

Tuesday 16 October 2007

## Worldwide Press Freedom Index 2007

### **ERITREA RANKED LAST FOR FIRST TIME WHILE G8 MEMBERS, EXCEPT RUSSIA, RECOVER LOST GROUND**

#### **Bloggers now threatened as much as journalists in traditional media**

Eritrea has replaced North Korea in last place in an index measuring the level of press freedom in 169 countries throughout the world that is published today by Reporters Without Borders for the sixth year running.

“There is nothing surprising about this,” Reporters Without Borders said. “Even if we are not aware of all the press freedom violations in North Korea and Turkmenistan, which are second and third from last, Eritrea deserves to be at the bottom. The privately-owned press has been banished by the authoritarian President Issaias Afewerki and the few journalists who dare to criticise the regime are thrown in prison. We know that four of them have died in detention and we have every reason to fear that others will suffer the same fate.”

Outside Europe – in which the top 14 countries are located – no region of the world has been spared censorship or violence towards journalists.

Of the 20 countries at the bottom of the index, seven are Asian (Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Laos, Vietnam, China, Burma, and North Korea), five are African (Ethiopia, Equatorial Guinea, Libya, Somalia and Eritrea), four are in the Middle East (Syria, Iraq, Palestinian Territories and Iran), three are former Soviet republics (Belarus, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan) and one is in the Americas (Cuba).

“We are particularly disturbed by the situation in Burma (164th),” Reporters Without Borders said. “The military junta’s crackdown on demonstrations bodes ill for the future of basic freedoms in this country. Journalists continue to work under the yoke of harsh censorship from which nothing escapes, not even small ads. We also regret that China (163rd) stagnates near the bottom of the index. With less than a year to go to the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the reforms and the releases of imprisoned journalists so often promised by the authorities seem to be a vain hope.”

#### **Government repression no longer ignores bloggers**

A total of 26 bloggers and online journalists have been convicted and jailed since September 2006 for using their right to online free expression. Cases of Internet censorship are on the increase and more and more repressive governments are realising the threat that the Internet poses in the hands of pro-democracy activists. Bloggers are now being harassed as much as journalists working for the traditional media. Worldwide, 64 cyber-dissidents are currently in prison.

China (163rd) still the world’s biggest prison for bloggers and online journalists

With its position in the ranking unchanged since last year, China continues to pursue very repressive policies towards the Internet. Five major censorship bodies, including those operated

directly by the government and the Communist Party's publicity department (the former propaganda department), control the flow of news and information online.

Censorship ranges from imprisoning online journalists to replacing taboo words such as "4 June," "Tiananmen" and "conservative wing of the Communist Party of China" with asterisks. Censorship may be applied both before and after publication of a news report. Since August, two cyber-police have been regularly popping up on the screens of computers in Internet cafés to remind users that they are being monitored. Fifty cyber-dissidents are currently detained in China because of their online activities.

### **In Vietnam (162nd), harshest crackdown since 2002**

Vietnam continues to be one of the world's most authoritarian and repressive countries as regards online freedom of expression and information. Six online activists were arrested in the space of a week in May. This is one of the reasons why Vietnam fell eight places in the ranking. The hopes raised by the release of most of the detained cyber-dissidents in November 2006 was just a smokescreen to ease Vietnam's admission into the World Trade Organisation a month later. Eight cyber-dissidents are currently in Vietnamese prisons, serving sentences ranging three to 12 years for "hostile propaganda."

### **Self-censorship as well as censorship**

Bloggers have to live with the same fears as traditional media journalists. Governments adopt measures to control the flow of news and information online and some asks bloggers to register with the information ministry. This is the case in Bahrain (118th), where 18 websites that defend human rights have been blocked for the past year. Malaysia (124th) often harasses bloggers and their families while Thailand (135th) adopted a computer crime law in July that requires ISPs to keep each person's online usage records for 90 days and allows the authorities to examine them without any control by the courts. The example of the blogger known as Kareem Amer in Egypt (151st) showed how far the government is ready to go silence critics. He will soon have completed a year in prison because judges decided he represented a "national security" threat for criticising Islam in his blog.

*Reporters Without Borders compiled this index by sending a questionnaire to the 15 freedom of expression organisations throughout the world that are its partners, to its network of 130 correspondents, and to journalists, researchers, jurists and human rights activists. It contained 50 questions about press freedom in their countries. The index covers 169 nations. Other countries were not included because of lack of data.*

47 rue Vivienne – 75002 Paris (France)  
Tel: 331-4483-8484 / Fax: 331-4523-1151  
index6@rsf.org – Read more on [www.rsf.org](http://www.rsf.org)