarely issues instructions to censor such subjects. “They need these reports in order to identify pollution risks and public health problems,” said a Chinese journalist who was fired a few years ago for writing about a polluting industry. But local officials do everything they can to suppress this kind of scandal and, unfortunately, they possess real coercive power.

“I dare not go back,” said a Beijing-based European journalist about one of the “cancer” villages near Beijing where hundreds of residents are suffering from the effects of industrial pollution. He was verbally threatened by a local official’s thugs while visiting the town with a photographer.

In the case of a May 2007 controversy about a chemical plant in Xiamen, the central government let the media to their job until thousands of demonstrators took to the streets. “When public order is at state, the censorship order comes from Beijing, even for public health issues,” this journalist said. The editor of a newspaper in southern China said it was fairly easy for journalists to find roundabout ways to refer to environmental controversies.

## ◀ China pursues a very ambiguous policy on environmental issues.

sies. “For example, the Guangdong media cannot cover protests about waste management so they talk about the solutions proposed by the authorities,” an investigative reporter said. “So, in practice, they talk about the real problem.”

### ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISTS – INDISPENSABLE SOURCES OF INFORMATION

In most countries in which the press is subject to control and intimidation, the only way for journalists to tackle these issues is to use information provided by environmental activists, including international environmental NGOs. The role of the international NGOs is crucial as they are often the only people capable of gathering information, processing it and producing detailed reports.

NGOs such as Global Witness or Greenpeace are often threatened or prevented from working in certain areas. The intimidation to which many environmental activists are subjected impedes the flow of information in the media and elsewhere. In Pakistan, for example, the police in Sindh province never conducted a serious investigation into the November 2009 murder of Nisar Baloch of Shehri Citizens for a Better Environment, who was a key source of information for the press about land seizures in the Karachi region.

Chinese ecologists, who are also key sources for local and foreign journalists, are often harassed or arrested by the authorities. In April 2010, police detained Gu Chuan for several hours and confiscated files from his home on the eve of a conference on environmental issues in which he was to have participated. Under pressure from the authorities, the event was cancelled by the hotel that was going to host it.



After being beaten within an inch of his life, Mikhail Beketov lost a leg and suffered irreversible brain damage. He was the editor of Khimkinskaya Pravda, a newspaper with a print run of 10,000 copies which he founded in 2006 and financed himself, bravely covering local corruption.

## The blogosphere speaks out

This is what three members of the Vietnamese Independent Journalists Club posted online about their visit to a bauxite mine near Tan Rai, in Lam Dong province: “A young girl brought us work clothes stained with a red substance, which we put on to hide our journalistic attire and resemble the people who had come looking for work. Thanks to this disguise, we managed to get through many doors. We finally arrived at a work site where everyone was very busy. It consisted of about 50 hectares of red mud and steel machinery, surrounded a long fence with signs in Chinese characters.”

### BAUXITE MINES IN VIETNAM – AN ↗

## ► INDUSTRIAL NIGHTMARE

As in the case of the current oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, every ecological disaster resulting from an industrial accident gets a lot of media attention. Oil and mining companies are blamed and journalists investigate the negligence that led to these disasters. After decades of impunity, the most polluting corporations are nowadays monitored much more closely by civil society and the media, even when operating in developing countries.

But the authorities in some countries devote a lot of resources to preventing the free flow of information about the crucial issue of industrial pollution, especially when mining is involved. Reporters Without Borders has investigated the recent issue of a Chinese company's involvement in bauxite mining in Vietnam, a sensitive subject that has led to the imprisonment of several journalists and bloggers.

Nguyen Hue Chi, an academic and editor of a website about these bauxite mines ([www.bauxitevn.info](http://www.bauxitevn.info)), was subjected to a week of interrogation («work sessions») in February 2010 designed to make him abandon his commitment to this very sensitive issue. Police searched his home while hackers blocked his site. He was forced to change the site's host several times before finally finding a refuge at [boxitvn.wordpress.com](http://boxitvn.wordpress.com). In a one-party state that prevents the emergence of a free press, the site had been visited by 17 million people by the end of 2009, becoming a platform for exchanging information on this subject and, more broadly, for questioning the Vietnamese government. The site offers exclusive information, including a report by journalist and geologist Vi Ngoc who, by posing as a Chinese technician, was able to see



The red bauxite sludge contains heavy metals and other pollutants that damage the environment (DR)



Life is impossible in this polluted area (DR)

**< The Chinese authorities need these reports in order to identify pollution risks and public health problems**

the extent of the ecological disaster at Tien Nhan Co, the site of the company's headquarters and its aluminium refining plant.

