

May 3

# World Press Freedom Day

*Chris Anyanwu was released from prison in June 1998 after serving three years of a 15-year jail sentence for revealing an alleged coup plot in Nigeria. As editor of The Sunday Magazine, she had been arrested in 1995 along with three other journalists, on charges of 'publishing false information'.*

## Out of Prison - And Back to Face the Mountain By Chris Anyanwu, Nigeria

The day came at last. It took three years in coming; three years waiting to regain what one ought not to have lost. Indeed, as new developments have firmly established, what happened ought not to have happened and had it not, then the need for a special day of liberation would not have arisen.

But it happened. Grave injustice happened in Nigeria. Nearly four years after, the men who executed it have confessed that the coup of 1995 was a hoax, a phantom event. It never happened. Rather, it was a cover for a massive program of elimination that was to pave the way for General Abacha's scheme to prolong his rule. Today, every word I published in March 1995 for which I was gagged has been vindicated.

It is now seven months since that day, when somewhat dazed by the unexpected, bizarre turn of national events, I walked out of Kaduna prison into the hazy sunlight of a rainy afternoon.

The angry despot had died. Another had taken over... Suddenly, I was free. The long ordeal was over. The journey had ended.

But the story did not end with freedom. What was at an end was only a stage of the struggle. Another one was unfolding.

Three years after I was abducted from my office on a hot, humid, exhausting production day, I returned to face the full weight of reality awaiting me and it was a harsh, daunting reality. General Abacha had smashed nearly all I had built with my life's resources and most vital energies. It was not enough for him to have imprisoned me in his rage over my audacity in publishing a truth too bitter for him to stomach, he had to try to inflict so much financial damage as to make recovery difficult.

By his specific instructions, the security agencies raided, towed away property, smashed equipment, and shredded records. Bank accounts - both personal and company- were frozen. The company was starved of funds. My family dependants were starved of funds. Checks I signed to take care of their immediate needs were seized by military security and kept till this day. Financial obligations mounted. Problems mounted.

