

Ivory Coast papers suspend publication after arson attack

ABIDJAN, IVORY COAST: Opposition newspapers in Ivory Coast that once supported ousted president Laurent Gbagbo, on Friday [24 August 2012] suspended publication for two days following an arson attack on a press group.

Notre Voie, the daily of Gbagbo's Ivorian Popular Front (FPI), and five other papers were absent from the newsstands to "protest against...sanctions, threats and now aggression," they announced in a joint statement.

The headquarters of the Cyclone group, which edits the daily *Le Temps*, was vandalised and partially burned down by raiders overnight on Saturday.

Hours earlier, an armed group attacked the FPI headquarters in Abidjan, abducting two people and wounding three.

In suspending publication, newspapers close to the former president said they wanted to alert the public "to the danger of death that hangs over their journalists and their workers", according to the joint statement.

The papers also denounced "threats and intimidation combined with heavy targeted sanctions by the National Press Council", the authority that regulates the press, which has several times taken action against opposition papers for failing to uphold professional standards.

The raid on the Cyclone group came in a climate of tension following attacks on the army that the government of president Alassane Ouattara has blamed on the FPI, whose deputy secretary general Alphonse Douati has been arrested and charged with violating state security.

Opposition newspapers have called on Ouattara to "keep his promise" of "a totally free press in Ivory Coast", under government protection.

Ouattara was Gbagbo's rival in a post-election crisis that plunged the country into chaos from December 2010 to April 2011 when Gbagbo refused to admit defeat. Clashes claimed about 3 000 lives.

Gbagbo was eventually arrested when forces loyal to Ouattara stormed his heavily fortified home with French and UN military backing. He was extradited in November to The Hague, where he faces charges of crimes against humanity at the International Criminal Court.

Source: AFP