

The right to write

A letter to my colleagues

(Excerpts from a letter by Pius Njawé smuggled out of Douala prison)

You are certainly already aware of the renewed persecution of me by the authorities. On 24 December they took me away from my family and threw me in prison, then sentenced me later to two years' imprisonment and a fine of 500 000 Central African Francs for "spreading false news".

On 21 December 1997 the final of the Cameroon Cup football tournament was played in Yaounde. Originally set for November, that most important sports event of the year was rescheduled to allow the President of the Republic, Mr Paul Biya, to preside, as is the tradition here. The President arrived at the stadium 20 minutes late, disappeared from the official tribune at half-time and only regained his seat five minutes before the end of the match, just in time to award the trophy to the winners and to leave the stadium.

This astonishing and discourteous behaviour prompted the journalists of *Le Messenger* to investigate. That is how they came to discover he had suffered a cardiac incident during the half-time break.

This information was immediately reported to me. I personally undertook the normal double-checking. Three different sources, all of whom had witnessed the scene, confirmed it to me. Each, however, expressed surprise that I was aware of the incident and begged me not to publish. But as a journalist I consider that a piece of news is publishable, unless it can be shown that it will threaten people's lives. In this case, it was just a malaise suffered by the chief of state and revealing it, in my opinion, represented no danger for the Cameroonian people.

The article appeared on 22 December as an exclusive in *Le Messenger*. It was picked up by some foreign colleagues. For reasons I do not understand, the government panicked and tripped all over itself issuing denials. First, there was a communiqué by the presidential staff, communicated to all the press except for *Le Messenger*, but which *Le Messenger* published nevertheless.

There followed an insidious press campaign in the columns of our colleagues, called to the rescue of the government, in an attempt to discredit *Le Messenger*.

On 23 December someone came to my office to inform me that orders had been given for the police to arrest me. The person suggested that I leave the city to escape arrest. Having committed no crime, I did not consider it necessary to take flight. So I returned to my office on 24 December where I was arrested at midday. After 48 hours of detention by the judiciary police, I was transferred to the prosecutor's office, where I was indicted for "spreading false news". This followed



A clandestine photograph of Pius Njawé, publisher of *Le Messenger* in Cameroon, during a previous jail sentence. He is behind bars again.

a well-muscled interrogation. My imprisonment order was signed on 26 December when I was incarcerated in the Douala Central Prison at first as an accused person.

On 13 January I was sentenced after a mockery of a trial.

This is the second time within a year that I have been jailed. In October and November of 1996 many of you expressed support for me when I was thrown into prison for "insult to the President of the Republic and to the members of Parliament", for having denounced an anti-democratic constitutional plan. This time, my tormentors seem determined to get me. Evidence of this is the terrible and humiliating prison conditions, as well as the physical and mental cruelties which my jailers inflict upon my family, my collaborators and me.

The tone was set upon my arrival in prison on 26 December. My wife, who was late into pregnancy, was physically abused in my presence by a prison administrator when she brought bed linen for me. My complaint to the public prosecutor had no effect upon this inhuman treatment. It was repeated on subsequent visits. Thus, my wife miscarried our child on 9 January.

My collaborators were subjected to the same brutal treatment in their attempts to communicate with me. My messages are filtered by prison authorities. My wife is allowed to bring me food once a day, but my collaborators are practically forbidden to visit me. I must work all kinds of angles to maintain contact with them. As for my children, they were so traumatised by the prison environment

and the behaviour of the prison guards that I decided it would be better that they stop coming to see me.

My treatment in prison is highly humiliating. The objective is surely to

break my morale, if I cannot be eliminated physically. I share cell number 15 with about 100 other prisoners, almost all of whom are criminals convicted of murders, assassinations, hold-ups, thefts, armed robberies, etc.

While I may receive newspapers and books, I don't have the right to write. The prison director called me into his office to forbid it. "Don't lift your pencil for as long as you are in jail," he told me. So, I have stopped writing the "Convict's Notebook" that I had been publishing in *Le Messenger* since my imprisonment. I now write in secret. I must get up at 3am to write by flashlight and I must pay off my neighbours not to turn me in. This is how I am composing this letter for you. I will send it to my office secretly to be typed into a computer.

Nevertheless, my spirits are good, even though I do have some health problems. I have nothing to reproach myself for, so my conscience is clear. I know that I'm paying for my stubbornness in my struggle for the past 18 years to broaden democratic freedom in Cameroon and in Africa. I'm paying for having refused to work with a political party. I'm paying for having refused to plunge into the trough. I'm paying for having preferred my independence to compromise. I'm paying because every choice must be paid for. But I'm proud of my choice, and I don't regret it because I'm convinced that it is the best path.

My only regret is that we still have so many colleagues who think that compromise with the powers that be is the way out.

Freed

When Unesco awarded the World Press Freedom Prize in February, the prize winner and one of the jurors were missing. Their absence on presentation day, 3rd May, World Press Freedom Day was even more conspicuous. Both Christina Anyanwu (the winner) and Pius Njawé (the juror) were in jail – in Nigeria and Cameroon.

In June, after the death of Nigerian leader General Sani Abacha, Anyanwu was released. But according to the Committee for the Protection of Journalists (which campaigned vigorously for Anyanwu's release) there are still 16 journalists in jail in Nigeria.

Anyanwu is the editor-in-chief of the Nigerian news weekly the *Sunday Magazine*. She was sentenced to 15 years in solitary confinement for exposing a government ploy to round up political opponents.



Free! With the death of Nigerian leader Sani Abacha journalist Christina Anyanwu was released.

Pius Njawé, director of the Cameroon newspaper *Le Messenger*, was charged with disseminating false news.

Since December, Unesco has been talking to the authorities of Cameroon to secure his release. In March former South African editor Raymond Louw travelled to Cameroon to meet with the government to appeal for Njawé's release. Louw represented the International Press Institute (IPI), the South African Committee of the IPI, the South African National Editors' Forum, the Freedom of Expression Institute and the Media Institute of Southern Africa.

Louw met with the Communications Minister and the Foreign Affairs Minister of Cameroon and attended a hearing at which he shook Njawé's hand and pledged the support of South African journalists. At the hearing Njawé's sentence was reduced to a year.