

What it's like to be a
**JOURNALIST
IN THE SAHEL**



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FOREWORD

THE SAHEL MUST NOT BECOME A NO-GO ZONE FOR REPORTERS

By Sadibou Marong

Director of RSF's sub-Saharan Africa bureau

Although French reporter Olivier Dubois was released on 20 March 2023, after 711 days as a hostage in Mali, conditions for journalists in the Sahel have worsened steadily for the past decade. The only French journalist to have been held hostage anywhere in the world in the past ten years, Dubois was kidnapped in a region where no fewer than five journalists have been killed and six others have gone missing since 2013. The increase in attacks by armed groups has steadily reduced the space in which journalists can gather information and has weakened the means of communication. Media simply giving a voice to community radio stations, which have many listeners in the Sahel, have been destroyed for just interviewing those who do not sympathise with the armed groups or for "broadcasting music instead of sermons".

The deterioration of the state of the media in Chad, Burkina Faso and Mali has been exacerbated by military coups. Pressure and patriotic directives from army juntas has fostered the development of controlled media and a code of silence surrounding sensitive subjects. Bans on international media and the expulsion of foreign reporters reflect a desire to silence criticism and have created space for media favourable to a pro-Russian narrative, that defend the presence of Wagner's mercenaries in the region, and contribute to the spread of disinformation.

The use of cyberspace laws and Internet shutdowns have also caused a great deal of harm to journalism and press freedom. In Benin, journalists can be sentenced to imprisonment under the Digital Law. In Niger, the cybercrime law was used to convict journalists until a revised version was adopted in June 2022.

In this hostile environment, fear of reprisals has favoured self-censorship. Withholding information has become the norm. The challenge for many media outlets has become existential. How do you continue as a news organisation when journalistic freedom and quality journalism are clearly compromised?

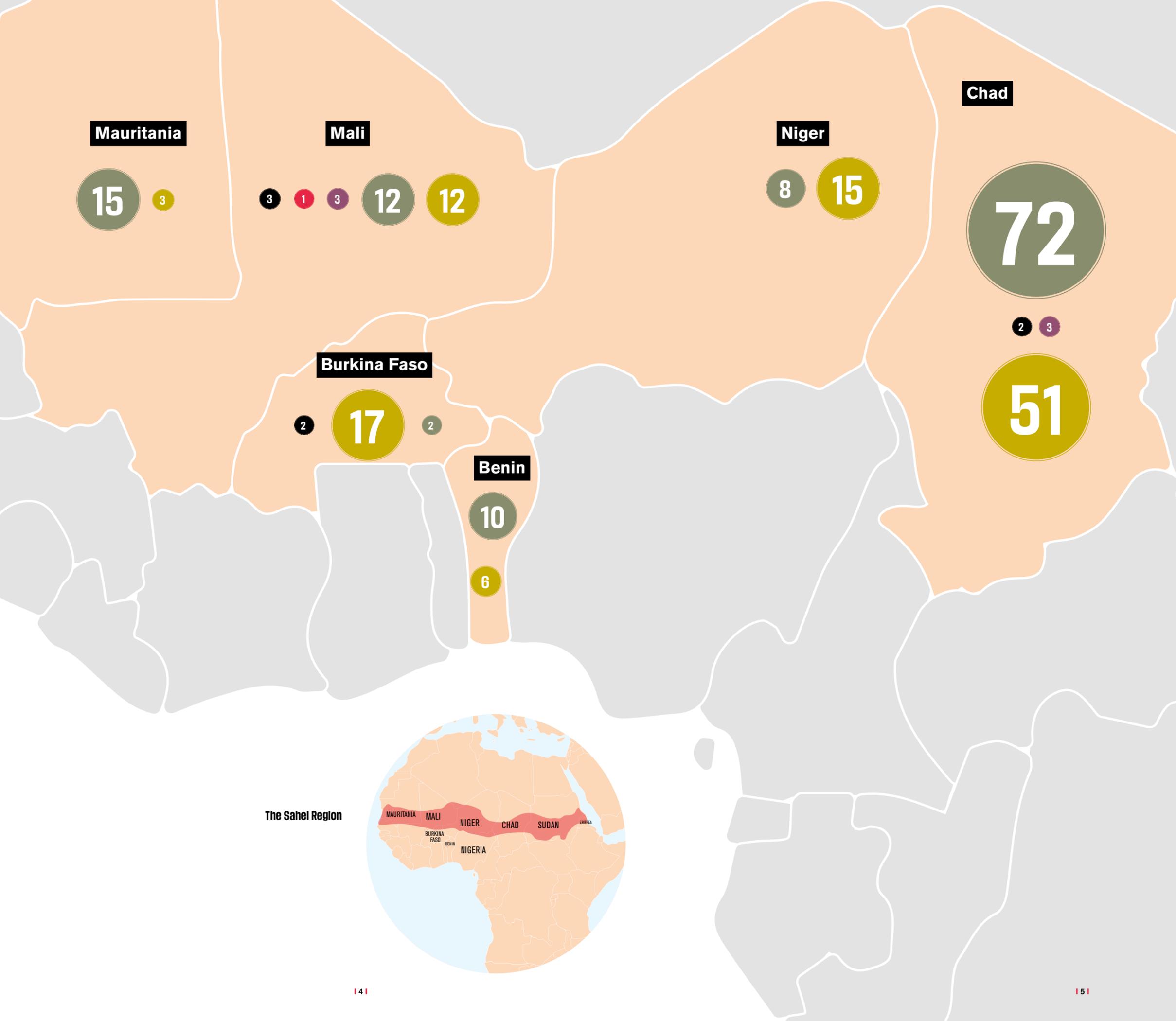
The fraught and complex situation for journalism in the Sahel requires widespread mobilisation efforts. This is why Reporters Without Borders (RSF) launched its "Save Journalism in the Sahel" campaign in January 2022. The aim is to bring together and organise the resistance in defence of journalistic freedom and pluralism in the Sahel so that this region does not become Africa's biggest news and information black hole.

This report is the fruit of research, interviews and advocacy carried out by the staff of the RSF bureau in Dakar as part of this campaign. It focusses above all on Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad and northern Benin, which borders the countries of the Sahel and is dogged by similar security issues. It also reports on the conditions for journalism in Mauritania, a country in the region that has so far been relatively protected from the attacks suffered by its neighbours. And it mentions initiatives that have emerged in the region that reflect a certain resilience. The report also stresses the importance – even amid the threats, armed attacks, retaliation from governmental forces and junta directives – of protecting the rights of journalists, and in particular their right to access information in the interest of the Sahel's.

THE SAHEL

ABUSES AGAINST THE PRESS

2013 - 2023



The Sahel Region



- Journalists killed
- Journalists held hostage (from 8/04/2021 to 20.03/2023)
- Journalists disappeared
- Journalists detained/jailed
- Other abuses (physical attacks, threats, ransacked or suspended media)

1 | FACING NEW ENEMIES

1/TERROR BY ARMED GROUPS

Community radio station reporters, presenters and technicians have not been spared the terror that armed groups have spread in the Sahel in the past decade. More than 1,000 terrorist attacks were recorded in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger from 2017 to 2022, according to Liptako Gourma Security, an organisation that provides security monitoring and expertise. Similar levels of violence have also been reported in neighbouring countries such as Chad. Threats, the risk of kidnapping, even assassination, have become part of the daily life of journalists in the region.

| FROM GAO TO KIDAL, A NO-MAN'S LAND FOR REPORTERS IN MALI

It's a date that many Malian and foreign reporters cannot forget. On 2 November 2013, two French journalists working for *Radio France internationale (RFI)*, reporter **Ghislaine Dupont** and sound technician **Claude Verlon**, were abducted by four Jihadi militants and executed a few hours later.



Malian journalists demonstrate in Bamako to pay tribute to RFI journalists Ghislaine Dupont and Claude Verlon, killed in Kidal. November 2013 ©AFP



For nearly two years, RSF campaigned constantly for the release of Olivier Dubois, a French journalist held hostage in Mali @ RSF

This double murder took place in the far north of Mali, in Kidal, a place regarded as the epicentre of the country's rebel groups, especially those allied with Tuareg warlord Iyad Ag Ghali, the founder of a Salafist Jihadi group that is part of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

"What we didn't imagine at the time," said Christophe Boisbouvier, *RFI's* deputy director for Africa, "was the impact that the Kidal tragedy was going to have, not only on *RFI*, but also all the Malian and international press." From the end of 2013 onwards, the national and international media gave up traveling to northern Mali on their own, "as Ghislaine and Claude used to do." Some journalists still go there, but only when "embedded" with the Malian army or with the soldiers of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), or with the troops that were deployed during the French-led Operation Barkhane. "But for the past ten years, there has been practically no investigative reporting in the field in northern Mali, in Kidal or Tessalit", Boisbouvier added.

Since 8 April 2021, journalists have not been to Gao, in northeastern Mali, either. That was the day that **Olivier Dubois**¹, a French freelance reporter for *Libération*, *Le Point* and *Jeune Afrique*, was kidnapped when he went to Gao to interview the head of an armed group. His abductors, members of the Support Group for Islam and Muslims (JNIM), a group affiliated with Al-Qaeda, released two videos showing him in captivity. In the first, a 20-second video released nearly a

1 "Olivier Dubois, voyageur immobile," by Célian Macé, *Libération*, 7 March 2022.



International journalists in Mali ©Sylvain Cherkaoui

month after his abduction², Dubois asked his family and friends and the French authorities to do everything in their power to get him freed. In the second video³, released on 14 March 2022, he asked his supporters to keep campaigning for him and he again asked the French authorities to work to obtain his release. RSF registered as an interested civil party⁴ in the French judicial investigation into his abduction in order to support the efforts of his family and friends to obtain his release. It was only a year later, on 20 March 2023, that Dubois reappeared, now free⁵ in Niamey, the capital of Niger.

On 18 April 2021, ten days after Dubois' abduction, **Moussa M'Bana Dicko**, a Malian journalist who was head of programming at *Radio Dande Haïre* (The Voice of Hairé), was abducted in the east-central locality of Boni by members of an armed group who accused him of making "critical comments" about them. His family was given no proof of life and demands in exchange for his release have not been made. He is now regarded as missing.

The family of **Hamadoun Nialibouly**, a journalist with *Radio Dande Douentza* (The Voice of Douentza), not received any news of him since armed men abducted him on 27 September 2020 in Somadougou, a village in central Mali's Mopti region. RSF has learned that he went to Bamako to participate in a training for journalists provided by the Mali Media programme. On his way home, his bus was stopped by a group of armed men, dressed as traditional hunters. He was the only passenger taken away by force (or abducted). On two separate occasions, the Maison de la Presse du Mali (an umbrella organisation of 50 Malian media groups) sent envoys to try to negotiate his release, to no avail.

2 [RSF on Twitter: "A 21-second video of which we learned this morning shows the French journalist Olivier Dubois saying he was kidnapped by the "Support Group for Islam and Muslims" on 8/04. He asks his family & friends and the French authorities to do everything in their power to get him released. https://t.co/yb3tpt04oy" / Twitter](#)

3 "New video of Olivier Dubois: RSF asks the authorities to step up their efforts to obtain his release," RSF, 14 March 2022.

4 "RSF helps coordinate support for French journalist kidnapped in Mali," RSF, 17 May 2021.

5 "RSF 'overjoyed and relieved' at Olivier Dubois' release," 20 March 2023.



FOCUS

JNIM and Islamic State – leading predators of journalists

Since 2012, attacks by armed groups directly affecting the media have been mainly concentrated in the northern areas of the Sahel countries. The group that held journalist Olivier Dubois hostage for 711 days is one of the two most active groups in the region. Its name is Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) – Support Group for Islam and Muslims – and it is led by the warlord Iyad Ag Ghali. Since 2017, it has brought together several Jihadi groups in the Sahel, including Ansar Dine and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). The other group is Wilayat al-Sahel (previously called Islamic State in the Greater Sahara).

