

# When the deadline becomes death

'The only crime committed by these journalists — 71 had been in prison for more than two years — was to have written something that their governments disliked.'

By DAVID ROBIE

Romeo Legaspi, an outspoken columnist and publisher of the *Voice of Zambales*, was last seen by his family on 11 January 1993. After the Filipino journalist vanished, police showed his family photographs of a charred corpse. It was, they hinted, the remains of Legaspi. His 'crime'? He had exposed police corruption in his newspaper.

Legaspi had been charged with criminal libel for a column he wrote about police corruption in the central Luzon province of Zambales. He had filed a counter lawsuit before the courts. And then he disappeared.

His case reminds me of an assignment I had in early 1991 to interview a Filipino journalist at Bacolod, on the island of Negros, who was well known for his exposés. The reporter, Edgar Cadigat, was sent a coffin for Christmas with a bullet and his photo inside. Would-be assassins also took potshots at him — but he has survived.

In Algiers, Tahar Djaout, editor-in-chief of the weekly cultural publication *Ruptures*, was shot outside his home by Muslim fundamentalists on 26 May 1993. Winner of the prestigious Prix Méditerranée in 1991 for his novel *Vigiles*, Djaout had received several death threats. He was the first of nine journalists to be murdered by religious extremists during 1993.

In South Africa, Calvin Thusago, a black reporter for the South African Broadcasting Corporation, was killed in Sharpeville on 23 April 1993 by a mob of 30 youths who attacked his car.

In Bosnia, Karmela Sojanovic was the first of nine journalists killed during the year. A reporter for the Sarajevo daily *Oslobodjenje*, she was shot in her home by a sniper on January 10.

These names are just a handful from among at least 56 journalists killed in the line of duty during 1993 — the cases of 16 more deaths are, at the time of writing, still under investigation. Their deaths have been chronicled in

the latest *Attacks on the Press*, a worldwide annual survey published by the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists.

Most of the victims were nationals working for local and international news media. Often the reporters were picked out for assassination by ethnic or religious fanatics. World Press Freedom Day was celebrated internationally and in the Pacific on May 4. And the Oceania region gets its share of mentions in *Attacks on the Press* — even though they don't really rank among the 'heavy' trouble spots of the world.

In spite of the Bougainville conflict, Papua New Guinea escaped being listed this year. But Fiji, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Western Samoa all had black marks. At a glance in 1993:

**Fiji:** In spite of a perceptible increase in press freedom with the lifting of visa restrictions on foreign journalists, ethnic and cultural guidelines continued to play a role in shaping Fiji's press laws. On July 29, the Fiji Government 'announced media restrictions on coverage of racially inflammatory speeches or culturally sensitive information as well as parliamentary speeches deemed libellous'. The government 'also said television coverage must give priority to important ministerial statements. The Government had stopped coverage of Parliament the previous month until guidelines were created'.

The *Daily Post* faced censorship when the Government-owned Fiji Post and Telecommunications Corporation banned advertising in the paper because of an expose about company operations.

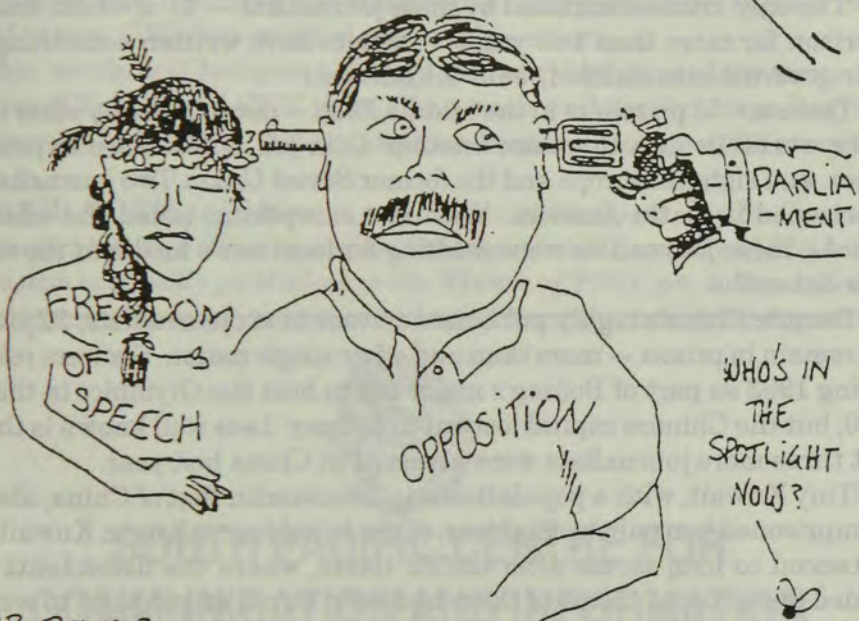
**Solomon Islands:** The Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation (SIBC) was also censored when then Prime Minister Solomon Mamaloni banned it from broadcasting any news about the Bougainville conflict on the grounds that it was 'likely to contravene the principles of the Public Security and Official Secrets Acts'.