The mines and plants that the Chinese company, the Aluminium Corporation of China (Chalco), is operating in Vietnam's central highlands are not open to the media. A lot is at stake in the agreement under which Chalco was granted the concession, signed during a state visit by Chinese President Hu Jintao to Hanoi in 2006. The Vietnam National Coal-Mineral Industries Group (Vincomin) and Chalco have invested 1.6 billion US dollars in the controversial project.

## GOVERNMENT DIRECTIVES

In an attempt to stifle the controversy that began to grow in 2008, the prime minister issued Directive 97 forbidding criticism of the government's actions in the press, and disbanded the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), the only non-governmental group of experts capable of providing the media with views and analyses on the issues of the mines. For fear that journalists would pounce on the bauxite issue, the government also issued a reminder that no privately-owned newspapers were permitted in Vietnam. In practice, dissident publications circulating clandestinely and by email have paid a great deal of attention to the dangers posed by the bauxite mines.

The army has brought the Lang Son region under close control, installing checkpoints on the roads leading to the mines. It is forbidden to photograph the installations but bloggers and journalists reporting for the dissident press have taken the risk of going there.

Afghanistan's gigantic Mes Aynak copper mine, which is being worked by China Metallurgical Group, a state-owned Chinese company, has received little coverage by the Afghan and international press because of the difficulty of getting to the plateau in Logar province where it is located because of Taliban activity in the area. It is protected by 1,500 Afghan policemen. No independent study of the project's environmental impact has been offered to the public or media. The ➤

## The blogosphere ... (continued)

The Vietnamese blogosphere has become very active in investigating and commenting on the impact of these mines as the national press, which has to censor itself, has carried only favourable comments. "It is through this debate that civil society has emerged in Vietnam," exile journalist Bui Tin, said. "The mines have come to symbolize the government's contempt for the public's concern."

The police have repeatedly cracked down. Nguyen Thi Nhu Quynh, who blogs under the name of Me Nam (Mushroom Mother), was arrested in September 2009 after posting a photo of herself on her blog in a T-shirt with the legend "Stop the bauxite mines in Vietnam." Like her, independent journalists are taking risks to denounce the "red sludge" residue from the bauxite mining, which pollutes the air, rivers and underground water and causes illnesses. In practice, the possibilities of finding technical solutions to its damaging effects are already very limited. Dissident bloggers and journalists are also critical of the fact that China's investment in bauxite mining in Vietnam followed the closure of about 100 mines in the Chinese provinces of Hunan and Sichuan because of the serious pollution problems they were causing. "Why are they doing in their neighbours' home what they no longer do in their own home?" a Vietnamese journalist blogged. "There is no transparency and no respect for the work of the press on this subject."



**Founded by Nguyen Quang,** the IDS was an influential think-tank made up of around 15 people who carried weight behind the scenes. For “opposing the line and objectives of the Party and State,” it was disbanded by a November 2009 decree restricting the right to conduct research into certain subjects.

Chinese authorities have promised to invest 3 billion US dollars and to pay the Afghan state an annual rent of 400 million dollars to access this reserve of 13 million tons of copper. But at what price to the environment?

### LATIN AMERICA – VIOLENCE FROM BOTH SIDES

In an area of northern Argentina visited by Reporters Without Borders, the mining industry and its impact on the environment have also spawned serious conflicts that are affecting the work of journalists. “The mine’s opponents accuse us of selling out and several reporters have been attacked,” said Adán González, the head of local TV station Canal 10, when he met Reporters Without Borders in Andalgalá, in Catamarca province. “At the same time, the mining company and its political supporters buy advertising space to influence our editorial position,” he added.

It is in this province that Agua Rica, a company owned by the Canadian multinational Yamana Gold, launched an immense copper mine project. But, because of concerns about the impact on the environment, especially water, which is in short supply in this semi-desert region, a sizeable part of the population is supporting a campaign against Agua Rica and the mayor, who gave the project his backing.

The violence against the press has come from both sides. Canal 10 journalists Nicolás Ziggio and Lucas Olaz were attacked and stripped of their equipment in February 2010 by opponents of the mine who say it is a public health threat and accuse the mayor of corruption. The two journalists told Reporters Without Borders they are still scared. One of them received an SMS message warning him that he could be the target of a Molotov cocktail attack.

