

Cameroon papers outing gays called “hate media”

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afrol News, 21 February - International press freedom groups are outraged by the homosexuality “revelations” practiced by several Cameroonian newspapers. Robert Ménard, Secretary General of Reporters sans Frontières (RSF), compares these Cameroonian newspapers with the “hate media” of Rwanda and Côte d’Ivoire, saying this “bad practise of journalism” lends itself to political score settling.

Since December 2005, a handful of newspapers in Cameroon have skyrocketed their circulation by “revealing” the so-called “homosexuals of the Republic”, naming over 50 famous nationals. Most notable among the accused is Cameroon’s Minister of Communication, Professor Pierre Moukoko Mbonjo, who has been named by ‘La Meteo’, ‘Nouvelle Afrique’ and ‘Anecdote’, but vigorously has denied the claims.

Homosexuality, which is punishable by five years in prison in Cameroon, has during the last two months been on everybody’s lips all over the country. Even in the countryside, newspapers carrying the accusation are being sold. Vendors have to make photocopies to meet the demand.

More and more Cameroonians are now however asking why these three newspapers had found a sudden interest in “revealing” so-called homosexuals. The “revelations” indeed were odd. They only included name lists and photos, but no named sources or facts behind the “revelation”. Would the Cameroonian power base accept such accusations if the motive had only been to sell more newspapers? Most observers see the campaign as a settling of scores between Cameroon’s most powerful elite before an expected re-shuffle of the government’s ministerial appointments.

For the Cameroonian press, which suffers from harsh conditions, the gay outing campaign has contributed to widen the split. The country’s most serious publications, including ‘Mutations’, ‘Le Messenger’ and ‘Le Jeune Observateur’, have shied away from the outing campaign due to press ethics.

Now, also international press freedom organisations are reacting to the smearing campaign. RSF leader Ménard wrote to the Cameroonian press and had his protest letter published in the daily ‘Le Messenger’ and the weekly ‘Le Jeune Observateur’. Mr Ménard asks the rhetoric question “What is hate media?” and refers to “paranoid extremist” Hutu media in pre-Genocide Rwanda and war promoting media in Côte d’Ivoire, ex-Yugoslavia and the Middle East.

“In Cameroon today, newspaper editors have for the past few weeks been boosting their business through outrage, denunciation and stigmatisation of individuals,” Mr Ménard continues. RSF was now “worried that this public admonition and personal attacks carry a whiff of hatred. We are concerned because trials are being prepared and they are in danger of damaging a profession that is already in poor shape.”

“As an organisation that defends freedom of the press, Reporters sans Frontières will refrain from detailing how severely it views a law on homosexuality such as exists in Cameroon. That is not its

role. However, we can say exactly how bad we think is the practise of journalism that lends itself to releasing anonymous tracts or score settling, but not to the essential freedom to criticise that media should enjoy in democratic societies," he writes.

Mr Ménard is also concerned what this "scandal" may mean for the future of the press in Cameroon, where the government of Paul Biya still authorises the imprisonment of journalists and the state vigorously controls the media. This "draconian system" had now demonstrated its "bankruptcy", the press freedom activist holds.

The RSF leader hoped that the aftermath of this "scandal" would not be settled in the courts, as the Minister of Communication has already demanded. "The press should be reformed and an independent regulatory body for the media should be established," Mr Ménard advises. "Obliging a newspaper to publicly admit that it has made a mistake is a satisfactory form of redress, but throwing a man in prison does not in any way provide justice to the person libelled," he explains.

While the "homosexuality revelations" continue being the big issue in Cameroon, also an indigenous pro-gay group for the first has sent a message to the world. Last week, the Cameroonian Association for the Defence of Homosexuality (ADEFHO) issued a press release saying the group demands "the decriminalisation of homosexuality and the condemnation of homophobia, which is an intolerable discrimination based on sexual orientation and equivalent to discrimination on the basis of religion, race and/or gender." ADEFHO yet has to appear in the Cameroonian press.

By staff writer

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