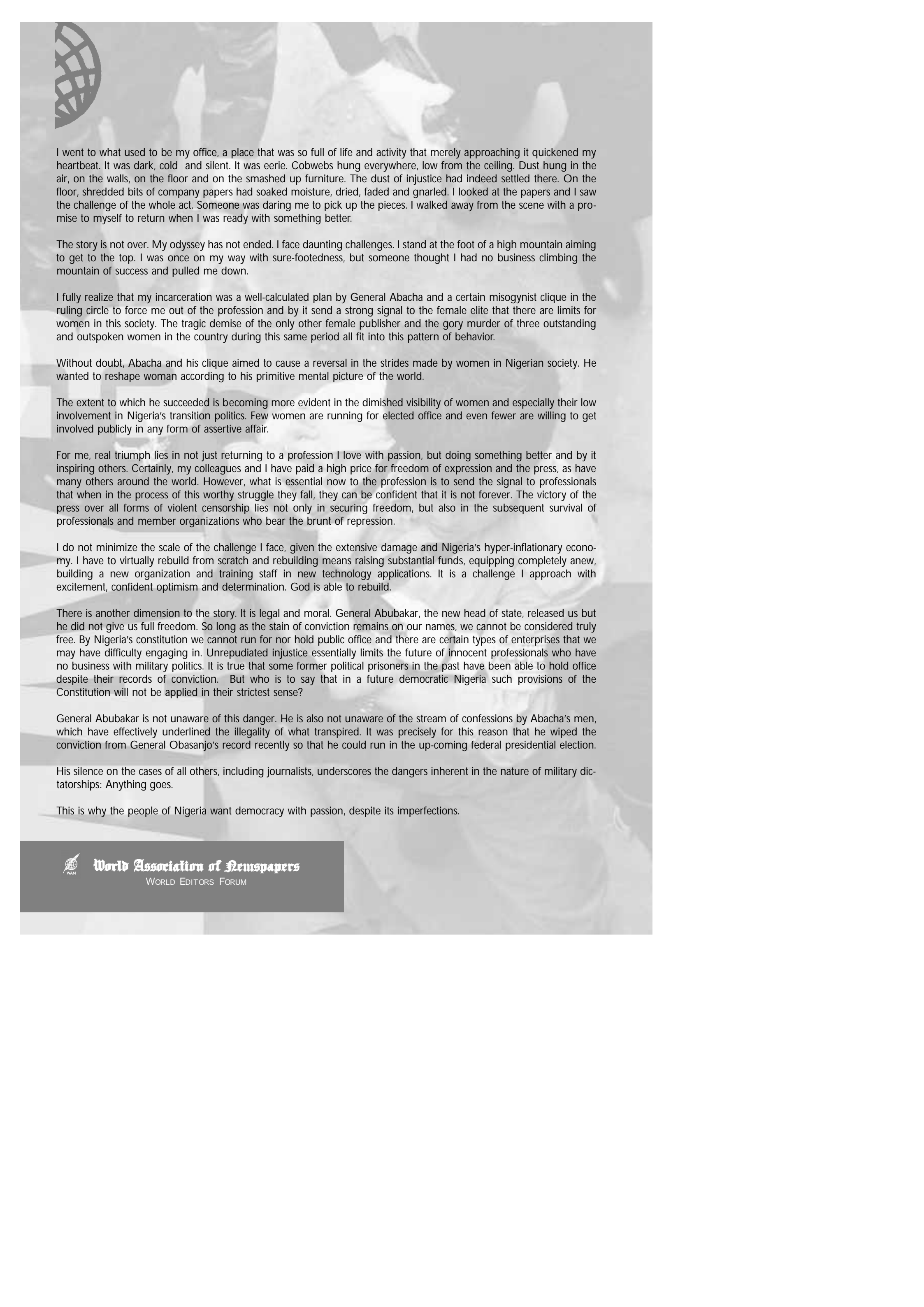
I got out of prison to see I had no work to return to, no organization from where to relaunch my career. Our government had decimated everything, even going as far as to seize my personal land and reallocate it; seize my telephone lines and reallocate them.

ESSAYS



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I went to what used to be my office, a place that was so full of life and activity that merely approaching it quickened my heartbeat. It was dark, cold and silent. It was eerie. Cobwebs hung everywhere, low from the ceiling. Dust hung in the air, on the walls, on the floor and on the smashed up furniture. The dust of injustice had indeed settled there. On the floor, shredded bits of company papers had soaked moisture, dried, faded and gnarled. I looked at the papers and I saw the challenge of the whole act. Someone was daring me to pick up the pieces. I walked away from the scene with a promise to myself to return when I was ready with something better.

The story is not over. My odyssey has not ended. I face daunting challenges. I stand at the foot of a high mountain aiming to get to the top. I was once on my way with sure-footedness, but someone thought I had no business climbing the mountain of success and pulled me down.

I fully realize that my incarceration was a well-calculated plan by General Abacha and a certain misogynist clique in the ruling circle to force me out of the profession and by it send a strong signal to the female elite that there are limits for women in this society. The tragic demise of the only other female publisher and the gory murder of three outstanding and outspoken women in the country during this same period all fit into this pattern of behavior.

Without doubt, Abacha and his clique aimed to cause a reversal in the strides made by women in Nigerian society. He wanted to reshape woman according to his primitive mental picture of the world.

The extent to which he succeeded is becoming more evident in the diminished visibility of women and especially their low involvement in Nigeria's transition politics. Few women are running for elected office and even fewer are willing to get involved publicly in any form of assertive affair.

For me, real triumph lies in not just returning to a profession I love with passion, but doing something better and by it inspiring others. Certainly, my colleagues and I have paid a high price for freedom of expression and the press, as have many others around the world. However, what is essential now to the profession is to send the signal to professionals that when in the process of this worthy struggle they fall, they can be confident that it is not forever. The victory of the press over all forms of violent censorship lies not only in securing freedom, but also in the subsequent survival of professionals and member organizations who bear the brunt of repression.