According to Wassim Nasr, a France 24 journalist specialising in Jihadi groups: "These two groups mainly have a presence in Mali but they are also in Burkina Faso and Niger, and they have been active in border areas in the north of Benin, Togo and Côte d'Ivoire (...) They have been waging an unrelenting war since late 2019 or early 2020." This war, which is aimed at extending their control over the territories of the Sahel, is also played out in the media. According to a report by the French military research institute IRSEM, the communication strategy "of the African jihadists oscillates between invisibility and the staging of scenes of horror", involving increasing use of social media and dedicated propaganda outlets such as JNIM's al-Zallaqa.

"These groups do not directly threaten the media," says TV5Monde Africa editor Ousmane Ndiaye. "But when they say 'Western propaganda,' we know they mean 'Western media.' And we pay particular attention when they threaten France, because this can have consequences for journalists, who are less protected than the humanitarian workers or UN employees still in the region. Iyad Ag Ghali posted a video threatening the French government just a few months before Olivier Dubois' abduction."



Islamic State (IS) flag
JNIM (Al-Qaeda branch)



Reporter in the field in Mali © Malick Konaté

BURKINA FASO AND CHAD, OTHER RISKY AREAS

The dangers are growing elsewhere in the Sahel. In Niger, a journalist with a privately owned media outlet said: "Since the beginning of the fighting in 2015, no journalist has dared to go into the field except on the very occasional trips organised by the government, such as visits by the president or ministers responsible for security issues." In Burkina Faso, Atiana Serge Oulon, the publisher of the newspaper *L'Événement*, said: "I often travel within the country, but in recent months my trips have become less frequent because of the security situation. Nowadays, you have to evaluate the risk before you make a move."

The tragic death of two Spanish journalists in eastern Burkina Faso on 26 April 2021 has left a deep mark on the media. Reporter **David Beriain** and cameraman **Roberto Fraile** were attacked and killed by a terrorist group while reporting on poaching in a nature reserve near the tri-border area (Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso). Several armed groups are active in this area, which is traversed by strategic traffic routes and is one of the central points of the Sahel's multifactorial crisis.

TV reporter and cameraman **Obed Nangbatna** fell victim to the conflict between the government and armed groups in Chad. Employed by the national TV broadcaster *Télé Tchad*, he died⁶ on 25 May 2019 from the injuries he sustained when the army vehicle in which he was traveling triggered a mine en route to the north shore of Lake Chad. Chadian army positions had been attacked by terrorist groups in this area the day before.

⁶ "Les Groupes djihadistes au Sahel. Une communication globale à l'épreuve des réalités locales," by Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, Étude No. 87, IRSEM, October 2021.

⁷ "TV reporter killed by mine in Chad," RSF, 27 May 2019.

RADIO SILENCE

The deterioration of the security situation directly affects the local media. In the north of Mali, the liberalisation of the media in the early 1990s enabled many community and commercial radio stations to emerge, but there are now only a handful left. In the Kidal region, of the seven radio stations that existed in 2013, only three are still active: the radio station in Tessalit, the UN's *Radio Mikado* and the national radio station.



Journalists in the studio of Radio Voix du Soum ©DR

In Burkina Faso's Sahel region, *La Voix du Soum*, which broadcasts from Djibo in four local languages and covers an area that extends to the border with neighbouring Mali, somehow manages to keep going after being directly threatened. On 11 March 2022, the province of Soum was the target of four simultaneous armed attacks. One of them directly targeted the radio station's generator, which had enabled it to operate during frequent power cuts. *La Voix du Soum* was silenced for a week.

The radio station's personnel had received threats prior to this attack. The head of programming, **Emmanuel Bamogo**, said members of an armed group had recognised him on a bus in 2021. "One of them came up to me and asked me to broadcast sermons instead of music", he said. "This showed that they are listening to the station." Like the radio station's director, **Roger Sawadogo**, he has left Djibo for safety concerns since March 2022. Nowadays, the two men only go to the radio station when the security situation allows it, and then only for short periods, in order to "boost the morale" of the few employees who have stayed put. The latter currently stick to broadcasting press releases from the local authorities and messages from the station's few partners. The radio station has also relocated to be able to broadcast from a place with better security conditions.

In northern Mali, several community radio show hosts also say they are extremely careful. "To continue to exist in areas beyond government control, you have to comply with the demands of the armed groups, which means promoting their ideology and refraining from giving the microphone to dissenting voices", said a local media specialist who asked not to be identified. In some areas, self-censorship has become journalists' best measure of protection.

Malian journalists on the streets of Bamako during a media strike in 2012. ©Habibou Kouyate/AFP





Ali Oumarou ©DR



INTERVIEW

Ali Oumarou, fleeing threats and dangerous areas

Traveling in areas where there is strong presence of armed groups is particularly risky for journalists, who can be spotted at frequent roadblocks and then threatened. This is particularly so in Burkina Faso, where radio host Ali Oumarou lives.

It was outside in Tampouy, a neighbourhood in the northern outskirts of Ouagadougou, that an RSF team met Ali Oumarou in September 2022. He spoke against a backdrop of music and the voices of reporters commenting on a football match that was being broadcast live.

Until the beginning of 2022, he worked for *Radio Lutte Contre la Désertification* ("Radio Fight Against Desertification"), otherwise known as *Radio LCD*⁸. It was set up in Djibo, the capital of northern Burkina Faso's Soum province, by SOS Sahel, an NGO founded in 1976 and based in Dakar, Senegal. With ten employees, *Radio LCD* covered a radius of 100 kilometres, and used to broadcast prevention, awareness and information programmes on health and the environment in local languages. Oumarou, who is originally from Soum, left the province in early 2022 to participate in a training in Ouagadougou, and has not returned since then.

"It's very dangerous to travel by road" due to roadblocks on the Ouagadougou-Djibo highway, he explained. The fact that his national ID card specifies his profession puts him at even more risk in the event of an inspection. The fear of running into armed groups limits not only his work trips but also his travel for family reasons. "My father died in my absence, but I could not attend his funeral," he said. Several very specific threats forced him to change the radio station's programming. He described how armed groups began intervening on *Radio LCD* in 2017. "They called during a programme to threaten us", he said. Four years later, in 2021, "they asked us to stop broadcasting our shows, and threatened to attack us if we refused."

Since then, the radio station's programmes have been limited. Frequent power and phone network cuts in the area also prevent listeners from calling in and participating in interactive programmes to give their views. Gathering information has become more and more difficult. Several of its reporters and radio show hosts, including Ali Oumarou, decided to leave the region and, as a result, lost their jobs. But Oumarou is not thinking of giving up journalism. "My dearest wish is to be able to continue my work," he said. "If I really had to quit journalism and stop hosting shows, it would be like a stab in the back."

DOWNED TELECOMMUNICATIONS

Journalists who are still active need to be able to communicate and transmit. "In some areas, it is complicated because the terrorists destroy the phone towers", said **Fanny Noaro-Kabré**, *TV5Monde's* correspondent in Burkina Faso. Since 2015, the destruction of telecom infrastructure has been part of terrorists' modus operandi, as they try to isolate certain areas in order to better take control of them.

According to ARCEP, Burkina Faso's electronic communications and postal regulator, between late 2020 and late 2022, 293 telephone antennae were destroyed⁹ in the country's Sahel provinces, the Boucle du Nouhoum region and part of the northeast. These acts of vandalism took 553 mobile phone sites out of service. In early November 2021, in Sebba, in the northeastern of Burkina Faso, individuals destroyed two cell phone towers used by the three mobile phone companies: Moov Burkina, Telecel and Orange. In January 2022, armed groups burned down the telecom infrastructure of at least five villages. A few months later, assailants affiliated with JNIM raided Ouo, a locality in

⁸ [Radio LCD 98.6 FM - Djibo Officiel | Djibo \(facebook.com\)](#)

⁹ ["Burkina : les télécommunications ciblées par les jihadistes,"](#) APA news, 9 December 2022



Bullet holes on *Radio Soum's* generator ©DR



Community radio satellite dishes in Gao ©Harandane Dicko/UN

the south-west, disabling the installations of mobile phone companies. Cutting villages off from the rest of the world not only prevents their inhabitants from reporting in real time the presence of armed groups to the army and police, but it also complicates the work of journalists, who have a hard time contacting their sources in the area in order to verify information.

TERRIFIED SOURCES

When journalists manage to contact people living in areas threatened by armed groups and ask to interview them, the issue of their safety arises. "Most of those contacted in these areas do not dare to speak and the few who dare always ask to remain anonymous", said a Beninois journalist working on subjects related to security in the north of the country, who himself asked to remain anonymous. A Burkinabé journalist, who also asked not to be identified, said: "People who agree to provide us with information on the situation in the north often tell us that they are threatened and are afraid of reprisals." Aware of these issues, the foreign journalists interviewed by RSF explained that they take extra care to protect sources who are exposed to pressure, and to protect anyone else providing information or accompanying them. "Even the army auxiliaries are afraid," *TV5Monde* reporter Fanny Noaro-Kabré said.

The risks are real. A Malian livestock herder was kidnapped and savagely murdered in 2020, a few weeks after the broadcast of a *France 24* report for which he was interviewed, cruelly raising the issue of the safety of those who agree to speak openly on camera. In a statement, *France 24* defended its decision to broadcast the report without blurring his face: "The terrorists know everything and about everyone, without any delay, from the presence of soldiers in the villages to the identity of the inhabitants who speak to them. There is no reason to think that blurring Sadou Yehia's face would have guaranteed him any security. In this context, anonymisation is illusory."¹⁰

¹⁰ Excerpt from the statement entitled [France 24 s'exprime sur le drame de l'assassinat de Sadou Yehia](#) that the broadcaster posted on its website on 12 February 2020.



FOCUS

Women journalists in the Sahel: “Either their husbands say no, or they’re afraid”

The International Network of Women Journalists (RIF), an RSF partner, brought women journalists from Sahel countries together in Dakar, Senegal in October 2022 for a workshop entitled “Strengthening the network of women journalists and communicators across the Sahel”. The fear of violence from armed groups was at the heart of the conversations during these meetings.

Clotilde Sawadogo from *Radio Salaki* in Dédougou, in northwestern Burkina Faso, said she could no longer travel to cover events in certain areas despite the adoption of various methods for gathering information.

“We initially adopted a strategy of bringing certain sources to us”, she said. “But when we broadcast our programmes, the sources were identified and they could be threatened. We then had to develop a second strategy – using only the telephone. Except that the armed groups destroyed the phone network antennae, and went so far as to ban people from meeting to listen to our programmes in groups and discuss the subjects raised afterwards.”

