

Press regulators halt publication in Benin

Reporters Without Borders is perplexed at the indefinite closure of a daily newspaper by the High Authority for Broadcasting and Communication (HAAC) on 8 December and warns of the risk of further abuses.

Le Béninois Libéré was closed for allegedly "violating the ethical and professional rules" of journalism at a special public hearing on 8 December. Its articles were seized and its premises were closed. The paper's manager, Aboubacar Takou, and its publisher Eric Tchiakpè, were banned from working as journalists and setting up a news organisation.

"The decision by the HAAC is an unprecedented violation of press freedom and damages the image of a country previously seen as a model in this area," said Reporters Without Borders.

"What is particularly worrying is the risk that the high authority may be taking a harder line against critical media outlets. The closure of a newspaper and the ban on journalists practising their profession are in no way an appropriate response."

The newspaper was accused of publishing "inflammatory articles and discourteous comments aimed at destroying the republic and damaging relations between Benin and the other members of the Conseil de l'Entente" (Council of Accord or Council of Understanding), a West African regional co-operation forum established in May 1959, as well as a "particularly serious" headline and expressions that were "vulgar, offensive and foul" towards the heads of state of the council in an earlier edition.

The newspaper had ridiculed a meeting between the heads of state of the regional grouping in Cotonou in an article headlined: "Conseil de l'Entente: Watch out for wind!"

Previous closures of the newspaper appear to have been a factor in this drastic decision by the regulatory body headed by Théophile Nata.

At the same time, Reporters Without Borders has learned that eight other newspapers have been temporarily suspended for between a week and one month for a variety of reasons relating to professional ethics.