I do not minimize the scale of the challenge I face, given the extensive damage and Nigeria's hyper-inflationary economy. I have to virtually rebuild from scratch and rebuilding means raising substantial funds, equipping completely anew, building a new organization and training staff in new technology applications. It is a challenge I approach with excitement, confident optimism and determination. God is able to rebuild.

There is another dimension to the story. It is legal and moral. General Abubakar, the new head of state, released us but he did not give us full freedom. So long as the stain of conviction remains on our names, we cannot be considered truly free. By Nigeria's constitution we cannot run for nor hold public office and there are certain types of enterprises that we may have difficulty engaging in. Unrepudiated injustice essentially limits the future of innocent professionals who have no business with military politics. It is true that some former political prisoners in the past have been able to hold office despite their records of conviction. But who is to say that in a future democratic Nigeria such provisions of the Constitution will not be applied in their strictest sense?

General Abubakar is not unaware of this danger. He is also not unaware of the stream of confessions by Abacha's men, which have effectively underlined the illegality of what transpired. It was precisely for this reason that he wiped the conviction from General Obasanjo's record recently so that he could run in the up-coming federal presidential election.

His silence on the cases of all others, including journalists, underscores the dangers inherent in the nature of military dictatorships: Anything goes.

This is why the people of Nigeria want democracy with passion, despite its imperfections.



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*J. Jesús Blancornelas, editor of Zeta, a weekly magazine in Tijuana, was severely wounded by gunmen in a November 1997 attack which left his bodyguard dead. Mr Blancornelas had been investigating drug trafficking by the mafia, who have been held responsible for the murder of the Zeta co-founder and columnist, Hector Félix Miranda. Mr Blancornelas continues his investigations.*

## \$80,000: The Price of a (Dead) Journalist in Mexico by J. Jesús Blancornelas, Mexico

The World Association of Newspapers reported the murder of three of my colleagues in 1997: Jesús Angel Bueno in Chilpancingo, a city in the south-eastern state of Guerrero, Benjamin Flores in San Luis Rio Colorado on the northern border, and José Hernández Martínez in our country's capital.

I escaped being fourth on the list.

Ten gunmen ambushed a car in which I was travelling on 27 November. The car was hit more than 180 times. They killed my chauffeur and bodyguard Luis Valero Elizalde by shooting him with 38 bullets. He covered me with his body and dragged me to the ground; thanks to him I was only shot four times. On my way to the hospital I lost nearly four litres of blood and somehow, miraculously, survived two operations. They operated on my abdomen and thorax to check my liver and a lung, pierced by a bullet that had split in two, breaking one of my ribs. The other part of this bullet went upwards and lodged between my vertebral column and my heart. This was my second operation.

What were the motives for their attack? In the three weeks running up to this skirmish, I had published the names of two imprisoned drug traffickers, together with their confessions. I had identified the killers of a federal policeman who had been waiting outside a court, and I had distributed the letter of a mother who had lost two of her children, victims of the same mafia they had belonged to.

Now ten heavily-armed soldiers protect me 24 hours a day. My three children and the three chief editors who work with me on the weekly "Zeta" are escorted by armed police.

In 1998 the American FBI told the Mexican authorities and the army that it had intercepted two messages. Both of these messages contained contracts drafted by mafia gunmen, proposing a reward of \$80,000 to whoever managed to kill me. But the conditions for this reward stipulated that they should use guns, and aim for my head without fail, since in the previous ambush they had crossfired and accidentally killed their own gangleader.

Now, I only leave my home to go to my newspaper and then to come home again. I rarely appear in public places. Sometimes, under protection, I travel to the United States or around my own country, but only in exceptional circumstances.

But I have not renounced my investigation into the trafficking of drugs. At the time of the ambush I had many anonymous phone calls offering more and more information on drug dealing. I am still following the leads given to me and, of course, am publishing whatever I have confirmed with the help of my colleagues. I am also working with other newspapers, and writing a personal diary on a daily basis. I keep all tapes and papers in a locked safe.