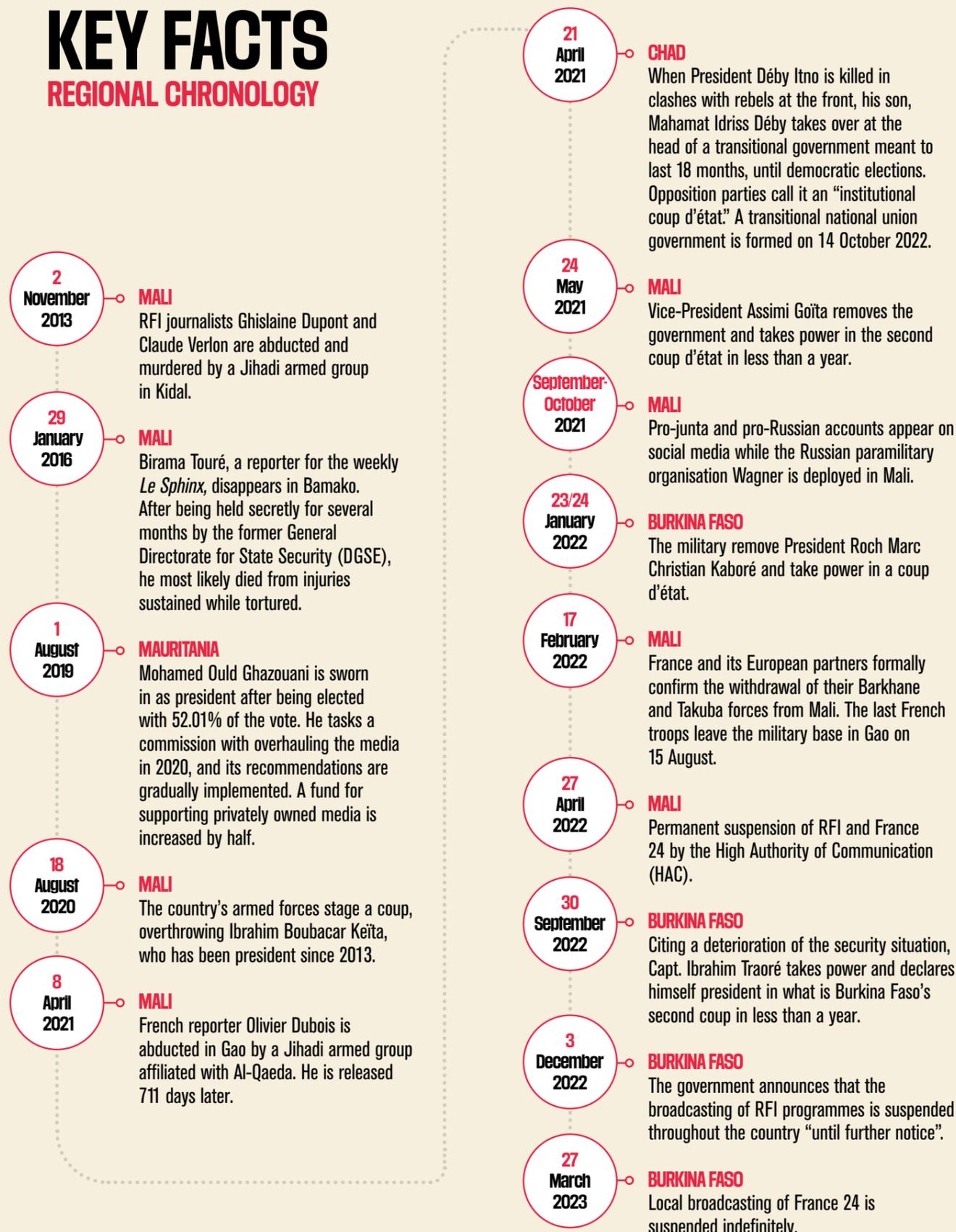
Participants from Niger said few women journalists in their country dared to travel to such areas as Tillabéry or the Diffa region in the north for the purpose of reporting. “Either their husbands say no, or they’re afraid”, said Aminatou Housseini Noma of the Association of African Women Journalists (APAC Niger).

At the end of the workshop, RIF issued a call to governments to ensure the protection of women and men in the media in a situation of crisis, and urged the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to establish a sub-regional Code for the Safety of Women Journalists in Conflict Zones.



Women journalists and communicators in the Sahel @CLoum

KEY FACTS REGIONAL CHRONOLOGY





Soldiers control the entrance to the national TV channel during the coup d'état in Burkina Faso in January 2022
© Olympie de Maismont / AFP

| 2/ HOSTILE MILITARY JUNTAS

The arrival of military juntas in the Sahel has posed an additional challenge for journalists. As soon as they took power in Mali, Burkina Faso and Chad, the military governments have tried to control the media by means of prohibitions or restrictions and even attacks and arbitrary arrests.

| COUP D'ÉTAT: STATE-OWNED MEDIA UNDER STRICT CONTROL



L'Observateur's front page on the day after the coup d'état in Burkina Faso in January 2022
© Olympie de Maismont / AFP

The state-owned media are particularly vulnerable when coups are being carried out because the military try to seize control of the national TV and radio stations in order to announce their takeover. In Mali and Burkina Faso, the coup plotters controlled who was going in and out of the headquarters of the national TV channels¹¹ – *ORTM* and *RTB* – and forced journalists¹² to read their communiqués on the air. Some journalists were even attacked.

Media regulators may also be targeted. In Burkina Faso, the junta that was in power from January to September 2022 refused to sign a decree confirming the Superior Council for Communication's new, democratically elected president.

The junta wanted an ally to be the regulator's new president. As a result, its activities were suspended until the decree was finally signed on 6 December 2022 by the new junta that had taken over in September.

| OPPOSITION PROTESTS: HIGH RISK REPORTING

The periods of instability that can accompany political changes are particularly delicate for the media and journalists. In Chad, **Narcisse Oredjé**, a producer at the privately owned radio station *CEFOD*, was killed by a stray bullet in N'Djamena, the capital, during a protest on 20 October 2022 against the extension of the transition period. His death's traumatic effect on the media was increased by the fact that several other journalists were attacked and arrested by security forces the same day and during the days that followed.

Nathan Ayati, a reporter for the newspaper *Le Pays*, was assigned to cover the protest, which had been banned by the Military Transition Council (CMT). His account was particularly damning. "Although I had my press card, soldiers and police told me that I had no place being there and that I should not cover the protest. They slapped me, hit me with the butts of their weapons, and shoved me into their vehicle, where they continued to beat me. And they refused to let me tell my newspaper I'd been arrested." Ayati spent a night at the police station "along with detained protesters" even though he kept saying he was a journalist. He was finally released the next day after his editor and the head of the Union of Chadian Journalists (UJT) intervened.

During the following days, **Adam Azarack**, a reporter for the daily newspaper *Le Progrès*, and **Gamou Richard**, who works for the privately owned *Electron TV*, were also arrested and beaten by police although they were returning from covering a story and had their press cards on them. In Sarh, a city 600 km southeast of N'Djamena, **Rayam Mbaïom**, a journalist with the provincial radio station of the National Media and Broadcasting Office (Onama), and *Radio Lotiko's* **Voltaire Allahoguina** were briefly detained by the police and beaten even though they had their press cards. A group of soldiers fired three shots at Mbaïom without hitting him and took his motorcycle.

UJT vice-president Abba André Kodmadjingar, who is also executive secretary of Chad's Maison des médias (an umbrella structure made up of Chadian media organisations), said the events of October 2022 were indicative of the growing persecution of the media during the past decade in Chad, which has seen many other press freedom violations, as well as violence against journalists. In September 2020 alone, 12 newspapers – about a quarter of the country's newspapers – were suspended for three months for "failure to comply" with the press law adopted in 2018.

| JOURNALISTS EXPELLED, MEDIA OUTLETS SHUT DOWN

After taking power, the military juntas have not hesitated to reshape the media landscape in order to better serve their interests. This was the case in Mali and Burkina Faso, where several French media outlets have been suspended.

In a letter to Mali's communications ministry in January 2022, the Military Defence Collective (CDM) – a group of soldiers said to be close to the ruling junta – accused the correspondents of *Radio France Internationale* and *France 24* of contributing to a "campaign of disinformation, denigration and intoxication by making subversive remarks undermining the homeland's sovereignty and integrity."

Benjamin Roger, who covers the Sahel for the French monthly *Jeune Afrique*, was arrested at his hotel in Bamako on 7 February 2022 and was expelled from Mali. He had been in the country for less than 24 hours and had a visa, but the Malian authorities said he did not have press accreditation. The CDM hailed his expulsion and urged the authorities to "immediately expel the correspondents of *France 24* and *RFI*."

The following month, Col. Abdoulaye Maïga, the minister for territorial administration and decentralisation, announced that the junta was suspending local broadcasting by two French international news broadcasters, *RFI* and *France 24*¹³. The announcement came just days after *RFI* and *France 24* broadcast a report in two parts on 14 and 15 March 2022 about summary executions and looting by Malian soldiers and their Russian auxiliaries. Other international media outlets carried similar reports but only the two French broadcasters were suspended.

Although France Médias Monde, the public company that owns *RFI* and *France 24*, provided a detailed response to Mali's criticisms of the report, local broadcasting by the two French broadcasters was terminated for good¹⁴ by Mali's High Authority of Communication (HAC) on 27 April 2022.

This has had consequences in Mali. "As *RFI*'s French, Mandenkan and Fulfulde language correspondents can no longer work freely, they are no longer working", said Christophe Boisbouvier, *RFI*'s deputy director. *RFI* no longer reports from Bamako. "And this hasn't just affected *RFI*", he said. "Several other international media correspondents have had to stop working or leave the country."

11 "Au Burkina Faso, un coup d'État militaire salué par la rue," by Sophie Douce, *Le Monde*, 25 January 2022.
12 "After coup, Burkina Faso's junta must let journalists work, says RSE," RSF, 28 January 2022.

13 "Mali bans local broadcasts by leading French radio and TV news outlets," RSF, 17 March 2022
14 "France Médias Monde conteste avec force la décision définitive de suspension de RFI et France 24 au Mali," *RFI*, 27 April 2022.

The situation has also worsened in Burkina Faso. *RFI*'s local correspondents "are in a very complicated situation" there, Boisbouvier said, and *RFI* hasn't sent any reporters there since 3 December 2022, the date on which the junta suspended broadcasting by *RFI* throughout the country until "further notice."¹⁵ The junta accused *RFI* of relaying a "message intimidating the population that was attributed to a terrorist leader" and including a "false report" in its 2 December press review, namely that the president of Burkina Faso's transitional government, Capt. Ibrahim Traoré, had said he was the target of a coup attempt.

A few weeks later, *France 24*'s correspondent in Burkina Faso, **Bangaly Touré**, was summoned by the Superior Council for Communication (CSC) about an "error" in a news item on the TV channel's scrolling news ticker on 16 January 2023, which reported that 50 women had been kidnapped by "Islamist rebels" in the north of the country.¹⁶ According to the government's version, they were "armed terrorist groups" not Islamist rebels, the CSC pointed out. On 7 February 2023, the CSC issued a formal warning to *France 24* about this. It said that, in the event of a similar mistake, *France 24* could be sanctioned and could have its broadcasts in Burkina Faso suspended.¹⁷ A few weeks later, on 27 March 2023, *France 24*'s broadcasts were indeed suspended indefinitely after it broadcast replies by the head of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).



FOCUS

Worsening relations between France and Mali affect French media

Speaking from the podium of the United Nations in New York on 25 September 2021, Malian Prime Minister Choguel Kokalla Maïga accused France of subjecting Mali to "a sort of abandonment in mid-flight." He was referring to the announced withdrawal of Operation Barkhane, the French military presence in the Sahel and Sahara since 2014, which had failed to stop the expansion of armed groups in the region. A year later, Mali's interim prime minister referred to the French government as a "junta". Operation Barkhane's troops left Mali in November 2022.

The journalist Rémi Carayol¹⁹ blames this military "fiasco" in part on the length of this military intervention and a "biased perspective inherited from the colonial war". Critics of the colonial and post-colonial legacy question not only France's military presence but also its media presence, above all France Médias Monde, the former Audiovisuel Extérieur de la France (French External Broadcasting). The state-owned parent company of *RFI* and *France 24* is seen as the voice of France, wielding media "soft power" in its former colonies.

In an interview for Mali's national TV channel *ORTM* at the start of 2022, Prime Minister Maïga openly accused France of deploying "all-out media terrorism" against his government with "the goal of overthrowing it." In March 2022, local broadcasting by *RFI* and *France 24* was suspended.

¹⁵ "RSF urges Burkina Faso to lift ban on French public broadcaster," RSF, 5 December 2022.

¹⁶ "Burkina Faso : une cinquantaine de femmes enlevées par des jihadistes présumés dans le nord," *France 24*, 16 January 2023.

¹⁷ "Burkina : La télévision France 24 mise en demeure par le Conseil supérieur de la communication," *Lefaso.net*, 8 February 2023.