Maria Márquez, the host of a show on radio FM La Perla, has been threatened because of her criticism of the mining project. “They have threatened to kill me, burn my house down and kill my

children,” she said. After accusing the mayor of Andalgalá of misappropriating funds in connection with the project, she has on several occasions had to take measures to protect her children and herself. She also says the mining company tried to buy her. “An individual identifying himself as an Agua Rica employee offered me 350 euros a month and the purchase of advertising time on the radio if I stopped criticising them so much,” she said.

Corrupt practices by mining companies jeopardise editorial independence. A young reporter, Sául Reynoso, was fired from one day to the next by the owner of Canal 5, a local TV station funded by Agua Rica, because of a report he did for FM La Perla, a radio station for which he also works. All he did was cover a demonstration in support of several mine opponents who had been arrested. The TV station’s owner did not

“The mines have come to symbolize the government’s contempt for the public’s concern”

deny firing him. “My goal is to support the mayor because there are political motives behind the environmental question,” he said. “There is no information coming from the mine’s opponents on my station. And yes, I fired Reynoso for ideological incompatibility.”

When contacted by Reporters Without Borders, an Agua Rica spokesman denied any attempt to intimidate journalists. “It would be crazy to threaten or buy local media when we have so much need of them to explain our work and put an end to the rumours circulating about environmental impact,” he said.

In the neighbouring province of Chaco, radio FM Frontera director Dante Fernández described how he was attacked in February 2010: “They did not say anything. They hit me in the face, the stomach and the back. They tore my clothes. After several minutes they left.” His attackers were ➤

## Ruthless operators

In Gabon, TV reporter Félicien Biviga Koumba was threatened by a French businessman running an illegal logging operation in the south of the country when he revealed that the Frenchman was smuggling the timber to Congo before exporting it. The report caught the attention of the Gabonese authorities. In Cambodia, the editor of a local magazine was sued and repeatedly threatened by an army officer he had linked to illegal logging. The Cambodian media often cover illegal logging but they are far from having the necessary resources to carry out extensive investigative reporting in the often remote regions where it is going on.



► the bodyguards of a local politician linked to San Carlos SRL and Cancha Larga SA, two companies that are accused of aerial spraying of pesticide over a lagoon where the population gets its water supply.

Entry of the Socapalm plantation, belonging to the Bolloré group, in Cameroon (DR)

### **EL SALVADOR – JOURNALISTS' LIVES IN DANGER**

Conflicts between the local population and mining companies sometimes take a tragic turn for journalists. In El Salvador, radio show hosts and environmental activists have paid with their lives for opposing the gold mining operations of Pacific Rim Mining Corp, a Canadian company. Two environmental activists associated with Radio Victoria, a community radio station in the department of Cabañas, Gustavo Marcelo Rivera and Ramiro Rivera Gómez, were murdered by thugs said to be in the pay of a local businessman who is trying to silence local opposition to the mining operations.

Radio Victoria, which let the relatives of the victims speak on the air, has itself been the target of death threats since July 2009. The author of an anonymous email sent to several of the station's employees claimed responsibility for one of the murders and said the next victim could be "a presenter, correspondent or anyone else working for this damned radio station" (watch <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vmIVQVJlxOY>). The police showed no real interest in the matter.

Ludwin Iraheta, one of Radio Victoria's journalists, said: "There is a lot of gold here. We do not know who are making the threats, but there are many interests at stake in connection with the mine – political and business interests. A few years

ago, Pacific Rim offered us 8,000 dollars to shut up. We refused (...) the mine uses strong chemical products. The water has been polluted ever since there have been mines."

### **STRATEGY OF OBSTRUCTION IN INDIA**

State-owned mining companies often pursue a similar obstructive strategy. Shubranshu Choudhary, an Indian journalist who tried to investigate pollution from mines operated by the National Mineral Development Corporation, the biggest mining company controlled by India's central government, said: "We tried to do a detailed report on the impact on the rivers and forests of the mines installed by the NMDC in the Batar region during the past 50 years. But the police and local authorities prevented us from working as soon as we arrived in the area. They forbade us to enter indigenous villages affected by the pollution. All we could do was take a few photos of rivers polluted by the company."