When others ask me why I do not back out, I reply that I am not in this business to avoid being held up by the mafia as an example to threaten other journalists. I maintain that I am not here to wage war against the mafia, but that news is news and I am a journalist.





Fifteen years ago, the prominent journalist Manuel Buendía was assassinated in Mexico City; I don't believe that those arrested for this crime are the real murderers. We have more and more pending crimes that need to be thoroughly investigated, such as the murder of Victor Manuel Oropeza ten years ago in Juárez, or that of my companion Héctor Félix Miranda, who died from two gunshot wounds in 1988. We are investigating this case, and the authorities have announced that they have arrested the actual gunmen, but not the political and economic powers behind the plot to kill him.

Our offices have also been subjected to machine gun fire in the early hours of the morning, in an attack that we interpreted as a warning to back down over our investigations into this crime.

The organising factor behind the murder of journalists has changed in Mexico. Previously, journalists were executed or their newspaper offices raided by government order (as happened to us in 1979). Now, former politicians are behind any criminal assault, politicians who are about to retire, often because of their involvement in drug-trafficking. Today, unlike yesterday, the army protects us.

The number of crimes is on the decrease whilst the freedom to write evolves and increases. This freedom has led to the founding of more and more independent newspapers, whilst traditional newspapers answering to government whims are on the decline.

We have joined with like-minded colleagues from states throughout the Republic of Mexico to form the Society of Civil Journalists, originally intended as an affiliate to the Committee to Protect Journalists in New York.

Our objective is not to publish announcements protesting the death of journalists, nor to draw up manifestos against the government ordering them to investigate these crimes.

Our purpose is to maintain a monitoring network, like the one we have already set up, in which we draw attention to any journalist who is working on a demanding and dangerous project. We therefore back journalists in their work, and defend them wherever possible in the most influential and widely distributed dailies and weeklies in Mexico. By doing so, we hope to serve as an umbrella or even as a lightning conductor.

We are looking to prevent violence, not to lament it.



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*Doan Viet Hoat, journalist, poet and academic, has spent 20 of the past 22 years in prison. His "crimes" include being "a lackey of American imperialism", setting up a reactionary organisation and publishing anti-Communist propaganda - all euphemisms for exercising his right to free expression. Following a concerted international campaign, Professor Hoat, 58, was released from prison on 29 August 1998 and deported. He now lives in the United States with his wife and children, continues to call for greater freedoms in Vietnam from exile and is actively seeking to return to his home country.*

## Press Freedom: "The Enemy of Corruption"

By Doan Viet Hoat, Vietnam

Just a few months ago I was approaching my twenty-first year of a prison sentence. My crime was to have advocated freedom and respect of human rights in Vietnam.

The Communist government of Vietnam that jailed me has never accepted the term "political prisoner", let alone "prisoner of conscience". For the Communist government of Vietnam, like all other totalitarian regimes, we are only "law violators" or "delinquents".

Ten years ago this government rejected the mere existence of human rights issues in Vietnam. Nowadays, caught up in a socio-economic crisis and under pressure from the international community, the Communist government has to accept dialogue and even reach an agreement over these same issues.

The release of some prominent religious leaders and political prisoners in September 1998 was a positive event welcomed by many governments and all human rights organizations. But three issues should not be forgotten.

