

## Journalists' Struggle Continues in Haiti

By Kim Brice

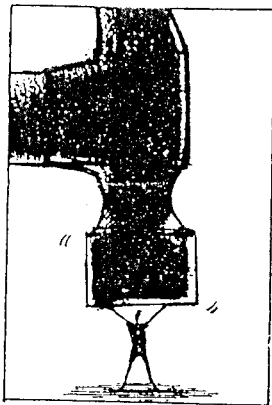
**T**HROUGHOUT the night, people in the Haitian capital of Port-au-Prince lie awake listening to sporadic gunfire, hoping they won't be the next victim. But by morning, a deceptive peace has resumed; the previous evening's terror is never reported in the news media — just in uncertain whispers in the market place.

This is the climate of fear that today's Haitian refugees are attempting to escape. Beyond the terrible poverty that is their history, beyond the current bloody conflict that makes them news, the vast majority of Haitians also are suffering the deprivation of basic information on developments in their own country.

It was not always so. Over the six years following Jean-Claude Duvalier's fall from power, freedom of expression was one area that tangibly improved. The media, particularly radio, pulled a largely illiterate and marginalized population out of its political isolation during this turbulent period, filling a vacuum left by political parties unable to channel or respond to popular aspirations.

Whatever the flaws of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide's brief time in office, his presidency did coincide with a continued flowering of mass news media. Talk radio was the prevailing format, much of it partisan, but nonetheless giving Haitians the opportunity to hear a vigorous airing of the issues of the day.

All of this ended, abruptly, with the coup last September 30. According to one Haitian journalist, "One of the coup's objectives was to silence popular movements and to kill the instrument of those movements, radio." In the seven months since the ouster of Aristide, Haiti's first democratically-elected president, the nation's broadcast media has been silenced. Few of the 49 radio stations that served as news outlets during his administration now dare to broadcast news reports. Only five of the 25 stations in Port-au-Prince continue to operate.



The caution of Haitian broadcasters is born of terror. On the day of the coup, Jacques Simeon, owner and director of Port-au-Prince's Radio Caraibes, was abducted by uniformed soldiers at his home and several days later found dead in the street. He had been tortured; his face was barely recognizable. Ten weeks later, Felix Lamy, director of Radio Galaxie, was abducted from his office and never heard from again. At the time, Radio Galaxie was virtually alone in broadcasting news in Port-au-Prince.

Beatings and detentions are common. Reporters routinely receive telephone threats. Rumors of death lists have been floated in Port-au-Prince. The fear is now so pervasive that many journalists have gone underground, while others have chosen to flee the country.

Ties to foreign media provide no guarantee of protection. In February, staff reporters for National Public Radio and the Chicago Tribune were detained by soldiers who threatened to kill them. Voice of America correspondent Joseph Guyler Delva was beaten by police last week. Several other VOA stringers have gone into hiding after being threatened, and several people have been arrested merely for listening to VOA broadcasts.

Repression and intimidation of journalists is openly acknowledged by leaders of the present government, yet nothing has been done to curb it. One might expect this situation to bother Haiti's prime minister, Jean-Jacques Honorat, a human rights lawyer of international renown. But in a recent interview in Port-au-Prince, he expressed nothing but contempt for his country's news media. "There is no press here," he said pointedly. "They're nothing but little devils and damned liars."

U.S. government officials say they are aware of the Haitian journalists' plight, but in fact, they are reluctant to voice human rights concerns if it means they must reflect those concerns in their refugee policy. "If the Bush administration were to acknowledge the prevalence of abuses," says Jocelyn McCalla of the National Coalition for Haitian Refugees, "it would give the current wave of boat people a better case for obtaining U.S. asylum — and that's something the administration wants to avoid."

But it serves no one's interests to ignore Haiti's semi-official persecution of the news media. The Haitian refugees say the current regime has made their country into a prison. It is up to us not to abandon them to a prison of silence as well.

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