In November 2009, the Indian foreign ministry refused to give visas to four journalists from Bangladesh and Sri Lanka who were supposed to take part in a seminar on investigative coverage of coastal and maritime ecologies.

### **OIL IN GABON**

An independent press is vital in oil-rich regions for blowing the whistle on both pollution problems and the related corruption that can infect all levels of government. In Gabon, some media have covered the campaigns that environmental NGOs have waged about the serious pollution resulting from the activities of various companies including Total, Shell, Addax and Synopec.

In 2007, Nicaise Moulombi (see box), the editor of the magazine Croissance Saine Environnement, had a brush with military security officials,

« The violence against the press has come from both sides. »

who wanted to question him about his coverage of Shell Gabon after he revealed that the company had buried used oil and other polluting waste in Gamba. This year, he and colleagues at the newspaper L'Union published exclusive information about the polluting activities of Addax Petroleum.

L'Union editor Albert Yangari told Reporters Without Borders: "The companies threaten us with libel suits in order to intimidate us but they hardly ever do sue us because they are bound to lose. Although these multinationals do not always make it easy for us, we have access to the areas where they are operating and this allows us to collect

► evidence of their misdeeds." L'Union reporter Jonas Moulenda has nonetheless been sued over some of his articles about pollution.

Moulombi recognises that the role of the press has its limits when the government lacks the will to make "the polluters pay." The Gabonese government and the French nuclear energy company Areva still have not created the public health monitoring institute that was promised after revelations about contamination from a former uranium mine at Mounana which was operated by an Areva subsidiary.

United States. It has lost 70 per cent of its forests since 1950, especially those in Sumatra and Kalimantan, which have been turned into oil palm or pulpwood plantations, pushing orang-utans to the brink of extinction. The large-scale destruction of Indonesia's forests has been widely commented in the international and national press in recent years.

But establishing the responsibility of individual companies is often difficult because they use intimidation and corruption. Journalists in the provinces of Sumatra, Jambi and Riau told Reporters Without Borders that the leading companies managed to suppress most critical articles by applying pressure or by paying local journalists "subsidies."

In Jambi province, where the forest area shrank from 4 million square hectares in 1970 to 1.6 million square hectares in 2000, Sinar Mas Group, a conglomerate with links to Carrefour and Unilever, is said to often resort to intimidation against media that take too close an interest in its activities. In March 2010, for example, Muhammad Usman, a local reporter for radio 68H, was arrested by Sinar Mas security agents near the Tabo Multi Agro plantation.

"I was investigating deforestation in the field," he told Reporters Without Borders. "They quickly released me after confiscating my memory card. A Sinar Mas spokesman denied all this but an unidentified person sent my memory card to my home a week later." Sinar Mas is very concerned about its image. A list of journalists who had received money from Sinar Mas circulated in 2009. A local journalist said: "When I was hospitalised, a Sinar Mas official came to see me in hospital and offered me financial support."

## PULPWOOD

It is not easy for foreign journalists to cover deforestation in the neighbouring province of Riau, where one of the biggest companies is Riau Andalan Pulp and Paper (RAPP), a subsidiary of the Raja Garuda Mas Group. An Indian journalist and an Italian journalist were arrested while covering Greenpeace's activities in a RAPP concession in November 2009. Although it is being investigating for alleged corruption and alleged illegal logging, RAPP is very influential. That explains why the police were quick to expel these two foreign reporters although they had official accreditation.

Like Sinar Mas, RAPP uses both "carrot and stick." It often buys advertising space in the local newspapers in order to "silence media criticism," Riau Pos editor Ahmad Fitri said. "When reporters cover RAPP's activities negatively, the company gets in touch with our publishers and offers a full page of advertising, and the next day, the criti- ➤

**Deforestation in tropical regions, described as alarming by the United Nations, is said to be responsible for at least 18 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions. It is one of the major causes of global warming and a lasting deterioration in the environment in countries such as Indonesia, Brazil, Congo and Cambodia.**

## DEFORESTATION AND "CARROT AND STICK"

Legal and illegal logging is a gigantic source of corruption of local institutions and therefore a major challenge for the press. Media coverage of this problem is increasing but it is usually limited to a general denunciation of the phenomenon, without those responsible being clearly identified.