¹⁸ Author of *Le Mirage sahélien. La France en guerre en Afrique : Serval, Barkhane et après ?*, La Découverte, January 2023.



Sign brandished by the pro-Russian group Yerewolo during a demonstration in Bamako on 19 February 2022 ©Florent Vergnes /AFP

3/ THE LONG SHADOW OF WAGNER'S MILITIA

"It's hard to be outspoken, to enjoy freedom of expression in the media today because you're caught between the hammer of terrorists, who go so far as to control radio programmes in certain localities, and the anvil of the junta and its Russian partners", said a Malian journalist who asked not to be identified because of these dual threats to his profession. The Malian government's rapprochement with Russia is accompanied by a rhetoric that relies on an anti-French sentiment and references to relations with "our Russian partners". This communication strategy, especially on social media, owes a lot to the influence of the privately owned Russian military company Wagner, which has had a significant presence in Mali since late 2021.¹⁹

NO INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING ON THE WAGNER PRESENCE

All the journalists contacted by RSF have the same comment: "In Mali in general, in the north and centre in particular, no media outlet dares to talk about Wagner for fear of reprisals", one said. "Since the suspension of *France 24* and *RFI*, the national media have refrained from using the words 'Russian mercenaries' or 'Wagner'. Everyone adopts the terms used by the government and talks about our 'Russian partners' or our 'Russian instructors'. The local media limit themselves to relaying official information. Only the international media mention reports by NGOs talking about human rights violations by the White soldiers. No journalist here dares to do any investigative reporting about the Wagner presence." In other words, everyone censors themselves, to "avoid trouble".



This undated photo shows three Russian mercenaries on the right in northern Mali. © Armée française

¹⁹ "Wagner au Mali : enquête exclusive sur les mercenaires de Poutine," by Benjamin Roger and Mathieu Olivier, *Jeune Afrique*, 18 February 2022.

“INFORMATION SUPPORT” FOR THE RUSSIAN PRESENCE IN MALI

At the same time, online campaigns have emerged that encourage the dissemination of content in favour of the relations between Mali and Russia. In a study entitled “Russia in Mali, a two-headed presence”,²⁰ published by the French military research institute IRSEM, researchers Maxime Audinet and Emmanuel Dreyfus analyse “information support for the Wagner group’s deployment in Mali”, which they define as “information support for Russia’s unofficial presence, promoting content favourable to Wagner’s paramilitaries, endorsing its actions by media and cultural means, forging links with potential local supporters and, on a larger scale, legitimising cooperation between Russia and Mali and discrediting its detractors.”

Among the local sources of support identified, the study names *Mali Actu*²¹, a news site founded by the journalist Séga Diarra in 2007. When the rapprochement between Russia and Mali began developing, the Russian media outlets *Sputnik* and *RT* approached Diarra, offering to sign a partnership with him and acquire a stake in his website. When contacted by RSF, Diarra said *Mali Actu* “declined the participation proposal” and indicated its “reticence as regards any external participation”. But he confirmed, as he already did in an interview for the Qatari TV news channel *Al Jazeera* in May 2022²², that *Mali Actu*, against the backdrop of the suspension of *RFI* and other French media, seeks to diversify its news sources and that it may use content provided by Russian TV channels.



This front page from the *Mali Actu* news website is indicative of its editorial line. The first story praises the bilateral relationship between Mali and Russia, while the second refers to the divorce between Mali and France
@Screengrab from the *MaliActu.net* site on 1 March 2023

20 “La Russie au Mali, une présence bicéphale,” by Maxime Audinet and Emmanuel Dreyfus, Étude No. 97, IRSEM, September 2022.

21 [Mali | maliactu.net - Mali Actualités, Les Actus et Informations sur le Mali](http://MaliActu.net)

22 (105) Misinformation in Mali | [The Listening Post Feature - YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...)

THREE QUESTIONS FOR

Sophie Bernard

All Eyes On Wagner expert

“Press freedom has deteriorated since Wagner’s arrival in Mali”

All Eyes On Wagner (AEOW) is an independent international project consisting of experts from Switzerland, France, Australia and Canada. Created in March 2022, shortly after the start of hostilities in Ukraine, AEOW aims to monitor and investigate Wagner, and to document the various aspects of this Russian paramilitary organisation’s crimes and its predatory and disinformation activities.

How has Wagner’s influence in Mali affected the local news market?

It’s hard to say with any certainty that the Malian junta is solely responsible for the recent restrictions on the media. The chronology of violations that we recently compiled has unfortunately shown a deterioration in press freedom since the Wagner Group’s arrival in Mali. Added to this is the creation of an online ecosystem of fake media on Facebook, and the placing of articles favourable to Russian interests in Mali, even if it is not possible to formally link these two aspects to Wagner. For the moment, we don’t have a precise vision of the impact on radio stations. On the other hand, groups that mainly relay pro-Russian messages and narratives are proliferating on WhatsApp.

Have you been able to document cases of national or community media, especially in northern Mali, that have been prevented from working by Wagner, and pro-junta media campaigns?

We’ve not found any trace of media being prevented from working by Wagner. But there are pro-junta media campaigns, although it’s often difficult to directly attribute and link a campaign to a group. Our Year 1 of Wagner in Mali report, published in November 2022, shows online influence operations directly correlated to actions linked to the Wagner Group. In our view, Mali doesn’t yet have the cyber capability to implement such influence operations. So they may either be handled by the Russian partner, as can be seen in the Central African Republic, or outsourced to communication companies that have worked with the Wagner Group in the past.

What are the recent narratives that you have seen emerge in Mali?

We’ve noticed that there are coordinated unauthentic online campaigns (Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp) that promote the junta and its actions. The recent narratives that we’ve seen emerge are: “The terrorist groups are funded by the French military”; “There are no Wagner Group mercenaries in Mali”; and “There are no atrocities in Mali.” For the “Recovered Sovereignty Day” celebration,²³ we also noted that media outlets linked to Wagner boss Yevgeny Prigozhin, such as *Afrique Média*, were once again carrying cartoons vilifying the French presence in Mali and presenting the Russians as saviours. We also noticed the launch of a new anti-French online campaign via fake accounts or by influencers like Nathalie Yamb,²⁴ who is seen as being close to the Wagner apparatus.



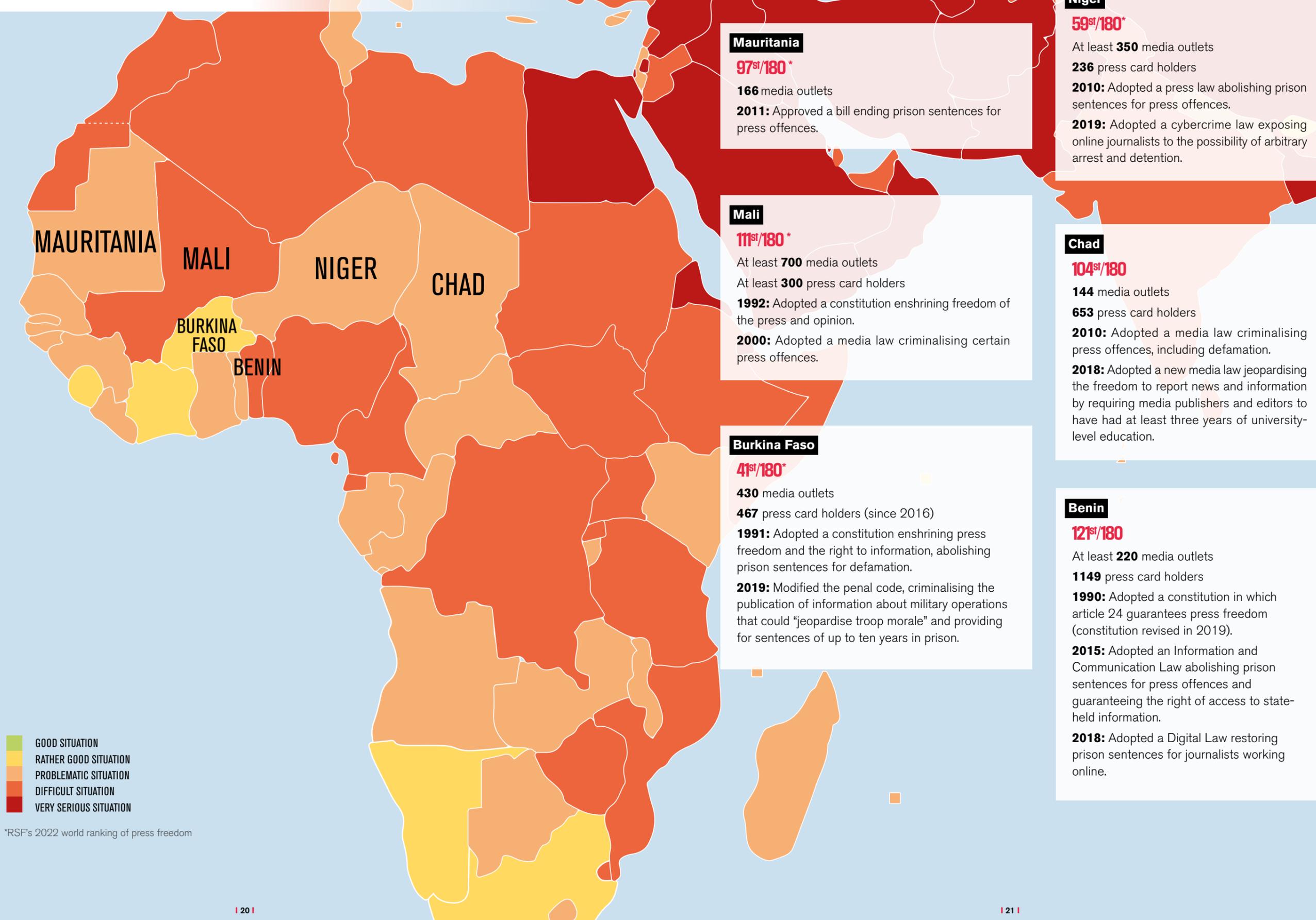
Demonstration in support of cooperation between Russia and Burkina Faso on 4 October 2022 in Ouagadougou ©Issouf Sanogo/AFP

23 On 14 January 2023, Mali’s transitional government organised the first “Recovered Sovereignty Day” celebration, commemorating the big protest on 14 January 2022 against the sanctions that the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) had imposed on Mali.

24 Nathalie Yamb campaigns actively on Africa’s French-language social media against the former colonial power. “[Dix choses à savoir sur Nathalie Yamb, cyberactiviste anti-Macron](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...),” by Vincent Duhem, *Jeune Afrique*, 26 January 2023.

KEY FACTS

PRESS FREEDOM INDEX IN THE SAHEL



Mauritania
97st/180*
 166 media outlets
2011: Approved a bill ending prison sentences for press offences.

Niger
59st/180*
 At least **350** media outlets
236 press card holders
2010: Adopted a press law abolishing prison sentences for press offences.
2019: Adopted a cybercrime law exposing online journalists to the possibility of arbitrary arrest and detention.

Mali
111st/180*
 At least **700** media outlets
 At least **300** press card holders
1992: Adopted a constitution enshrining freedom of the press and opinion.
2000: Adopted a media law criminalising certain press offences.

Chad
104st/180
144 media outlets
653 press card holders
2010: Adopted a media law criminalising press offences, including defamation.
2018: Adopted a new media law jeopardising the freedom to report news and information by requiring media publishers and editors to have had at least three years of university-level education.

Burkina Faso
41st/180*
430 media outlets
467 press card holders (since 2016)
1991: Adopted a constitution enshrining press freedom and the right to information, abolishing prison sentences for defamation.
2019: Modified the penal code, criminalising the publication of information about military operations that could "jeopardise troop morale" and providing for sentences of up to ten years in prison.