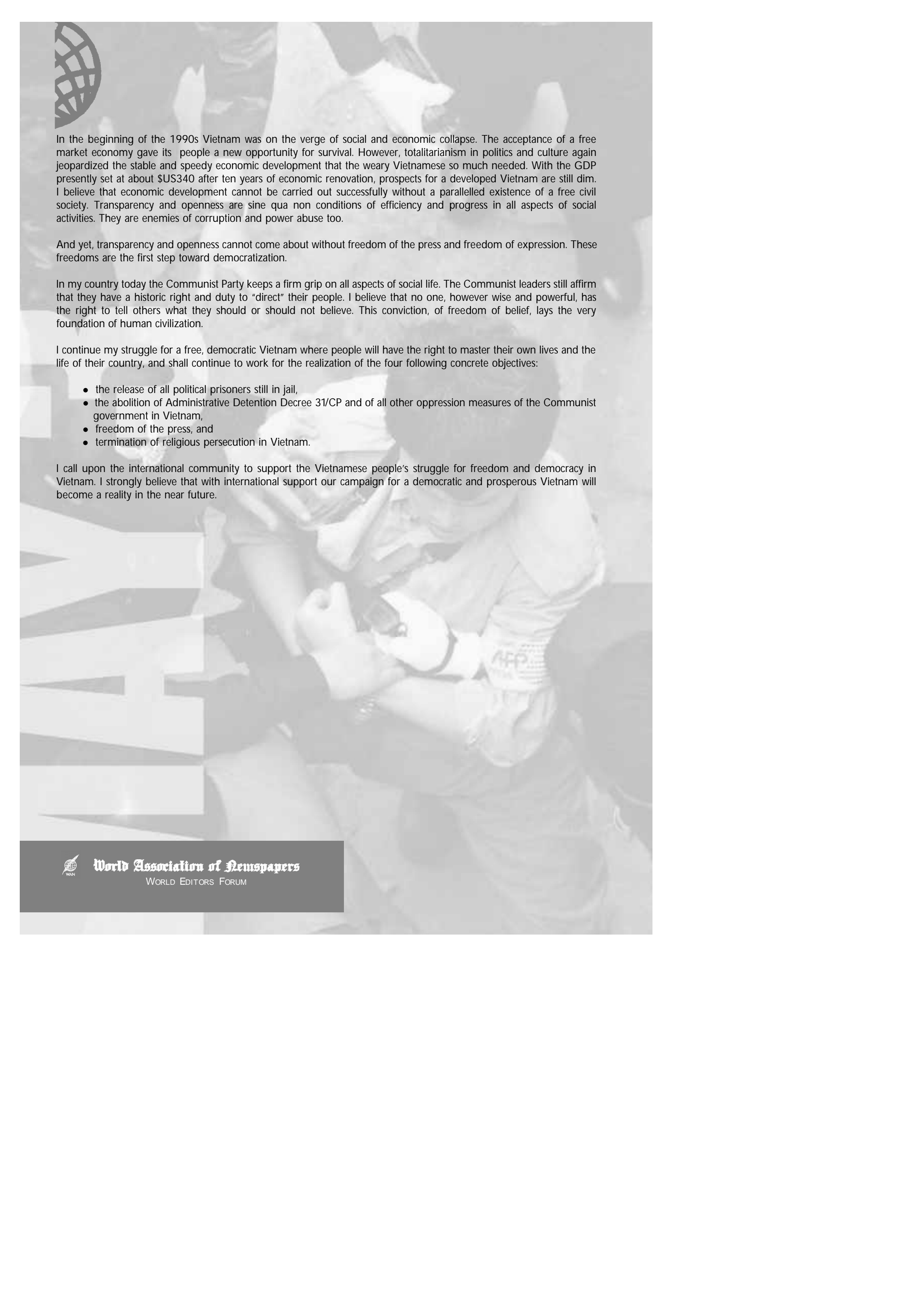
Firstly, it is clear that world-wide intervention freed those prisoners, including myself, last year. I, and some others, are proof that international pressure on Vietnam works, and this pressure should continue to be applied on all other unsolved human rights issues in my country.

Secondly, there are still hundreds of oppressed political and religious dissidents in Vietnam who are either imprisoned or harassed. Most of them are unknown to the world. The prisoners suffer miserable conditions, are humiliated and forced into labour. Many are kept under house arrest or administrative detention. Countless others still suffer from police harassment, infringement of privacy, violation of fundamental human rights, disregard and contempt of human dignity - barbarous acts committed by the government and police officials - every day and everywhere around the country.