Indonesia leads the world in deforestation and, as a result, is the planet's third biggest emitter of greenhouse gases, behind only China and the

## En croisade contre la collusion des autorités et des entreprises étrangères

Nicaise Moulombi decided to create the monthly Croissance Saine Environnement in 2005 because he realised it would help to promote the cause of environmentalism. One by one, he ran cover stories criticising Areva, Veolia Environnement, Total, Addax, Synopec and Shell. Now a member of the Economic and Social Council of Gabon, he said: "2007 was a complicated year for us, with a lot of pressure on our staff after our articles on Shell Gabon."

He nonetheless succeeded in getting a public debate on such serious issues as the poor quality of water caused by breakdowns suffered by the SEEC (a subsidiary of the French company Veolia

Environnement), radioactive contamination from an old mine that used to be worked by Areva, and oil pollution from Shell's operations.

Under pressure, some foreign companies such as the French multinational Total changed their practices. After a campaign

launched in 2005, Total created a used-oil treatment station. "Areva did not keep its promises," Moulombi said. "And the Swiss company, Addax, which was bought up by the Chinese, turned a deaf ear to our reports about gas pollution of a river in the south of the country, but we are continuing our investigative reporting."

The pragmatic Moulombi added: "Our articles always have a big impact but the collusion between certain corrupt officials and the European companies prevents real progress. Promoting the environmental cause requires a free press but it also requires a degree of proximity to the most senior government officials."



**Our articles always have a big impact but the collusion between certain corrupt officials and the European companies prevents real progress. »**

ocal articles have disappeared," he explained. A RAPP subsidiary, Asian Agri Ltd, brought a libel suit against the renowned daily Koran Tempo in 2008, demanding 1 billion Indonesian rupiahs (100,000 euros) in damages for an article about illegal logging and tax evasion. In the end, a Jakarta court ordered the newspaper to pay around 5,000 euros in damages.

According to a representative of the Indonesian NGO Aliansi Jurnalistis Indonesia (AJI), companies such as RAPP and Sinar Mas, which are linked to US, European and Chinese multinationals, have an "invisible hand" in many local and national publications because it is the only way for them to avoid frequent front-page stories about the very negative impact of their activities on the environment.

## NEWS CONTROL IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

In neighbouring Papua New Guinea, the Malaysian multinational Rimbuan Hijau (RH) found a very effective way to limit unwanted articles about deforestation: it became the owner of The National, the country's leading daily. RH has repeatedly been accused by groups such as Greenpeace and

 It often buys advertising space in the local newspapers in order to "silence media criticism »

local landowners of illegal logging. In response, The National described Greenpeace as a group of "pirates" in a 2004 editorial and asked the authorities to outlaw its activities in the country. And RH's owners are in the habit of threatening to sue the competing daily, the Courier-Post, whenever it starts to take too much interest in its operations.

A journalist who works for a Papua New Guinea newspaper said The National's management did nothing to train its journalists in environmental issues. The country's media recently provided good coverage of the conflict between the inhabitants of the Madang region and the Chinese company Ramu Nickel, which planned to dump toxic waste from a new mine in the sea. But a journalist specialised in Papua New Guinea pointed out that local media editorials are in the unfortunate habit of always describing mining projects as "opportunities" for this developing country.

## EVEN LEADING WESTERN MEDIA CAN BE TARGETED

Journalists working for public radio France Inter were sued last year by the CEO of the French industrial group Bolloré over their coverage of 

### INTERVIEW WITH PATRICK ALLEY, DIRECTOR OF GLOBAL WITNESS

## « Fear prevents proper coverage of the link between deforestation or oil money and corruption at the highest level. »

**Interview with Patrick Alley of Global Witness, an organisation that exposes and breaks the links between the exploitation of natural resources and the funding of conflict, corruption and human rights abuses, and for fifteen years has focused on the endemic corruption in the logging industry. Despite being arrested several times while conducting investigations and banned from visiting a number of African and Asian countries, Alley thinks it is still possible to gather information about these problems, but the local authorities and the companies concerned still have many "legal or illegal means" for preventing the truth emerging.**

*Has the press progressed in its coverage of environmental issues?*

Firstly, local environmental NGOs have made a lot of progress so better information is available to the local press. But the crisis that the international press is undergoing, and by this I mean the increasing focus on national issues and the trend of dumbing down, is giving us a hard time because it costs a lot of money, for example, to investigate deforestation in remote places. Even if the concern about global warming has led to more recognition of the seriousness of deforestation, and therefore more media visibility, news organisations do not invest often enough in reporting on these issues in the field.