Benin
121st/180
 At least **220** media outlets
1149 press card holders
1990: Adopted a constitution in which article 24 guarantees press freedom (constitution revised in 2019).
2015: Adopted an Information and Communication Law abolishing prison sentences for press offences and guaranteeing the right of access to state-held information.
2018: Adopted a Digital Law restoring prison sentences for journalists working online.

- GOOD SITUATION
- RATHER GOOD SITUATION
- PROBLEMATIC SITUATION
- DIFFICULT SITUATION
- VERY SERIOUS SITUATION

*RSF's 2022 world ranking of press freedom



March in favour of press freedom in Bamako, Mali on 4 November 2013 ©STR/AFP

2 | AN INCREASINGLY UNFAVOURABLE INSTITUTIONAL ENVIRONMENT

1 | ARBITRARY DECISIONS

As the security situation in the Sahel's countries worsens, entire swathes of territory are becoming inaccessible. Border regions where armed groups operate are turned into military zones from which civilians are banished. The evolving regulatory framework in dangerous areas and security priorities enable the authorities to keep tightening the restrictions on the freedom of movement of national and international journalists. Increasingly complex and opaque administrative protocols facilitate arbitrary arrest and deportation.

| INCREASINGLY RESTRICTIVE PRESS ACCREDITATION

Newly created travel authorisation systems are now part of the bureaucratic red tape that “discourage journalists”, said Idrissa Birba, the head of the New Human Rights Organisation (NDH-Burkina). In Mali and Burkina Faso, simple administrative registration formalities have been replaced by complex accreditation processes, which hamper journalistic work and do not respect the principle of journalists being able to protect the identity of their sources.

Jeune Afrique reporter **Benjamin Roger**'s deportation from Mali in February 2022 on the grounds that he was not accredited highlighted the junta's increased control over the activities of journalists working for the foreign media. Until 2021, accreditation was rarely required in Mali and not having it did not prevent journalists from working freely. Since the second coup in 2021, the accreditation process has become more restrictive and opaque. In principle, only broadcast media journalists must

systematically apply for accreditation, using a form on which they are required to specify the stories they plan to cover and the people they plan to meet. Several journalists have reported having difficulty in obtaining their accreditation and in some cases it has been refused without explanation. A few weeks after Benjamin Roger's expulsion, another *Jeune Afrique* reporter, **Manon Laplace**, was briefly detained on the same grounds.

“The conditions for accreditation had already changed in 2012 when Amadou Sanogo took power”,²⁵ said *TV5Monde Africa* editor Ousmane Ndiaye, who was based in Mali at the time. “This is a constant feature of military regimes. As soon as there's a coup, there are bureaucratic restrictions on journalists.”

In the case of Burkina Faso, five months after the second coup and three months after *RFI*'s suspension there, the Superior Council of Communication (CSC) issued a reminder that accreditation had been a legal requirement since 2015. A visiting foreign correspondent or a local reporter for a foreign media outlet can only work if they have “an accreditation issued by the employer and approved by the CSC”, the regulator said. The CSC reminder, published on 23 February 2023, added that this accreditation could at any time be “invalidated by the cancellation of the visa of the regulatory authority.” These loosely worded and draconian conditions clearly open the way to arbitrary decisions.

Journalists are not only unsure of being able to get accreditation, even after lengthy administrative procedures, but the accreditation they obtain may not actually guarantee their ability to work. Although reporter **Édouard Dropsy** and producer **Philippe Abdelkafi** had accreditation when they arrived in Burkina Faso in May 2021 to report on camps for displaced persons for French TV channel *M6*'s “*Enquête exclusive*” (“Exclusive Investigation”) programme, and although measures had been taken for their protection, they were expelled on the grounds of a “threat to state security” after just 40 hours in the country.

| ARBITRARY ARRESTS AND EXPULSIONS IN BENIN

Journalists are faced with vague and arbitrary procedures in Benin as well. In theory, journalists are not required to obtain special authorisation to travel to areas bordering Burkina Faso and Niger. But, in practice, these dangerous areas cannot be accessed without permission. No fewer than seven journalists and a fixer were arrested there in 2022.

Four journalists, including three working for *Agence France-Presse*, were arrested in the northwestern city of Natitingou in January, after filming a stone tunnel in “a dangerous area” near Tanguiéta, a small town 50 km to the north. The Natitingou police held them for four days for “violating the rules of Benin's drone legislation” and scrutinised the contents of their phones. They were then transferred to the capital, Cotonou, where they spent three more days in police custody. After being interrogated at the Central Office for the Suppression of Cybercrime (OCRC), they were handed over to the special prosecutor at the Court for the Suppression of Economic Crimes and Terrorism (CRIET) and then finally released.

A month later, Beninois journalist **Flore Nobime** and her Dutch colleague **Olivier van Beemen** headed for the northwestern town of Tanguiéta, where Nobime had already gone in 2019 without authorisation and without incident. They were investigating the funding of African Parks, a nature conservation NGO that manages nature parks in Africa. Their report quickly turned into a nightmare.

After taking a detour to the village of Sangou, near the main entrance to the Pendjari National Park, they were detained and taken to the local police station for an identity check, and then they were transferred to criminal police headquarters in Parakou, a more than four-hour drive from Tanguiéta. Half-way there, at the police station in Djougou, policemen confiscated van Beemen's equipment and money. To protect her sources and information, Nobime managed to tear up her notes and spill water on them so that they were illegible. Van Beemen threw his out of the car window.



From left to right, the journalists Flore Nobime and Olivier van Beemen and a village leader from Sangou, a few hours before their arrest in February 2022 © DR

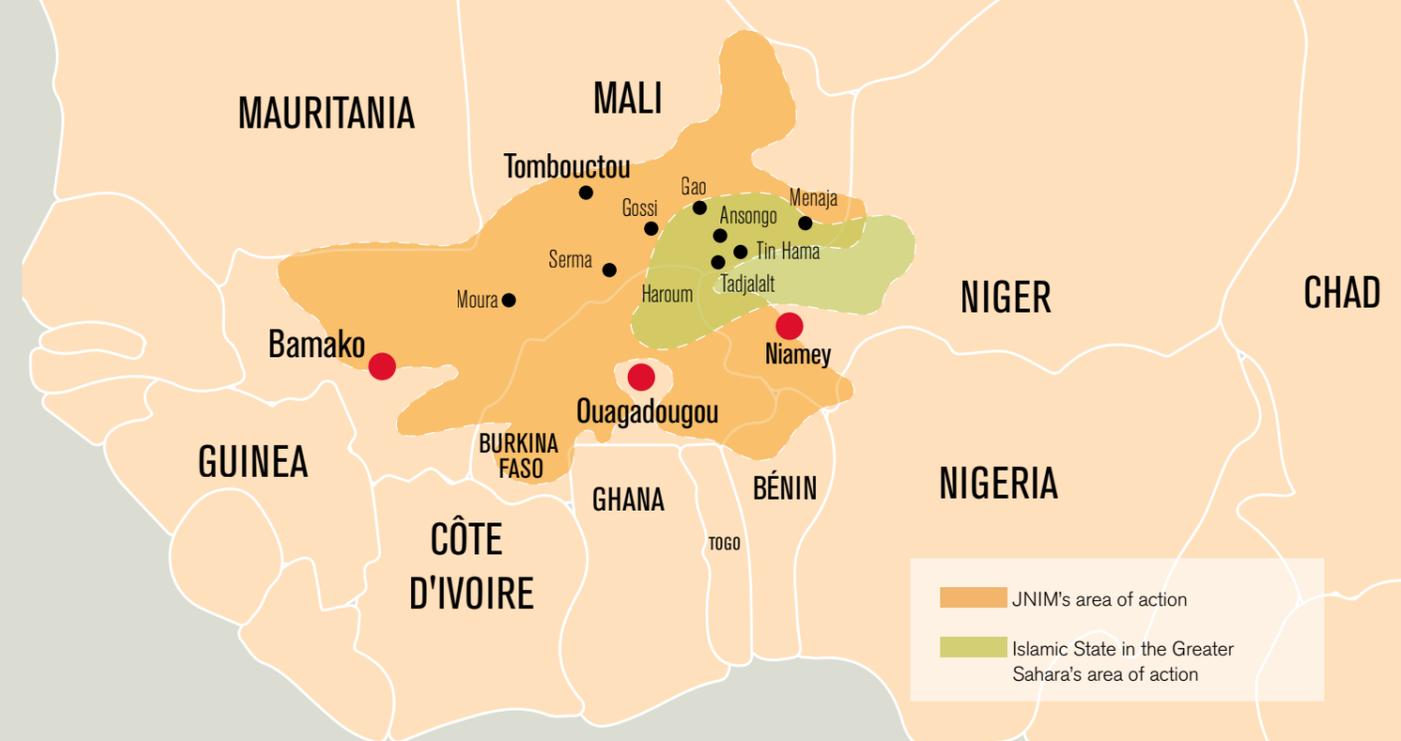
²⁵ Gen. Amadou Sanogo seized power in Mali when he overthrew President Amadou Toumani Touré in a coup on 22 March 2012.



Penjari National Park was one of the popular tourist sites in Benin ©Stefan Heunis / AFP

After reaching Parakou, the two journalists learned that they were “suspected of espionage” and that they were also accused of failing to ask permission to visit the villages where they had gone. After many questions about their identity, whether or not they belonged to certain political parties and what they were reporting on, they were ordered to sign a confession that said they were accused of serious offences, and that “the investigation has gathered corroborating information against them.” They refused to sign, but did so the next day after the statement had been modified. The police then set off with them for Cotonou, a journey that usually takes only six hours but in this case lasted 24. They continued to be interrogated, handcuffed – sometimes together – and the police refused to give them water.

After arriving at Republican Police headquarters in the capital, van Beemen managed to make several calls to the Dutch embassy, and they were received by the police director-general, who told them they should have “requested authorisation from the authorities in order to go into the field.” They were then finally released and van Beemen was deported that evening. In January 2023, the two journalists referred their case to the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, registering a complaint against Benin.



| Prohibited and Restricted Areas |

Niger

Dangerous areas have been placed under a state of emergency. In the regions of Diffa, Tillabéri and Tahoua, the state of emergency was implemented on 24 January 2020 and was renewed for three months on 26 January 2023. These areas are inaccessible to journalists without a military escort and without government authorisation. Without it, says a journalist based in Niamey, “the journalist risks being taken for an enemy of the state or, if he comes across an armed group, he risks being mistreated, kidnapped or even killed.”

Chad

The state of emergency established as part of the anti-junta demonstrations of 20 October 2022 was lifted on 6 December 2022, but the one established in the Savanes region, on the border with Burkina Faso in June 2022, was extended until in March 2023. The Lake Chad basin is considered an inaccessible area due to the presence of the armed group Boko Haram. No journalistic presence is authorised in these territories except with the supervision of defence and security forces.

Burkina Faso

Two areas “of military interest” were established in June 2022 comprising part of the province of Soum, bordering Mali, and protected reserves between Pama and the W National Park, known to be hideouts for jihadists. They are forbidden to civilians and journalists.

Benin

In the north of the country, the border areas with Burkina Faso and Niger are considered dangerous, like the Pendjari National Park, as well as the entire W National Park. While there are no official instructions requiring journalists to bring special authorisation to go there, the areas considered to be at risk are inaccessible without authorisation.

Mali

Working outside the capital, Bamako, is very risky for journalists. Northeastern regions, such as Gao, where Olivier Dubois was taken hostage in 2021, and Kidal, where Ghislaine Dupont and Claude Verlon were kidnapped and then executed in 2013, are very high risk areas due to terrorist threats. Since mid-July 2022, terrorist attacks have also turned the centre, the south of the country, and the vicinity of Bamako into dangerous areas.

Mauritania

The military areas located near the border with Mali to the east and the Sahara to the north are inaccessible to civilians. Journalists can only go there with a special delegation from national authorities or international humanitarian organisations. To travel in the rest of the country, a travel order, an authorisation or a pass from the authorities, as well as accreditation for foreign journalists, are recommended.

