



## SITUATION REPORT: DETERIORATING MEDIA FREEDOM IN PARTS OF WESTERN AFRICA

Nairobi, Kenya – September 1, 2024 - The African Editors Forum (TAEF) has been monitoring events in three countries of the Sahel and has observed a troubling resurgence and intensification of repression of the media in these countries.

On this occasion, we urge the military authorities in Burkina Faso, to free and allow the media to operate and ensure the safety of all journalists in that country.

The military authorities in these countries – Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali have effectively shut the media space, snuffed out freedom of expression and the press, and have become increasingly hostile to journalists.

On July 7, these countries announced in Niamey, the creation of the Confederation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), marking a significant step towards establishing an economic-military bloc and moving away from regional and Western countries following a series of coups.

On September 16, 2023, they signed the Liptako-Gourma Charter, establishing the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). The Liptako-Gourma region, located at the borders of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, is the epicentre of the security crisis in the broader Sahel region, which began in 2012. The borders of Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali converge and that is where several armed groups are active.

It has therefore become common for reporters covering protests in these countries to be threatened or subjected to violence.

Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger had announced their withdrawal from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) following the creation of the AES, and in response to ECOWAS suspending the three countries after their respective military takeovers, which occurred in August 2021 in Mali, September 2022 in Burkina Faso and July 2023 in Niger.

The withdrawal of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS is a significant development that reflects the continuing security, economic, and political challenges facing West Africa. As these countries seek to redefine their regional relationships and address their own national challenges, the deterioration of the political and security environment has brought an increased pressure on journalists and self-censorship, worsening the environment for journalism and access to plural media, compelling news organisations fearing for their safety to resort to the publication of news and information favourable to the military leaders, an atmosphere that has gradually overshadowed critical reporting.

### **Focus on Burkina Faso**

Following the coup d'état of Captain Ibrahim Traore on September 30, 2022 he promised that the territories controlled by terrorist groups would be liberated within a few months, a short transition (ending July 2024) and the organisation of elections, to fight corruption, rebuild the State, rebuild and strengthen democracy, freedoms and human rights - he has subsequently won the unreserved support of many of the citizens.

Since then, loyalists of the junta, supported by the State have organised a smear and terror campaign against Burkinabé journalists critical of the junta.

### **Forcing the media into silence**

Burkina Faso has more than 80 newspapers, 30 TV channels and more than 100 news websites and a renowned culture of investigative journalism.

Under the watch of President Traore, an aggressive nationwide campaign to silence critical journalism and freedom of expression, and kidnapping of journalists and human rights defenders have been reported. Journalists have been divided into two groups: 'The Patriots' - those who support the authorities and report favourably about it, and the 'enemies of the state' - those who criticize the government.

Between the end of June and August 2024, four journalists/columnists have disappeared, kidnapped by hooded people presenting themselves as agents of the Burkina Faso intelligence service. They are: Kalifara Séré of the private BF1 Television, missing since June 19, 2024; Serge Atiana Oulon, journalist and managing editor of the L'Evènement newspaper, abducted from his home on June 24 around 5am.; Adama Bayala, also of the BF1, abducted on June 28 and Alain Traoré of Radio Omega, abducted on Saturday July 13, 2024.

Several human rights defenders and politicians have also been kidnapped. Until now, neither their families nor their colleagues know where they are.

As a result of the kidnappings, most journalists have had to stop writing and publishing, others have also been forced into exile.

Journalists who have remained in the country are regularly threatened, harassed and intimidated. Lamine Traore of the privately owned media Radio Omega and Ahmed Newton Barry, former editor-in-chief of the privately owned newspaper L'Événement, have received death threats from government supporters.

The Norbert Zongo Press Centre, a pillar of the defence of freedom of expression and the safety of journalists in the country, was also hit hard by the repression of the military in power. Its coordinator Abdoulaye Diallo and board members, Boureima Ouédraogo, Inoussa Ouédraogo have been forced into exile after receiving death threats.

Protesters also regularly threaten journalists, often in their workplace. In July, they organized a sit-in in front of the private television channel, BF1 to demand a change of its editorial policy. Such forms of pressure have forced several media organisations to suspend programming.

The media regulatory body, the High Council of Communication (CSC) has enacted reforms that enable the military through the President to directly appoint the head of this institution responsible for regulating the media. Since then, several international media outlets have been closed in Burkina Faso (BBC, VOA, RFI, TV5, Deutsche Welle, Radio Vatican, Le Monde, Libération, etc.). Local media such as Radio Omega and l'Évènement have also been suspended.

L'Évènement and the Savane Médias group have been closed following an order to pay several million CFA to the tax authorities. Other media have been subjected to tax adjustments. Meanwhile, the State, the main creditor of the media, refuses to pay the media's bills. Similarly, the subsidy granted to the private press (400 million fcfa) was halved this year to 200 million, without explanation.

Professional media organizations have been forced to do only the bare minimum, issue statements.

TAEF is hereby calling on the authorities in Burkina Faso to respect the rights and freedoms of all citizens – especially so, the rights of journalists as guaranteed under universal press freedom charters. TAEF further calls on the military authorities to

release all journalists that have been kidnapped and where their rights have been abused, those should be thoroughly and impartially investigated and when established, the perpetrators should be brought to book to ensure justice for the journalists. We are also calling on the military authorities to lift all the suspensions, allow all media organisations to operate freely, and protect journalists from their supporters and all other groups and individuals who may seek to harm any journalist performing their duties.

**Note to editors:**

**About TAEF:** TAEF is the continent's premium editors' guild that represents editors and senior journalists, whose primary purpose is to defend media freedom and be the leading voice for media advocacy.

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Signed: 

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Churchill Otieno,  
President