

In Cameroon, journalists given suspended prison terms

NEW YORK: The Committee to Protect Journalists has condemned Monday's, 3 December 2012, criminal convictions of three Cameroonian journalists who tried to investigate a purported government memo that suggested corruption in the management of a state oil company.



One of the defendants said he was tortured in custody, while a fourth journalist accused in the case died in custody.

A judge handed a three-year suspended prison term to Harris Robert Mintya, editor of the weekly *Le Devoir*, and a two-year suspended prison sentence to Serges Sabouang, editor of the bimonthly *La Nation*, on forgery charges, according to local journalists and news reports. A third journalist, Simon Hervé Nko'o, a former reporter for the weekly *Bebela*, was sentenced in absentia to 15 years in prison, the sources said. The judge also ordered the journalists to each pay a fine of 119,421 CFA francs (US\$238), and told them they had 10 days to appeal, Sabouang told CPJ.

Sabouang said he would appeal. It was not immediately clear if Mintya and Nko'o would appeal.

The case stemmed from a complaint filed by former presidential adviser and current Justice Minister Laurent Esso in 2010 who claimed that the journalists had forged his signature in a document purported to be a leaked confidential memo to Adolphe Moudiki, executive general manager of the state oil company. The memo supposedly ordered secret payouts of 2 billion CFA francs (US\$3.9 million) to oil company managers, news reports said. The defendants had sent Esso a series of questions along with a copy of the memo. Esso denied that the document was authentic.

In February 2010, police detained Mintya, Sabouang, and Nko'o. Nko'o told local media that he had been tortured in custody and fled into exile. Mintya and Sabouang were charged and remanded into pretrial detention at Nkondengui Prison, but released on bail in November 2010.

Germain Cyrille Ngota Ngota, an editor for the *Cameroon Express*, was also detained with the journalists in 2010, but died in jail due to inadequate medical care. Authorities blamed his death on ill health. In July, Esso publicly denied any wrongdoing or responsibility in the journalists' arrests or Ngota's death.

"Cameroon is punishing journalists for handling a document obtained from government sources and for asking questions of a top public official instead of investigating the content of the memo or bringing to account those responsible for the death of Germain Cyrille Ngota Ngota," said CPJ Africa Advocacy Coordinator Mohamed Keita. "We call on the appellate court to reverse this decision, which is a mockery of justice."

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