2 / UNCOOPERATIVE OFFICIALS

Whether accredited or not, journalists working in the Sahel region have to face another major difficulty. It has become much harder if not impossible to gather and verify information relating to political and military issues because the relevant institutions are uncooperative. The media find themselves increasingly limited to relaying mollifying governmental press releases.

WITHHOLDING OF INFORMATION

In Niger, a journalist said the authorities “withhold information” on security grounds and issue belated press releases that contribute nothing because they have no new information or no official data or figures.



Newspaper front pages the day after the announcement of the Barkhane troop withdrawal from Mali @AFP

In Benin, since Patrice Talon became president in 2016, journalists have found it hard to get information about matters related to the security situation, internally displaced persons, and mining contracts. When they try to contact government ministers or their staff, the officials are “often busy or unreachable”, several journalists said. “Sometimes”, one Beninois journalist said, “politicians call us to give us information but ask us not to divulge it. So, we then have material that we cannot use, because we have to wait for permission. It’s very frustrating.”

In Burkina Faso, journalists find it especially difficult to get information about terrorist attacks. As they occur in areas where journalists are no longer able to go, some attacks receive no media coverage at all. The international media must also deal with the particular “mistrust” that the authorities may harbour towards them. “We are not the most incisive, but the authorities watch us closely”, said one international media journalist on condition of anonymity. “They no longer inform us systematically, including about events that may concern the president.

And they don’t dare speak to us on the record, even about matters that might reflect positively on the government. They only speak to us on background.”

CONTROLLING THE STORY

The authorities’ silence on certain subjects is due in part to their desire to control what the media say. To this end, they produce their own content and statements that are unverifiable. In the event of a terrorist attack in the north of Burkina Faso, for example, the president’s communications department often sends their own people to the site to interview people. This was especially so when Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba was interim president. These people film and show aspects that are then made available to the media. “The government communicates information that is impossible to verify, which poses a problem of journalistic ethics”, Burkinabé freelancer Charles Bako said. Wenceslas Mahoussi, a digital media expert who heads the Observatory of Information and Communication Sciences (OBSIC) in Benin, agreed. In such circumstances, “the risk is great that journalists become nothing more than communicators who relay factual information with no analysis or debate”, he said.

THE END OF PROTECTIVE LAWS

In what is another major challenge for the region’s journalists, the worsening security situation has undermined the legislative progress that, from 1990 to 2010, had gradually helped to strengthen the media and protect journalistic work. In some countries, new regulations that were adopted to combat the dangers of online fake news are restricting the right to report the news more than they are protecting it.

In Benin, the Digital Law has been used to arbitrarily detain and convict several journalists, including **Ignace Sossou**, an investigative reporter for *Bénin Web TV*, in 2020.²⁶ He spent six months in prison because, in social media posts, he quoted comments that a prosecutor had made during a workshop on disinformation.

Niger’s 2019 cybercrime law was used against journalists until its modification was announced in 2022. It provided for sentences ranging from six months to three years in prison for defamation by a means of electronic communication. In 2020, the law was used to arrest and jail the journalist **Samira Sabou**²⁷ in response to a complaint by the then president’s son, whom she had linked to a case of overbilling for military equipment in a social media post. Responding in April 2022 to criticism of the way the law was being used, Niger’s new president called for the “abolition of prison sentences for offences by means of electronic communication, including insult and defamation.”

Press offences have been decriminalised in Mauritania, but the country still has “provisions in the criminal code, cybercrime laws and law on attacking the symbols of the state that can be used against a journalist or other person expressing an opinion online”, said Amadou Sy, the Mauritania country director of Médias et Démocratie (Media and Democracy), an independent NGO. **Abdellahi Mohamed Ould Atigha**, the editor of the independent newspaper *Al Hoor*, was held by the police for 48 hours in 2021²⁸ because of a Facebook post in which he questioned how the government had spent money from a fund for disadvantaged sectors of the population.

Burkina Faso’s national assembly amended its criminal code in 2019, adding provisions criminalising the dissemination of information about military operations in order “not to undermine troop morale.” These new offences are punishable by five to ten years in prison and fines of up to 10 million CFA francs (15,000 euros). In theory, these criminal code provisions do not concern journalists, who are governed by the Information Law, but they have nonetheless had a chilling effect on them. Interviews by RSF confirm a trend towards self-censorship on matters relating to terrorist attacks and military operations.

²⁶ “Court’s decision to uphold conviction deals ‘unprecedented setback’ to press freedom in Benin,” RSF, 27 July 2020

²⁷ “Niger: Two journalists arrested in disturbing setback for press freedom,” RSF, 16 July 2020

²⁸ “Mauritanian reporter held for two days over Facebook post,” RSF, 25 May 2021



Programme at a radio station in Gao, Mali.
© UN Harandane Dicko



FOCUS

Challenge of combatting impunity

MALI: BIRAMA TOURÉ DISAPPEARED IN A SECRET PRISON

It has been seven years since **Birama Touré**, a reporter for the weekly *Le Sphinx*, disappeared in Mali. Neither his family nor his colleagues have seen him since 29 January 2016. At the time of his disappearance, he had been investigating two stories involving Karim Keïta, the powerful head of the national assembly's defence committee and son of then President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta. One was about the affair Keïta was reportedly having with the wife of one of his friends, and the other concerned weapons contracts in which a great deal of money had reportedly been embezzled. In a report published in February 2022,²⁹ RSF revealed that Touré was secretly detained for several months at a clandestine prison run by Mali's General Directorate for State Security (DGSE) and that he most likely died as a result of being mistreated and tortured there. Seven years later, his body has yet to be found and the suspects are still at large. In RSF's view, it is vital that the Malian judicial system should continue its efforts to shed all possible light on the case and should assign the required resources to this task.

CHAD: ÉVARISTE DJAÏ-LORAMADJI'S KILLERS STILL UNPUNISHED

A reporter for *Radio Lotiko*, a Christian community radio station, Évariste Djaï-Loramadji was shot dead while providing live coverage of an intercommunal clash between livestock herders and crop farmers on 9 February 2022 in Sandana, a village in southern Chad. Eleven people in all, including Djaï-Loramadji, were killed in that day's clash. According to *Radio Lotiko*'s director, Djaï-Loramadji had received threats after covering a punitive raid three days earlier in connection with the conflict between herders and farmers that had left around ten dead in the village. His murder must not be allowed to remain unpunished, says The Union of Chadian Journalists (UJT), which is calling for all those involved in this "vile act" to be prosecuted. Justice for journalists in Chad is at stake, the union says.

²⁹ "Malian journalist who disappeared six years ago is very likely dead, RSF says," RSF, 3 February 2022



FOCUS

In Mauritania, progress undermined by the economic situation

Mauritania has emerged from a particularly oppressive period for the media since the 2019 presidential elections. State aid through a support fund for privately owned media (Fonds d'appui à la presse privée), which is managed by the press and broadcast media authority (Haute Autorité de la presse et de l'audiovisuel), increased significantly in 2022. The creation of new media outlets and accreditation for foreign journalists are now much easier. Journalists can now "write about sensitive subjects without risking imprisonment", said Amadou Sy, Media and Democracy's Mauritania country director. For example, the media were able to talk about a man's death in police custody, "whereas, in the past, broaching any subject connected with the police was taboo", Sy said. "It's an indicator of significant change."

The media can now cover subjects such as slavery, corruption or stories involving state agencies without being systematically subjected to reprisals. But journalists are paid very little and "the economic model of the media, based on advertising, is not really viable". Sy said. "When a media outlet is dependent on the funding it gets from a phone company, its journalists will think twice before doing a story on it." Most Mauritanian journalists are forced to combine their journalism with other jobs. "Whoever is a journalist is also a teacher or is employed somewhere else, so there may be conflicts of interest or proximities with certain protagonists", Sy explained. "For these reasons, journalists may censor themselves and certain subjects may be ignored or, on the contrary, over-covered."

3/ PATRIOTIC DIRECTIVES

Aside from the constraints imposed on security grounds or by draconian legislation, journalists must also resist direct editorial pressure. The desire by the authorities in some of the Sahel's countries to control what the media say directly threatens journalistic independence and reliable news and information.

REPORTING UNDER CONTRACT

In Benin, the authorities influence media content by means of so-called partnership contracts, which began under the former president in 2006 and have become much more widespread since Patrice Talon became president 10 years later. The media outlets that sign these contracts are paid up to 1 million CFA francs (1,500 euros) every month to cover the government's activities and to prioritise the information it gives them to them. Guideline memos tell editors what angles to take.

"Partnership contracts foster corruption and have reversed much of the progress that had been made with regard to press freedom in Benin", said media expert Wenceslas Mahoussi. He also pointed out that "the use of guideline memos contributes to the frequent identical front pages in the Beninois press", even in newspapers with otherwise very different editorial lines.

PATRIOTIC NEWS COVERAGE

Although Mali's transitional government appears to enjoy a significant level of support from the population, Col. Assimi Goïta, who took over in a second coup in May 2021, has sought the media's support. During a meeting in June 2021, he invited the main local media organisations to "preach the right words so as not to demoralise" the population and the armed forces.³¹ "We are asking you to help us calm the situation down", he added. The "House of the Press" supported him in the press release it published eight months later urging journalists to provide "patriotic coverage" of the news.

³⁰ "Mali : L'aide de l'Etat à la presse au Mali : Une enveloppe insignifiante et introuvable," *MaliActu*, 10 May 2021

³¹ "Le colonel Assimi Goïta lors de sa rencontre avec les hommes de médias : 'Le Mali a besoin de ce sursaut, surtout au niveau de la presse,'" by Boureïma Guindo, *Le Pays*, 3 June 2021

BENIN: THE NEWS ACCORDING TO TALON

RSF has received several copies of “guideline memos” that were sent to Beninois media from 2017 to 2019. The one reproduced below was sent to the media when the president met with pharmacists in 2018.

Dear friends,

You have been invited to follow the broadcast, on television and radio, of the meeting of the President of the Republic (PR) Patrice Talon with pharmacists on Saturday. For tomorrow Tuesday, you are therefore invited to highlight the said meeting in order to:

- hail the PR's leadership;
- emphasise that pharmaceutical actors have always abused the public;
- emphasise their mea culpa;
- report that these actors implore the PR to establish order in their sector;
- highlight that TALON exposes the depth of the evil (his revelations show how rotten the situation was);
- ask why the public, through consumer associations, do not associate themselves with the trial by becoming a civil party;
- implore that order is finally restored in the sector;
- show that TALON has already taken stock of the situation and will have a national benchmark laboratory set up to certify the quality of pharmaceutical products placed on the Beninese market;
- highlight the fact that last Friday's session showed the true face of the crooked actors, who lack consideration for the public's health despite the oath they took; and that everyone now understands that President TALON and his government were right to start the fight against fake drugs;
- show that (contrary to what actors have tried to say, panicked because their manoeuvres have finally been discovered) the fight launched by the government only aims to protect consumers and their health;
- salute the sense of responsibility of President TALON (who knows how to find the happy medium of things) because, given the extent of the evil, he could have gone so far as to withdraw approval from all wholesalers; and this would have generated a major crisis jeopardizing the country's supply; which is why, when he had the possibility and the conditions were met, he refrained from going to this level of sanction;
- invite the sector's actors to present their apologies to the public;
- emphasise the evidence that NEW CESAMEX [an Indian laboratory based in the DRC] is just a mechanism for transporting questionable products to Benin (combined with manoeuvres by the actors to avoid customs and controls by the competent state structures to certify the quality of the medicines), etc.

NB: Big headlines desired

HEADLINES GLORIFYING THE PRESIDENT

In another “guideline memo” sent to editors ahead of a TV broadcast with health minister Alassane Seidou in 2021, the government explicitly urged the media to focus their headlines and coverage on the achievements of Patrice Talon, the newly reelected president.