Thirdly, I am aware that all those who are working for freedom and respect of human rights in Vietnam are appalled by this Vietnamese government that refuses to acknowledge the existence of political prisoners. Under the pretext of law enforcement and the preservation of social order and stability, the Communist government of Vietnam continues to suppress dissidents in various ways. Take for example the Administrative Detention Decree 31/CP, effective since April 1997, which allows government officials even at village levels to place anyone considered "detrimental to national security" under custody for six months to two years without trial. They may be placed under house-arrest or forced to move to an assigned location to be re-educated. This Decree not only violates universal standards of human rights and human dignity, but also makes a mockery of all efforts to struggle for a free and democratic Vietnam.

All of which points to the need for a closer look at the human rights situation in Vietnam. I strongly believe that the recent release of some well-known political prisoners marked the first, and not the last, successful step towards liberalization and democratization in Vietnam. I think that my country is now ripe for an evolution from dictatorship to democracy, as it was ripe for the transformation from monopoly economy to a free market economy ten years ago.





In the beginning of the 1990s Vietnam was on the verge of social and economic collapse. The acceptance of a free market economy gave its people a new opportunity for survival. However, totalitarianism in politics and culture again jeopardized the stable and speedy economic development that the weary Vietnamese so much needed. With the GDP presently set at about \$US340 after ten years of economic renovation, prospects for a developed Vietnam are still dim. I believe that economic development cannot be carried out successfully without a paralleled existence of a free civil society. Transparency and openness are sine qua non conditions of efficiency and progress in all aspects of social activities. They are enemies of corruption and power abuse too.

And yet, transparency and openness cannot come about without freedom of the press and freedom of expression. These freedoms are the first step toward democratization.

In my country today the Communist Party keeps a firm grip on all aspects of social life. The Communist leaders still affirm that they have a historic right and duty to "direct" their people. I believe that no one, however wise and powerful, has the right to tell others what they should or should not believe. This conviction, of freedom of belief, lays the very foundation of human civilization.

I continue my struggle for a free, democratic Vietnam where people will have the right to master their own lives and the life of their country, and shall continue to work for the realization of the four following concrete objectives:

- the release of all political prisoners still in jail,
- the abolition of Administrative Detention Decree 31/CP and of all other oppression measures of the Communist government in Vietnam,
- freedom of the press, and
- termination of religious persecution in Vietnam.

I call upon the international community to support the Vietnamese people's struggle for freedom and democracy in Vietnam. I strongly believe that with international support our campaign for a democratic and prosperous Vietnam will become a reality in the near future.



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*Faraj Sarkohi has been persecuted by the regimes of both the Shah and the Islamic Republic. He was detained for a total of eight years during the Shah's rule and, following the revolution in 1979, has persistently called for greater press freedom. In December 1996, Mr Sarkohi was arrested by the Islamic Republic authorities who accused him of spying, and was released from prison in January 1998. He now lives in exile in Germany, campaigning for greater freedom of expression in his home country. He has been awarded the 1999 WAN Golden Pen of Freedom.*

*This article is based on extracts of an essay, the complete text of which can be received by e-mail (contact\_us@wan.asso.fr) or found on our website (www.wan-press.org)*

## The Seeds of Freedom Are Sown in Iran By Faraj Sarkohi, Iran

The twentieth anniversary of the Islamic revolution was being celebrated when, less than four months ago, Darish Forouhar and his wife Parvane Forouhar, leaders of the Melliyate Iran Party and prominent critics of the despotic regime, were found stabbed to death in their Tehran flat. Theirs was the first in a series of murders at the end of 1998, including those of the translator Mohammad Jafar Sharif and two active members of the Society of Iranian Writers, the writer Mohammad Paritana and the poet Mohammad Mokhtari.

Rather than focusing on the anniversary of the foundation of the Islamic Republic, the press in Iran has chosen to concentrate on these murders and the latest statement issued by the Iranian Ministry of Information, the political security police and a team of investigators that the latest killings had been carried out by officials of the Ministry of Information.