*To what degree do the local media relay what you report?*

There is a real interest on the part of journalists to talk about deforestation. For example, in Cambodia, these issues, especially the involvement of certain local officials, get coverage in the English-language press but it is more difficult to get the Khmer-language media to cover them. They are put under more pressure and the death threats that have followed certain reports have clearly had consequences. Many Cambodian journalists have been murdered because of their work. For this reason local

language press sometimes just print out press releases, with no comment attached, as they consider this to be less risky. The situation is exacerbated because a lot of the local media is controlled by the ruling party. In Congo Brazzaville and Angola respectively, intimidation prevents proper coverage of the link between logging or oil money and corruption at the highest level. Journalists imply it but rarely go into detail. Our reports have been banned in Angola and Cambodia, which is why the internet is a critical tool in ensuring freedom of information.

*Do Chinese companies, which have a growing international presence, act transparently?*

China has the same rights as other countries to invest abroad in logging and mining but there is a real risk that their practices will ruin 10 years of efforts to reduce corruption in these sectors, because Chinese interventions and investments are explicitly 'no strings attached'. Of course, countries love this because it's money without conditions, which is why some of the most oppressive regimes welcome Chinese investment because it allows them to maintain the status quo.

➤ a Bolloré subsidiary in Cameroon. Benoît Collombat, a France Inter staff reporter, was the first to be sued. Then Isabelle Alexandra Ricq, a freelancer, was sued over her comments about a plantation owned by the Belgian company Socapalm, itself 40 per cent owned by Bolloré.

"I interviewed many members of a pygmy ethnic group that had suffered as a result of these plantations and I thought it was important to re-

port it," Ricq said. "I saw for myself the ecological impact of these plantations. All I did was answer the questions put to me by a France Inter journalist about what I saw in Cameroon in March 2009. And now I find myself being sued."

The French reporters interviewed people about pollution and work conditions in Socapalm's oil palm plantations. According to Ricq, the inhabitants of nearby villages reported massive amounts of reject oil finding their way into rivers, enough for them to be able to make soap from it. France Inter and Collombat were convicted of defamation at the start of May 2010 but the amount of damages awarded to Bolloré was much less than what the company's lawyer had requested.



Illegal cedar logging in Morocco (DR)

## Mohamed Attaoui, defending cedar

Morocco's "cedar mafia" is notorious for its use of intimidation against those who might be tempted to expose the details of its abusive felling of the cedar forests in the eastern Atlas, to the southeast of Rabat. Some stories have appeared in the national press but few Moroccan reporters have dared to name names. Some of the mafia's leaders benefit from the support of local officials. Mohamed Attaoui, the Arabic-language daily Al-Monataf's correspondent in the region, has experienced this in person. As president of the Future for Cedar and Mountain Sheep Association, he is at the forefront of the struggle against the "cedar mafia" and his articles have ruffled feathers. In March 2010, he was arrested and sentenced to two years in prison on a trumped-up charge of extorting 1,000 dirhams (90 euros). As a result of pressure in Morocco and abroad, he was released on bail a few weeks later pending the outcome of his appeal. The local authorities clearly wanted to get rid of Attaoui, who had become the champion of the fight against the illegal felling of cedars, a protected species that is a valued part of Morocco's heritage. He blamed officials in rural municipalities in the Midelt region and accused the gendarmerie and National Office for Waters and Forests of complicity. While still held in Meknès prison, he told Reporters Without Borders he was expecting King Mohammed to intercede on his behalf because the king's Foundation for the Protection of the Environment sees itself as leading the fight against deforestation.

## CONCLUSION

Although in many respects a failure, the Copenhagen conference gave the world's media a unique opportunity to dwell on the vital need to combat global warming and defend the environment. Journalists played their part. But some governments and companies still have not accepted that this international commitment needs to be implemented on the ground. They continue to censor, threaten or silence journalists who do more than just talk about defence of the environment and who actually try to identify those responsible for two major problems – deforestation and industrial pollution.

Vast sums of money are often at stake in this kind of business and the most determined efforts to obstruct media coverage are to be found in countries where economic and political power are controlled by the same people. And the rulers of these countries are well aware that criticism of an environmental crisis, criticism of an eco-system's over-exploitation and its disastrous impact people's everyday lives, can quickly turn into a political challenge to the regime.

