

Saturday, January 3, 2015

Ethiopian journalists must choose between being locked up or locked out

December 29, 2014

(CPJ) A sharp increase in the number of Ethiopian journalists fleeing into exile has been recorded by the Committee to Protect Journalists in the past 12 months. More than 30—twice the number of exiles CPJ **documented** in 2012 and 2013 combined—were forced to leave after the government began a campaign of arrests. In October, Nicole Schilit of CPJ's Journalist Assistance program and Martial Tourneur of partner group **Reporters Without Borders** traveled to Nairobi in Kenya to meet some of those forced to flee.



Journalists who fled to Nairobi over security fears perform a traditional Ethiopian coffee ceremony in one of the cramped apartments they share. (CPJ/Nicole Schilit)

The group of reporters, photographers, and editors we met had all been forced to make a tough decision that has affected them and their families—a life in exile or prison. All of the journalists spoke to CPJ on condition of anonymity, out of concern for their safety. During meetings to discuss their cases, one of them told us: “I hope one day I can bring my family. Maybe in the future. I want to secure myself first. Now is not secure.”

Since July, a large number of Ethiopian journalists have left behind their families, homes, and a steady income to seek safety. The reason for this sharp increase is a government crackdown on the independent media. In January, the state-controlled Ethiopian Press Agency and Ethiopian News Agency carried out a **study** to “assess the role of [seven] magazines in the nation’s peace, democracy and development.” The results were illustrated in **two charts** that claimed the magazines were promoting terrorism and damaging the economy.



One of the exiled journalists CPJ met in Nairobi holds up a newspaper report on a study criticizing independent publications. (CPJ/Nicole Schilit)

The study was followed by a series of arrests and charges of journalists

from a range of publications, as well as those associated with the Zone 9 blogging collective. In July six bloggers and three journalists were **charged** with terrorism. [On June 25](#), 20 journalists at the state-run Oromia Radio and Television Organization were **dismissed** without explanation. In August, the Ministry of Justice announced that six publications were being **charged** with publishing false information, inciting violence, and undermining public confidence in the government. Managers at three publications were **sentenced in absentia** to three-year jail terms for “inciting the public by spreading false information.” And in October, Temesghen Desalegn of *Fete*h (Justice) magazine was **sentenced** to three years’ imprisonment for defamation and incitement.

With the threat of imprisonment hanging over Ethiopia’s press, many journalists decided to flee. Most left without much notice. Some knew Ethiopians who had moved to Nairobi months or even years earlier, and were able to contact them before leaving their homes. Others arrived without having any basic knowledge of the city, and had to find help with everything from registering as a refugee with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to finding a place to stay.

CPJ’s **Journalist Assistance** program has had a steady flow of requests from journalists in Ethiopia and other parts of East Africa since the program began in 2001, but we have never seen numbers like this. With so many journalists displaced, it was important that CPJ identified their most urgent needs and challenges before deciding how best to support them.

The exiled journalists that CPJ and its partner group met included journalists who worked for several independent publications, as well as freelancers and founding members of the **Ethiopian Journalists Forum** (EJF). Not all of the journalists were facing charges, but they said they had experienced harassment, intimidation, and threats of imprisonment over their reporting.

One of the journalists said he had been in Angola for a conference in April when he was advised by friends not to return to Ethiopia. While he was away, six Zone 9 bloggers had been arrested. The journalist was not part of the Zone 9 group, but he said friends convinced him to come to Nairobi instead of returning to Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa. Despite the warnings he was insistent on returning to Ethiopia. "I did not prepare to not return," he said. His wife begged him to stay in Nairobi and told him security officials had visited their home and threatened her. She joined him in Nairobi one month later.

All of the journalists told us they needed financial support for basic living expenses. Despite being crammed into homes that feel temporary, and where up to three people share a room, the journalists struggle to afford rent and food. They have lost their incomes and, with the desire to keep a low profile and no means to start a publication, they do not know when they will be able to work again.



Conditions for those fleeing into exile are hard. Up to four journalists share a bedroom but they still struggle to pay for food and rent. (CPJ/Nicole Schilit)

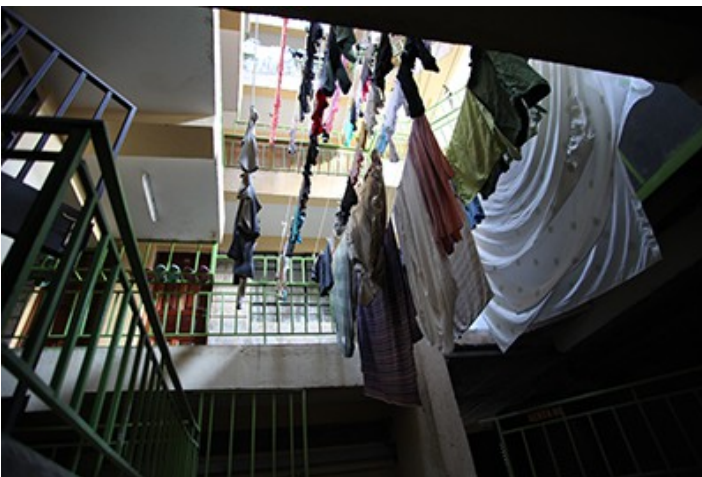
In one apartment, four journalists from a single outlet were living together. They described how in Addis Ababa they had been financially secure. "Most of us have no economic problems back home. I had my own TV show and the payment from our employment was good... but that charge. We

know the meaning of that charge,” one of the journalists said, referring to accusations that they had spread false information intended to undermine public trust in the government.

One of the journalists said he wanted to bring his wife and two-year-old son to Nairobi, but couldn't afford their travel, or to support them. “There is no money. And I am the breadwinner,” he said.

Nairobi has offered little solace for these journalists. We met the majority of those we spoke to in the barely furnished homes they were living in, which are spread out across the city. Several of the journalists said they still did not feel safe, and were scared of being taken back to Ethiopia. The **fear** that authorities have the ability to reach over borders is common among those who have **fled** into exile.

Exile and security fears have taken a psychological toll on these journalists. They repeatedly told us their daily movements were limited because they worry what could happen while they are outside. “In the morning, I find myself without any plan to do. We feel lost here,” one said during meetings to assess their needs. Another added: “It is very boring. I feel desperate.”



One of the apartment buildings where some of the journalists are living. Many say the fear that drove them to flee still lingers. (CPJ/Nicole

One of the journalists told us: “It’s a kind of traumatizing experience. At night, what if someone comes and is banging on the door looking for us? Whenever someone is shouting we think it is a security officer who [has] come to look for us. So it is very difficult at night. It is very scary.”

Respected journalists who had successful careers in Ethiopia are now refugees in a foreign country. Despite being in exile because of their reporting, they all expressed a commitment to continue working in journalism once their financial and security needs had been fixed.

Since speaking to the exiled journalists and assessing their needs, CPJ has been working with partner organizations to coordinate assistance for them. In addition to providing small grants to help cover basic living expenses, CPJ has continued to advocate on behalf of the journalists with the UNHCR. **Exiled journalists** have to register as a refugee with the organization, or other authorities, to begin the often lengthy process of applying for refugee status or waiting for resettlement to a third country.

The Journalist Assistance program is funded entirely through charitable donations. More details on how you can help, and how donations are used by the Gene Roberts Fund for Emergency Assistance are available [here](#).

Nicole Schilit is CPJ's Journalist Assistance Associate. She has a master's in public administration from the School of International and

Public Affairs at Columbia University and a bachelor's in documentary photography from Oberlin College in Ohio.