All the available evidence and the experience of people like myself show that the Ministry of Information has become an organization which, acting on instructions from the higher organs of power, secretly kills prominent and influential critics of the system and members of the opposition, both at home and abroad. Such acts were carried out most brutally against writers and journalists who had sought freedom of activity for their professional organizations and freedom of speech, and who had over the past 20 years protested against the official and unofficial censorship imposed by government agencies and pressure groups.

That is why the people of Iran wanted a group chosen by independent international organizations and by representatives of the Society of Iranian Writers to participate in the investigations of the killings. But this proposal was rejected even by the most liberal wing in the government.

Those in possession of publishing licences make a point of censoring prepared materials, stories and novels of their own accord, either out of loyalty to the government or out of fear of the numerous punishments announced by the Press Law, which criminalizes criticism of Islamic principles, insult to clerics or the religious leader, and protest against legislation and traditions discriminating against women. This same law is drawn up in a way open to interpretation and can be applied to any critical remark.

It is almost two years now since Seyed Mohammad Khatami was elected President on 23 May 1997, in landslide elections that ushered in a new era of enhanced freedom of speech and the issuing of new publications. Women and the young, who had played an important part in the elections, hoped for a more promising future and that the all-pervading control over the private life of citizens would be lifted, nurturing hopes like buds on trees eagerly awaiting their time to blossom.





President Khatami had a difficult task ahead: to act as mediator between the people, weary of 20 years of oppression, and the Islamic fundamentalists in or outside the government who resist even partial reforms. The President, like most Third World reformers, attempts on the one hand to limit the power of the oppressors, and on the other fears the growth of a popular movement. In his confusion he is unable to reply to the questions put to him. For he cannot find a compromise between religious power or the Constitution and democracy or civil liberties. The undivided power of the mullahs and the clergy, as reflected in the Iranian Constitution and in the Code of Islamic Legislation, stands in an irreconcilable contradiction with the republican form of government and the system of popular suffrage.

Even at the beginning of 1998, the conservative frost set in. Ten publications were closed down, among them large-circulation newspapers protecting the newly-elected President that had included items by critics of the regime. Writers were officially warned that they had no right to set up their own trade union organizations.

The censorship of books continues, and a license for a publishing activity is still being issued only to those who are loyal to one of the branches of power or to those who keep their publishing activity within the narrow framework of censorship.

The economic crisis throughout Iran is meanwhile rapidly gathering momentum. The young, so eager to contribute to the development of Iranian society, have dim prospects when unemployment is at 10 million. Inflation has shot up. Shrinking oil revenues, corruption, the state's inability to attract foreign capital, and many other factors have exacerbated economic and social hardship.

But the most serious difficulty facing the clerical regime that runs Iran is not the economic crisis nor the political crisis of a growing conflict between fundamentalists and reformers. The most serious challenge to the Islamic government is the change that has taken place within the minds of Iranians. A majority of the Iranian people - and not just the intelligentsia - want freedom.

Freedom of speech has an extraordinary role to play in Iran. Not only in Iran, but also in all other countries which are deprived of freedom of speech, the mass media and the independent press have a greater role to play and are doing very much more than simply conveying information and discussing differing opinions and judgements.

A society offering freedom to publish and the removal of censorship is a society that has stepped outside the narrow framework of the dominant uniform culture.

The press of societies downtrodden by dictatorship, because of the absence of political parties and independent people's organizations, is the only way for people to voice their aspirations when radio and television are monopolized by the state. Together with such telecommunications as the Internet, foreign radio stations and the use of satellites, the press overcomes the boundaries of uniformity and despotism and builds its own culture. The role and importance of the press and of these systems grows from day to day.

Freedom of the press, abolition of censorship, and freedom of speech in Iran are now called for by one and all. A promising prospect for the written word in Iran.