As Reporters Without Borders said in the Copenhagen Declaration, which was signed by dozens of journalists' organisations: "The media ➤

« The media help to establish credible, independent diagnoses of the state of our planet. Their analyses play a crucial role in helping decision-makers to adopt policies and rules that will lead to the desired changes »

## Not easy to cover the world's ten most polluted sites



**It is far from easy to cover the 10 sites that were classified by the Blacksmith Institute (<http://www.blacksmithinstitute.org/>) in 2007 as the most polluted in the world. Icelandic press photographer Pall Stefansson discovered this when he set out to do a photo report on daily life at each of these 10 locations.**

He began in November 2009 in La Oroya, Peru, where the US company Doe Run operates an enormous smelting complex. He quickly found that he was being followed absolutely everywhere by two of the company's guards. "When you have 60 kilos of

"drastically reduced toxic emissions"?

The second stop of Stefansson's tour of the world was Sumqayit, Azerbaijan's third largest city and the site of large chemical plants, in March 2010. He found himself under a menacing form of police surveillance and, while taking photographs of people living near the plants, he was arrested by nine policemen and taken to a police station, where they threatened to seize his equipment and film. He was released only after the Icelandic

embassy in Moscow interceded on his behalf.

"Investigative coverage of industrial pollution is difficult but not impossible," Stefansson told Reporters Without Borders. "And it is very important because it is one of the things that are necessary if international pressure is to force companies to modify their behaviour."

photographic equipment, you do not go unnoticed," he said. "It was clear that these Doe Run guards had been given the job of finding out what I was doing and who I was talking to." Why does Doe Run have foreign journalists placed under surveillance when they visit La Oroya while its Peruvian subsidiary claims on its website that its measures to protect the environment have

are needed to gather information and disseminate it to the public. As regards the challenges of climate change, the media help to establish credible, independent diagnoses of the state of our planet. Their analyses play a crucial role in helping decision-makers to adopt policies and rules that will lead to the desired changes."

Without a free press, consciences will never be aroused and behaviour will not change. Without a free press, the most recalcitrant governments and corporations will not be forced to combat global warming.

### ENVIRONMENTAL JOURNALISM IN PRACTICE: TRAINING AND LINKS

To cover environmental issues properly, a number of journalistic techniques need to be acquired. US journalism professor Tom Yulsman has produced an online course with support from Internews.

To follow the course, click on <http://www.news-u.org/courses/covering-climate-change>

- Useful links:
- <http://www.sej.org/> : The Society of Environmental Journalists
- <http://www.colorado.edu/journalism/cej/> :

The Centre for Environmental Journalism offers training programmes for journalists in sciences of the environment.

<http://www.esf.edu/ecn/> : The Environmental Communication Network brings together academics specialised in environmental issues.

<http://www.environmentwriter.org/> : Environment Writer is a source of key information about environmental issues and natural resources.

<http://www.ej.msu.edu/index2.php> : The University of Michigan's Knight Centre for Environmental Journalism trains journalists in environmental issues.

<http://www.metcalfinstitute.org/> : The Metcalf Institute For Marine and Environmental Reporting aims to promote scientific and ecological research and reinforce links between journalists and the scientific community.

<http://www.sciencecommunicationnetwork.org/> : The Science Communication Network is a private foundation that encourages scientists, medical professionals and environmental specialists to disseminate their work through the mainstream media.

# REPORTERS SANS FRONTIERES

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International Secretariat

**Reporters Without Borders**

47 rue Vivienne

75002 Paris, France

Tel: 33 1 4483-8484

Fax: 33 1 4523-1151

Website: [www.rsf.org](http://www.rsf.org)

E-mail: [rsf@rsf.org](mailto:rsf@rsf.org)

Ambroise Pierre - Africa desk: [afrique@rsf.org](mailto:afrique@rsf.org)

Benoit Hervieu - Americas desk: [americques@rsf.org](mailto:americques@rsf.org)

Vincent Brossel - Asia desk: [asie@rsf.org](mailto:asie@rsf.org)

Elsa Vidal - Europe desk: [europe@rsf.org](mailto:europe@rsf.org)

Soazig Dollet - Middle East desk: [moyen-orient@rsf.org](mailto:moyen-orient@rsf.org)

Lucie Morillon - Internet desk: [internet@rsf.org](mailto:internet@rsf.org)

Press contact: [presse@rsf.org](mailto:presse@rsf.org)

**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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