**Tonga:** 'Akilisi Pohiva, editor and publisher of *Kele'a* and a member of Parliament, continued to fight government gags and libel suits which during the year totalled nearly K40,000 in damages. Pohiva has championed press freedom and other democratic reforms for more than a decade.

**Western Samoa:** The Western Samoan government introduced new legislation, an amended Newspapers and Printers Act, requiring disclosure of sources in defamation cases. The penalty for breaching the law is a fine of up to K1400 or three months in prison. A new Defamation Act was also passed later in the month banning the publishing of defamatory statements made in court about a third party.

One important example of Pacific censorship or harassment overlooked in *Attacks on the Press* — presumably because of inflexible publishing deadlines — was the furore over a tame cartoon in the *Cook Islands News*. Commenting on a parliamentary order to outspoken MP Norman George to apologise or be suspended after he berated the Speaker in a robust manner, the cartoon became the target of the parliamentary privileges committee.

# APOLOGISE OR BE SUSPENDED



The *Cook Islands News* cartoon that caused the fuss.

The paper's publisher, editor and journalist-cartoonist were summoned for hearings over three days and ordered to apologise.

In **Australia**, three journalists were held in contempt of court in separate cases during 1993 for refusing to divulge their sources. Their cases were cited in attacks. Christopher Nicholls of the ABC was given a four-month jail sentence, the longest ever handed down in Australia for protecting a source. Australia's Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) protested over Nicholls' sentence and called for a shield law that would override common law and 'protect journalists who are under an ethical obligation not to reveal confidential sources'. In one of the other cases, New Zealander David Hellaby of the *Adelaide Advertiser* was fined \$3500 for contempt of court after he refused to disclose a source in articles alleging criminal activity in a bank.

Deborah Cornwall of the *Sydney Morning Herald* was sentenced to two months' jail for refusing to disclose a source over an article about police corruption. The Supreme Court later reduced her sentence to 90 hours of community service.

In *Attacks on the Press*, at least 126 journalists were reported as being imprisoned worldwide at the end of March 1994 — the largest number of jailings ever recorded and an increase by a third over the previous report. Governments jailed these journalists under charges such as 'separatist propaganda', 'treason', 'counter-revolutionary activities' or 'undermining national security'. And sometimes there were no charges at all.

'The only crime committed by these journalists — 71 of whom had been in prison for more than two years — was to have written something that their governments disliked,' said the editors.

There are 53 prisoners in the Middle East — more than any other region in the world. In Asia there are another 43 in jail. Fifteen are in prison in Africa, and eight in Europe and the former Soviet Union. Two journalists are imprisoned in Latin America. With few exceptions, noted the editors of *Attacks*, these journalists were working for local news media at the time of their detention.

Despite China's highly publicised release of six journalists, 22 journalists remain in prison — more than any other single nation. Six were released during 1993 as part of Beijing's major bid to host the Olympics in the year 2000, but the Chinese capital lost out to Sydney. Less well known is the fact that three more journalists were arrested in China last year.

Tiny Kuwait, with a population one-thousandth that of China, also had 22 imprisoned journalists. Eighteen of the jailed journalists in Kuwait were sentenced to long terms after unfair trials, where the defendants were 'denied due process'. Some of them had been forced at gunpoint to work for Saddam Hussein's propaganda sheets during the Iraqi occupation.

Nine Vietnamese journalists were convicted because of their work on the pro-democracy newsletter *Freedom Forum*.

'What has changed dramatically in recent years is geopolitics,' says CPJ's executive director William Orme. 'In the 1980s scores of central American journalists were murdered by government-aligned death squads; in the 1990s we are seeing similar patterns of repression in Central Asia. The most dangerous assignment for war correspondents of this generation had been Vietnam, but Bosnia — a country not even on the map when the decade began — has proven to be even more hazardous. For years the primary fear of independent journalists in much of the world has been retaliation from government forces on the totalitarian left or the authoritarian right.

While these remain serious concerns, in many countries the most direct assaults on press freedoms now come from religious fundamentalists and dissident nationalists. In Somalia and the former Yugoslavia, foreign

journalists have come under attack from rebel gunmen who consider them every bit as much the enemy as the multilateral military forces in their midst.'

On the good news side, Vietnamese editor Doan Viet Hoat of *Freedom Forum*, jailed in a detention camp in Ho Chi Minh City since 17 November 1990, was awarded one of the CPJ's International Press Freedom Awards. He had been accused of trying to 'overthrow the Vietnamese government' with his independent newsletter.

And TV mogul Ted Turner received the Burton Benjamin Memorial Award to mark the way he and Cable News Network have changed world communications. Reaching into the smallest villages and the highest corridors of power, CNN has wielded remarkable effects.

This 'revolution' has swept through the world because of the vision and stamina of Turner and CNN journalists, such as Peter Arnett in Baghdad and recently in Pretoria, fighting fear and censorship to get the story.

**DAVID ROBIE** is lecturer in journalism at the South Pacific Centre for Communication and Information in Development, University of PNG. This article was originally published in the *Times of PNG*, on 5 May 1994.



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