- Health sector reforms: Talon wants better care for the Beninois
- Health/Two years of investment: projects of hope
- Year 2/Health Sector: Talon therapy's results, or First fruits of Talon therapy
- Health: Minister Alassane Seidou reports two years of progress
- Health/Two years of Talon regime: patient Benin's cure is under way
- Health Report: Training and Equipment, Talon revolution's two thrusts

“The particularity of this second coup d'état,” said *TV5Monde* Africa editor Ousmane Ndiaye, “is that it convinced a sizeable proportion of Mali's journalists to provide ‘patriotic news coverage’ – a term invented by Mali's pro-coup journalists, that means coverage that supports the government.” A specialist in the Malian media who spoke on condition of anonymity added: “Most radio stations are won over to the cause of the military in power and their Russian partners. And similarly, the experts and guests who speak in the media generally support the actions of the army.”

The authorities also use social media and count on influencers who support them. “Unlike some media outlets”, the same media expert said, “these influencers are accredited to travel with the prime minister. They cover official events such as ceremonies at which Russian military equipment is received. These influencers also insult and smear dissenting voices.” (See Box “Malick Konaté, a journalist harassed and threatened online” p. 32)

“The current military government has imposed a new reporting standard based on a very simple principle”, said *RFI* deputy director Christophe Boisbouvier. “If you are with the transitional government, you are with Mali, but if you are against the transitional government, then you are against Mali”. Daring to make comments regarded as liable to “discourage the troops” exposes journalists to harassment and intimidation. The High Authority of Communication (HAC) suspended the *Joliba TV* channel from November to December 2022 after it broadcast an editorial regarded as critical of the junta.³²

“The transitional government's goal is for independent media to be silent”, Boisbouvier added. “With hindsight, I realize that by disconnecting our antennae, the military government did not just target *RFI* and *France 24*. It also sent a chilling message to the Malian and international media in general. Now, all journalists are nervous and there is less and less independent analysis and freedom of expression.”

³² “Suspension de Joliba TV au Mali : RSF juge ‘la mesure disproportionnée et destinée à censurer un média critique.’ *NetAfrique.net*, 4 November 2022.

3 | THE CONSTANT REPORTING CHALLENGE

In this degraded and unstable security environment, the media and journalists have had to adapt their practices in order not only to circumvent the harassment but also overcome the difficulties of movement and access to certain parts of the Sahel and thereby, despite everything, continue to fulfil their mission to report what is happening.

1/ OTHER MEANS TO GATHER INFORMATION

One of the options for getting information from restricted areas is to blend in with the local population. A journalist from Ouagadougou told RSF that he deliberately did not mention his profession in order to be able to enter camps for internally displaced persons³⁸ and carry out interviews there, thereby circumventing the requirement to obtain a special permit that needs approval from three ministries.

Conversely, in some areas, it is preferable for reporters to avoid the immersion technique and instead to limit their exposure time in the field to 24 hours. In both cases, journalists know that they should “keep a low profile” and adapt their clothing.

| OFF THE RECORD

Because of their inability to visit dangerous areas, journalists are developing networks of informal sources to collect off-the-record information and thereby continue to cover the situation. “We have set up a network of informants in the towns of Djibo, Dori and the entire province of Soum”, said an investigative reporter in Burkina Faso who asked not to be identified. “They give us the essential security information in the event of an attack. And as the army rarely issues statements, we have also developed a network of informants within the army.” To better guarantee the safety of their most exposed sources, journalists sometimes use one or more intermediaries.

It is such trusted networks, developed over the years, that enable *RFI* to keep covering the region, despite the suspension of its operations in Mali and Burkina Faso. “Our strength is our long history with Mali”, said Christophe Boisbouvier, *RFI*'s deputy director. “Many people in Mali and Burkina Faso grew up with *RFI*. And our reporters continue to have regular phone conversations with trusted sources. Despite the terrible pressure from terrorists in northern Mali, we talk to a wide range of people, including Tuaregs, Songhais and Bambaras. And even if the Malian and Burkinabé authorities no longer speak to us officially, we have access to off-the-record information thanks again to bonds of trust created over the long term. In other words, everyone continues to talk to us.”

| OPERATION COLLATERAL FREEDOM

The information reported by international news organisations is regarded as reliable and is regularly picked up by many local media in the region. But in Mali and Burkina Faso, the broadcasting bans imposed on *RFI* and *France 24*, combined with accreditation difficulties and the departure of international media correspondents, have contributed to the creation of a vacuum in the Sahel's media.

³⁸ A total of three million people were registered as having fled their homes to escape terrorist attacks from 2017 to 2022 in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, including 1.8 million in Burkina Faso alone, according to Liptako Gourma Security. The press are usually barred from camps for internally displaced persons, officially for “reasons of security and protection of human dignity.”

In neighbouring Burkina Faso, where local broadcasting by *RFI* was also suspended on 3 December 2022 and *France 24* was given a formal warning, the transitional government's president, Capt. Ibrahim Traoré, also invited his compatriots and the media to demonstrate their patriotism. During an interview for the national media on 2 February 2023,³³ he said that, when you want to talk in the media or on TV in a “context of war”, you must ask yourself, “Is it good for my homeland or is it not good for my homeland?”

During a hearing at the Superior Council of Communication (CSC) a few weeks before that, the prime minister said that it was necessary “to refocus communication at the media level in order to avoid chaos.” Journalists' organisations responded immediately to this threat, issuing a joint statement denouncing excessive calls for patriotism and “the grave risks of press freedom violations” in Burkina Faso. The statement added: “This outburst by the prime minister throws the media to the lions, especially in a national context in which emerging last-minute patriots and supporters of a single-way of thinking don't hesitate to treat all those who don't share their view (...) as traitors, or as enemies of the transition who must be physically eliminated or expelled or imprisoned.”³⁴

As in Mali, journalists in Burkina Faso can also pay a high price for not complying with patriotic directives. The journalist **Newton Ahmed Barry** was subjected to an aggressive cyber-harassment campaign³⁵ for daring to describe the suspension of local broadcasting by *RFI* as an “illegal decision”. Mohamed Sinon, the head of the Collective of PanAfrican Leaders (CL), called for Barry to be “killed” in a video widely circulated on social media. Arrested on 20 January 2023, Barry was given a two-year suspended prison sentence and fine of 1,500 euros three weeks later after being convicted of issuing “calls for murder”.



FOCUS

Malick Konaté, a journalist harassed and threatened online

Malian journalist Malick Konaté, a video reporter and founder of the Web TV *Horon*, has been subjected to repeated cyber-harassment. Followed by more than 120,000 people on Facebook (February 2023 figures), he has forged a reputation as a reliable, independent reporter over the past ten years, and has often been the first to report major political and social news stories and to document the activities of armed groups. The attacks against him escalated at the end of 2022 after the French TV news channel *BFM TV* broadcast an investigative report entitled “Wagner, Putin's mercenaries” on 31 October. He was not the report's author but he shot video footage for it. Since then, he has been called a “prey to be gunned down” and “Mali's enemy number 1” on social media. Malian plainclothesmen went to his home at the beginning of November. Faced with these real threats and the possibility of arbitrary arrest, Konaté finally fled the country.



Reporter Malick Konaté in Mali
©Fatouma Harber

³³ “Grande interview du capitaine Ibrahim Traoré à la date 02 février 2023,” available on the SIG-Burkina Faso YouTube channel.

³⁴ “Non, les médias burkinabè ne sont pas la “Radio mille collines,” statement by journalists' organisations published in several media outlets, including the *Ouaga.com* website, on 1 February 2023.

³⁵ “Growing threats against journalists in Burkina Faso,” RSF, 4 July 2022

³⁶ *Horon TV* is a Malian media outlet that aims to “contribute to the strengthening of democracy and consolidation of the rule of law with diverse content and programming aimed at all segments of the population.”

³⁷ “Wagner, les mercenaires de Poutine,” 47 min, 2022, available for streaming on RMC BFM Play

To remedy this, RSF's Operation Collateral Freedom unblocked their websites in April 2022 by creating mirror sites that make it possible to circumvent the censorship.³⁹ "Many Malians continue to listen to us in French, Mandenkan and Fulfulde, online or on the air thanks to VPNs", Boisbouvier said. "This makes me confident for the future. Yes, there is censorship and self-censorship", but in the face of all this, there is also the resilience of Malians, civil society and *RFI*."

I SAFETY OF LOCAL CORRESPONDENTS AND VISITING REPORTERS

After two *RFI* journalists were murdered in 2013, *RFI*'s parent company, France Médias Monde (FMM), created the position of security director tasked with monitoring the security environment of its correspondents and its visiting reporters. To define risk areas for their staff, FMM produced its own map of territories with a significant level of instability, based in part on French foreign ministry expertise "but also on the specific threats felt by journalists and on internal reporting of experiences in the field", *RFI* deputy director Christophe Boisbouvier said.

Depending on the level of danger in the area,⁴⁰ the security director helps correspondents prepare reporting activity, and monitors their work and their relations with the authorities. Visiting reporters are also given specific security training before they go. "And once there, and until their return to Paris, they are tracked using digital tools", Boisbouvier said. Attention is also paid to the content produced by *RFI*'s editors in order to ensure that reporters, technicians and sources are all protected.

Security is also about "solid documentary preparation", said *TV5Monde* Africa editor Ousmane Ndiaye. "Knowledge is a component of protection. Things will worsen in the coming years in the Sahel due to what is simplistically called anti-French sentiment, distrust of the media, and this new global geopolitical order in which, already, the media are being used. Protecting oneself therefore also means being informed about the country, being able to detect who the actors are, knowing the links between people, being equipped with the history of conflicts, and so on. The best insurance is to know where you are going."

Protection also involves building a network of trusted sources, beginning before you go and continuing once you are there. "Having a close, in-depth and real knowledge of certain key players and sometimes relationships of trust can protect you against physical and security risks, and also against manipulation and disinformation attempts", Ndiaye added.



Foreign journalists in front of the Radisson Blu hotel in Bamako on 21 November 2015 ©Habibou Kouyaté/AFP

39 "RSF creates mirrors of RFI and France 24 websites for users in Mali," RSF, 28 April 2022.

40 The map's areas are assigned three levels. Level 1 areas are where journalists work without any specific security measures. In Level 2 areas, they are assisted by the security director on a case by case basis. And in Level 3 areas, they are always assisted by the security director. Most of Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad are Level 3 areas.

2/ COMBATING DISINFORMATION MERCENARIES

In February 2023, the "Story Killers" project⁴¹, which brought together a consortium of international news media investigating the global disinformation market, revealed the existence of an Israeli company involved in large-scale election manipulation, mainly in Africa. Throughout the world, and in particular on the African continent, disinformation mercenaries "thrive at the crossroads of social media, digital media and cyber espionage, influencing public opinion and, in the shadows, impacting political life and the business world",⁴² said the French daily newspaper *Le Monde*, which contributed to the investigation.

Disinformation has grown in the Sahel against the backdrop of a struggle for geostrategic positioning in the region. Caroline Roussy, the researcher in charge of the Africa programme at the Paris-based Institute of International and Strategic Relations (IRIS) said Wagner's presence in Mali seems to have contributed to "a certain vitality of disinformation in the Sahel on the part of Russia."⁴³ In the review of the Timbuktu Institute thinktank, its director, Bakary Samb, wrote that "the Malian terrain has recently become the laboratory for experimenting with all forms of influence communication (...) which is hidden behind targeted communication campaigns." Disinformation has become a real threat to security in the Sahel, he added.⁴⁴ To the point that it is difficult today to distinguish what is true from what has come from completely fake accounts, the two sometimes intermingling.

I THE FACT-CHECKING STRATEGY

To combat the rampant disinformation, some news media in the Sahel have developed fact-checking services, whose mission is to systematically verify statements that are being widely shared by government officials or politicians or are circulating online.

