

JOURNALISM AND EXILE, A PAINFUL JOURNEY

Hundreds of journalists worldwide have been forced into exile, as the only option to avoid attacks, repeated threats, and death. Several of them have chosen Australia, writes Antonio Castillo

Somali exiled journalist Baabul Nor looks forward to the time when his family photomontage that he has made becomes a reality. Today it is just a photomontage, of him, his wife and his 11-month-old baby, against a backdrop of the iconic Sydney Harbour Bridge. Nor's wife and child have never been to Australia.

They are in a refugee camp in Uganda's Kampala. Nor, 29, arrived in Adelaide in August 2009 as an exiled journalist. He hasn't seen his family since. "My wife was pregnant when I left," he said.

Not far from Nor's one-bedroom flat in Adelaide lives his colleague Hassan Sheikh, 25. Also an exiled journalist from Somalia, Sheikh's wife and his three children are back in Mogadishu, the lawless capital of Somalia. He hasn't seen them since the end of 2007.

Nor and Sheikh are just two faces among the many exiled journalists in Australia. They are two faces among almost 400 journalists worldwide who have been forced into exile, according to data compiled since 2001 by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). For them the painful road to exile is the only option to avoid attacks, repeated threats and death.

The story of exile for these two Somali journalists began in 2007. Both worked for the Mogadishu-based

Shabelle Radio, an independent and leading media organization in Somalia. With almost daily death threats and intimidation coming from both the government and an Islamist insurgent group linked to Al-Qaeda, Al-Shabaab, they had no other option than exile.

"I took the decision to seek refuge when seven of my colleagues, including my boss, were murdered," Nor said.

The latest report by the CPJ states that Somalia – along with Iraq and Sri Lanka – are the main places from which journalists seek a safe haven in other parts of the world, especially in the US, Canada, Europe and some African countries.

Some exiled journalists – like Nor and Sheikh - have chosen Australia. "Several journalists have landed in Australia, forced from their homeland by governments and militia that will stop at nothing to silence the voice of dissent in the media," says the Media and Entertainment and Arts Alliance's report *2001-2005 Turning the Heat: The Decline of Press Freedom in Australia*.

The number of exiled journalists in Australia is not easy to determine. None of the humanitarian or journalist organizations are able to provide reliable data about the exact number.

“We have a small number of individuals seeking refugee status based on their work as journalists,” said Dr. Graham Thom, Amnesty International Refugee Coordinator.

They generally come from China, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Pakistan. He is also aware of the case of a Mongolian female journalist who failed to obtain refugee status. “She was deported,” he said.

Recently Dr. Thom has been dealing with a few cases of people “who do blogs”, and he is aware of some Iranian cases.

In some instances, exiled journalists prefer to keep their cases away from the spotlight because of fear. The writers association Sydney PEN has assisted several writers and journalists seeking refugee. However when the journalists have been approached to speak of their odysseys they refuse.

“[They] don’t want to draw attention to themselves, some are still afraid,” said Kathryn McKenzie, the Executive Officer of Sydney PEN. In a recent case, one exiled writer who was granted a visa requested that any reference to him as a refugee be deleted.

“He thought this would be detrimental when trying to obtain employment and would change the way people treated him,” she said.

Exiled journalists face almost insurmountable obstacles in host countries. Language and cultural differences are the most common barriers. A report by the CPJ said that more than two thirds of exiled journalists have been forced to abandon their careers.

But there are a few cases of exiled journalists who have been able to continue working as journalists in Australia.

One example is Fijian journalist Vijendra Kumar who was for 15 years the editor of the Fiji Times. “After the military coup of 1987, life became hard for ethnic Fijians and it was expected that an Indian editor would be viewed with considerable suspicion,” Kumar said.

He was harassed and threatened by the coup leaders in numerous ways including being dragged to the military barracks where he was interrogated and intimidated.

“We continually kept testing the waters to see how far we could go without jeopardising our existence.” After four years working under such oppressive conditions, Kumar took the road to exile.

He arrived in Australia in 1991. Coming from an English-speaking country and thanks to his work at the Fiji Times – a News Corporation newspaper – Kumar was able to get a job at *The Courier Mail* in Brisbane.

By nature journalists are resourceful people. In some cases they have branched into areas that allow them to maintain their interest in social and humanitarian affairs. This is exactly what Sierra Leonean exiled journalist Edison Yongai did nine years ago when he realised that breaking into Sydney’s journalism scene wouldn’t be possible.

Forced to leave his home country due to his exposé of

government corruption, at the helm of his newspaper *The Point*, Yongai now works as a refugee worker for Mission Australia.

He has also become a prolific writer while hosting – as a volunteer – a show at Radio Skid Row. “There are 12 exiled journalists from Sierra Leone living now in Brisbane, Adelaide, Cairns and Sydney,” he said. They have formed the Sierra Leonean Journalists in Exile Association.

“The association – which meets each Sunday – is a place where we boost morale and recognise ourselves for what we are – journalists,” he said. This is especially important when host and support mechanisms for exiled journalists are almost non-existent in Australia.

This is in marked contrast with Canada and some European countries for example where initiatives to assist exiled journalists have been created with the help of local journalism associations and unions.

In 2000, the Canadian Journalists for Freedom of Expression established a program – Journalists in Exile – that helps exiled journalists get in touch with each other and with mainstream Canadian media organizations. This program also aims to ensure that the skills of exiled journalists can be used in their adopted homeland.

La Maison des Journalistes (The House of Journalists) created in France in 2002 and funded by the municipality of Paris, media organizations, and European support-funds for refugees – provides shelter for exiled journalists for six months.

Journalists also receive food vouchers, phone and travel concession cards and French-language classes. Similar organizations have been established in Spain and Germany.

Back in Adelaide, Somali exiled journalists, Nor and Sheikh reflect on their experiences:

“Exile for a journalist is a terrible fate,” Sheikh said. “It is an experience where nobody knows you, nobody cares about you.”

And in spite of this high price they have paid, they are still stubbornly committed to journalism. “I would love to continue being a journalist, but I don’t know how to do it here,” Nor said.

Antonio Castillo is a journalist, academic and author. His latest book - *Journalism in the Chilean Transition to Democracy* - was published in 2009.