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*Milos Vasic has been President of the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia since 1997. He has worked as a broadcast and print journalist since 1969, and has been published widely in leading European and US newspapers. Mr Vasic has reported on the war in former Yugoslavia since it began, both in the field and as a defence and political analyst.*

## The Berlin Wall Still Stands in Serbia

by Milos Vasic, Serbia

In Serbia, the Berlin Wall didn't fall. Instead of normal Western-style democracy, the collapse of Communism brought to Serbia just another kind of totalitarian rule: nationalist populism. Slobodan Milosevic, the strongman of Serbia, changed one totalitarian ideology for another: latter-day "scientific socialism" for plain chauvinism.

Naturally enough, the first steps of the Milosevic regime were to take control of the most important media in the country, headed by Serbian Radio Television, the main source of information for 90 percent of the population. In 1993, some 1,300 journalists were fired from that media organisation for political reasons. Before that, the main Serbian dailies and weeklies were carefully purged of everybody not willing to howl in the same pack as Milosevic propaganda merchants. The purge led to the inception of many independent newspapers, radio stations and television channels, because the purged journalists just happened to be the best in the country and had the will to resist. In 1994 they founded the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia; in 1998 it was admitted as a fully-fledged member in the International Federation of Journalists.

The basic problem facing the Serbian media is very simple: Milosevic's regime regards all the basic values of modern, Western-style, political democracy as tactical concessions, whose purpose is to help it bridge what it considers the transient crisis of real socialism. The regime - and most opposition political parties, for that matter - are unable or unwilling to understand that freedom of press is one of the basic infrastructural rules of the game in a democratic society, something like railways, electricity or telephone networks. The free press provides information, which is a commodity; without free access to relevant information, democratic institutions don't make sense, the economy becomes a confidence trick and the rule of law is degraded to sheer corruption.

The rise of free media in Serbia, slow and trouble-ridden as it has been in the past eight years, increasingly irritated Milosevic and his regime. At the same time, Milosevic lost three wars in former Yugoslavia, forfeited all the promises and commitments he made, and in late 1998 found himself facing his fourth military defeat - in Kosovo. In October 1998 he decided to crack down on the free press with all his force: the new Law on Public Information was enacted in Serbia by his rubber-stamp parliament. The Law itself is the worst and most oppressive legal act in more than 150 years of press history in Serbia. For the first time ever, the jurisdiction over press matters was given to misdemeanour courts, presided over not by judges, but by civil servants, simple administration clerks.

The fines imposed by the Law are 50 times bigger than those imposed by the Criminal Code for serious offences. But the most outrageous part is that under the Law, even completely truthful information published through bona fide journalism can be used as a reason for prosecution. What's more, anyone can file a complaint and the district misdemeanour magistrate is forced to proceed and return a verdict within 24 hours. An appeal doesn't stop the payment of the fine; if it isn't paid within 24 hours, the bailiffs seize the property of the news organisation and even the private property of the publisher and the editor-in-chief. The first cases tried under the Law, in October 1998, showed the utter absurdity of it: a weekly and two dailies were ruined.

Soon enough, vigorous resistance built up and international pressure helped at least to slow down the application of the Law. But it's still there, to be used at any given moment against any news media deemed hostile by the regime. The Law is unconstitutional and contradicts several Serbian and Federal laws, but it means nothing to Milosevic's regime,





because he has already made a mockery out of the state, parliament, currency, judicial system, public interest and system of values. He and his henchmen treat the press in Serbia as just another party's propaganda outfit and can't conceive why timely, complete and truthful information is important for a democratic society because it is a concept they reject.

But the natural course of history cannot be stopped or diverted easily: Milosevic's Serbia is increasingly isolated and deprived; international pressure is growing and internal dissent is getting stronger; those few remaining independent media are brave and fearless, challenging the regime to pursue them and suffer the consequences.

The outcome of the Kosovo peace talks in France might be decisive for the future of Serbia and for her media too: it is believed in Serbia that each time Milosevic makes a concession to great powers, he is given the green light for a new wave of internal repression. But there is an end to everything.



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