"MaliCheck"⁴⁵ was one of the first projects to combat misinformation in Mali. It was launched by *Le Jalon*, a news site whose motto is "Inform well rather than inform quickly", in partnership with the US embassy in Mali. From 2020 to 2022, it trained nearly 1,000 journalists, college students and secondary students in fake news detection and verification.⁴⁶ *Le Jalon*'s website also houses a MaliCheck section⁴⁷ that checks videos, photos, texts, voicemails and speeches that are faked or have been taken out of context to mislead public opinion.

The "Africa Check" project⁴⁸, which trains journalists and tracks disinformation across the continent, recently identified several influencers specialising in disinformation who are very popular on social networks. They included "Gauthier Pasquet",⁴⁹ a popular Twitter account that often has tweets about politics in the Sahel.

In Chad, disinformation on digital platforms was at the heart of the discussions at a forum entitled "Disinformation in Chad: should we worry about it?" that was organised in February 2023 in N'Djamena.⁵⁰ It was part of "Désinfox Tchad", a project⁵¹ launched in 2022 by the French media development agency Canal France International (CFI). Intended to make the Chadian media more aware of the problem of disinformation, it also trains journalists to produce content analysing false information.

41 "Story Killers, Au coeur de l'industrie mortelle de la désinformation," Forbidden Stories, 14 February 2023

42 "Révélations sur Team Jorge, des mercenaires de la désinformation opérant dans le monde entier," by Damien Leloup and Florian Reynaud, *Le Monde*, 15 February 2023

43 Conference-debate "Sahel : désinformation et luttes d'influences," available on the Iris-france.org website

44 Interview Dr. Bakary Samb : "La désinformation est une réelle menace à la sécurité et à la stabilité au Sahel," via the Timbuktu-institute.org website

45 Mali Check, une initiative de vérification des faits soutenue par l'OIF et l'entreprise finlandaise ODIL spécialisée dans la lutte contre la désinformation

46 "Technique de détection et de vérification de fake-news. Le projet MaliCheck a formé 965 personnes," by Ousmane Fofana, *Mali 24*, 11 September 2022.

47 *Le Jalon* Rubrique MaliCheck

48 AfricaCheck, premier site indépendant de fact checking en Afrique

49 "Mali : un faux tweet attribué à Abdoulaye Diop, ministre des Affaires étrangères," by Georges Attino, Africa Check, 16 September 2022.

50 "Forum pour la désinformation : une mobilisation contre la désinformation au Tchad," *Hama Tchad*, 24 February 2023.

51 *Projet CFI : Désinfox Tchad*

Mauritania's media regulator, the High Authority for the Press and Broadcasting (HAPA), has also set up specific training in combatting disinformation. But more training is needed, according to Amadou Sy, Media and Democracy's Mauritania country director⁵². "There is no journalism training course at the University of Nouakchott", Sy said. "In a report, submitted in February 2022 on the reform of the media sector (...) the 64 recommendations include the creation of a press institute to train journalists. It is also a response to the challenges of professionalising the sector and combating disinformation."

Combatting disinformation is also a key concern of the international media. "We do not broadcast any information that has not been verified and cross-checked", said *RFI* deputy director Christophe Boisbouvier. "As *RFI*'s strength is its credibility, we prefer not being first with the news to taking the risk that it's wrong." When a journalist is personally defamed, *RFI* tries to identify "the origin of the attack and refers it to the regulatory authorities of the country concerned", Boisbouvier added. And to address propaganda and content based on conspiracy theory, *RFI* has also created a weekly disinformation analysis programme called "Les dessous de l'info"⁵³ whose subjects often concern Africa.

3/ NETWORKS OF RESILIENCE

The creation of new networks and partner media at the national and international level has fostered the resilience of journalists and enabled many media to continue reporting in the Sahel.

NEW GENERATION RADIO STUDIOS

Yafa, *Kalangou* and *Radio Ndarason Internationale (RNI)* are members of a radio station network established by the Fondation Hirondelle⁵⁴ that has brought a new media dynamic to the region. Their goal is to promote the professionalisation of the media sector and to provide information to populations facing crises. "We strive to do quality fieldwork whenever the security situation allows", said Hyacinthe Sanou, editor-in-chief of the *Yafa* studio, located in Burkina Faso's capital, Ouagadougou.

For this, the *Yafa* studio relies on both a privately owned TV channel and 51 partner radio stations in nine regions, to which it offers thematic programmes broadcast in five local languages. Some of this network's correspondents, also called "community relays", live in areas inaccessible to outside journalists. These relays are trained and equipped to create journalistic content. "We have to listen

to each piece of content before it is broadcast", Sanou said. "Because a single inappropriate or misused word can endanger the partner radio station that uses it and that is located in a red zone with a high security challenge."

Created in 2016, the *Kalangou* studio in Niger produces radio programmes in five languages (French, Hausa, Zarma, Tamashek and Fulani) for a network of partner radio stations, seven TV channels and social media. It also trains partners and provides them with equipment. "To date, more than 150 Nigerien journalists and media professionals have been trained in various branches of journalism", editor-in-chief Alhassane Abdou said. In April 2022, the *Kalangou* studio became the first African



Community radio technician in Gao, Mali @UNISMA Harandan Dicko

⁵² [Médias et Démocratie \(M&D\)](#) is a platform founded in 2015 by journalists from the French and African civil society sector to train African journalists and organise events in France and Africa on issues and developments affecting the various branches of journalism.

⁵³ [Les dessous de l'info \(rfi.fr\)](#)

⁵⁴ Created in 1995 and based in the Swiss city of Lausanne, the Fondation Hirondelle has developed 23 news media, FM radio stations, multimedia programs and streaming websites in 22 countries undergoing major crises. Each year, it supports more than 500 local media and provides training for journalists, technicians and media managers.

media outlet to be certified by the Journalism Trust Initiative (JTI), an RSF project that provides a machine-readable certification of compliance with journalistic standards for use in platform algorithms, with the aim of promoting reliable, quality journalism online.⁵⁵

RNI is based in the Chadian capital, N'Djamena, with an editorial office across the border in northeastern Nigeria, in the city of Maiduguri. It covers much of the Lake Chad basin, a conflict-ridden region where many armed groups, including Boko Haram, operate. It manages to reach inaccessible areas by means of short-wave broadcasts. "On a daily basis, the radio station also works with correspondents who are in Nigeria, Niger and Cameroon", said *RNI* regional director Antoine Kaburahe. "The journalists immerse themselves in the field every month for ten days, which allows us to carry out very detailed investigations and reports."

RNI's journalists work in a difficult environment, but "the originality and strength of *RNI* has been to recruit and train young journalists from these regions", Kaburahe said. "They are local people, who speak the local languages, including Kanuri, Kanembu and Buduma." Their knowledge of the terrain gives them a great advantage. "They are very well informed about these complex conflicts thanks to their many local sources, who are often members of their communities. They are like fish in water in this area, especially as the fact that we broadcast in the local languages is very popular. But the dangers remain and we must salute these journalists' courage."

WORKING TOGETHER TO INVESTIGATE

Other local initiatives have helped to develop investigative journalism, including the creation of the Norbert Zongo Cell for Investigative Journalism in West Africa (CENOZO)⁵⁶ in 2015. It was named after Norbert Zongo, the Burkinabé journalist who was murdered in 1998 and who founded the weekly *L'Indépendant* (of which *L'Événement* is now the heir). CENOZO's aim is to build the capacity of West African investigative journalists through training and to provide financial and technical support for investigations into such matters as corruption, organised crime, poor governance, human rights violations and the environment.

From 2020 to 2022, CENOZO reinforced the capacities of nearly 450 journalists, including more than 150 women, according to CENOZO president Moussa Aksar. During this same period, a total of 209 investigative stories were published in the 16 West African countries. The rise of investigative journalism in West Africa is not without difficulties. Several CENOZO members, including its president, have been prosecuted for their investigative work. "This shows that freedom of expression and the right to hold our leaders to account have yet to be achieved", Aksar said. "This requires greater vigilance and an unwavering commitment to journalists by from civil society."

TV5Monde Africa editor Ousmane Ndiaye regards history and precedent as fundamental for structuring the media sector and defending press freedom in Burkina Faso, regardless of the current government. "The Burkinabé press is the one of the best in the sub-region," he said. "It's the country of Norbert Zongo, who published investigative reports at the height of a dictatorship. It's an organised press with a strong culture of independence and struggle."

⁵⁵ ["Niger's Studio Kalangou is Africa's first JTI-labeled media outlet"](#), RSF, 13 April 2022

⁵⁶ [CENOZO, investigative journalism in West Africa](#)

4 | RSF APPEALS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) reminds the countries of the Sahel that the complex task of dealing with terrorist attacks and the response by regular armies must not be regarded as grounds for violating the right to information and press freedom. To provide solutions to the various issues raised in this report, and to allow the freedom to report news and information to be respected for everyone's best interest, RSF recommends and calls on:

Governments of the Sahel countries to:

- > **Ensure** as best as possible, and to the extent of available means, the safety of reporters who go to dangerous areas;
- > **Negotiate** with hostage-takers to obtain their release;
- > **Provide** practical security training to journalists, especially women, to prepare them for the dangers in the field;
- > **Put an end to** verbal attacks and threats against journalists, including by politicians, and publicly condemn such attacks when they occur;
- > **Ensure** that threats and attacks against journalists are the subject of systematic criminal investigations designed to ensure that those responsible are identified and prosecuted, in order to put a stop to such threats and attacks;
- > **Allow** journalists to access conflict zones and sites hosting internally displaced persons, so that they can do their job of covering what is happening in situ;
- > **Improve** the communication of official information about the security situation and allow representatives of the various state agencies to talk to journalists without fear of reprisals;
- > **Adopt** laws on access to state-held information (in countries that have not yet done so), in accordance with relevant international standards;
- > **Not unduly obstruct** the dissemination of information in the public interest, especially about military and security operations;
- > **Not prevent** journalists, who take their own security precautions, from reporting in the field;
- > **End** the arbitrary expulsions of foreign journalists;
- > **Overhaul** draconian electronic communication laws and bring the definition of offences and penalties into line with common law provisions, including the media laws of the countries concerned;
- > **End** Internet shutdowns, including those imposed when elections and street protests are taking place;
- > **Promote** quality media reporting and trustworthy news sources by supporting adoption of the Journalism Trust Initiative (JTI);
- > **Adopt** criteria for state support of the media that condition this support on respect for professional standards.



Yafa Studio newsroom,
Ouagadougou,
Burkina Faso
@RSF

ECOWAS and CEMAC member states to:

- > **Draft** a sub-regional code of conduct for the safety of journalists in war zones, especially women journalists;
- > **Recognise** and guarantee the right to news and information as proclaimed by the Partnership for Information and Democracy;
- > **Recognise** the JTI standard in the community area as the standard for promoting reliable news and information;
- > **Support** the creation and development of a regional media support agency.

Countries of the African Union and African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights to:

- > **Work**, especially with the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression, on implementing the recommendations to the region's countries;
- > **Recognise** and guarantee the right to news and information as proclaimed by the Partnership for Information and Democracy;
- > **Support** the creation and development of an African media support agency;
- > **Recognise** the JTI standard in Africa as the standard for promoting reliable news and information.

International partners of the Sahel countries to:

- > **Establish** a special fund for rebuilding destroyed media and radio stations;
- > **Finance and sponsor** security training for journalists;
- > **Help** media to establish security protocols;
- > **Help** to promote reliable news and information by funding media certification by recognised providers of media standards certification such as the JTI.



REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS (RSF) works for journalistic freedom, independence and pluralism all over the world. Headquartered in Paris, with 13 bureaux and sections around the world and correspondents in 130 countries, it has consultative status with the United Nations and UNESCO.