

# A fine line

A March 9, 1999 article published on the front page of Zambia's *Post* newspaper caused seismic reactions among government circles, including the government-owned newspaper, *The Times of Zambia*. Warning of the Zambian army's vulnerability to a possible attack from Angola, the article raised critical issues of national security. The *Times'* editors slammed *The Post*, the government cracked down and now the entire *Post* staff faces espionage charges.

Where's the line between 'the people's right to know' and protecting

security of state? We print the

*Times* editorial and *Post* Editor

Fred M'membe's reply:



FINDING THE BORDER BETWEEN PRESS FREEDOM AND A SECURE STATE

## 'Post Newspaper Has Overstepped its Limits'

*The Times of Zambia*  
March 11, 1999

Luusaka – *The Post* newspaper without any doubt has breached and overstepped its limits.

Plainly and simply, by displaying in detail the state of Zambia's defence arsenal, the newspaper has undressed the republic before the region, let alone the world at large, to borrow an expression used in Parliament by Mr. Christopher Chawinga. Pressmen and women do not function in their own world, an insulated territory in which their deeds are unquestionable and in which they are their own law.

They function in a world in which their desires and interests must be balanced against the hopes and aspirations of others. The point is that press freedom is not absolute and boundless. Media profession-

als and their organisations do not have the absolute right to publish and be damned. Rather, they bear on their shoulders the responsibility to aid and preserve, not dismantle, society.

Because society should be preserved and not dismantled, there are laws against exposing Zambia's defence capacity anyhow – even to citizens themselves. To expose a nation's defence resource as *The Post* has done is to aid the enemy, and therefore to dismantle and disgrace the nation.

Every nation has its security to protect. National security everywhere on earth is sacrosanct. Even in the developed world this is so strongly upheld that in war situations, military censors must clear news material before it is made public. It happens because a journalist may consider crucially newsworthy a certain discovery or

development which if published may actually equip and forearm enemy forces.

In Britain, for instance, Gerry Adams – leader of Sinn Fein, the political arm of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) – for years was deprived of voice advantage when it came to television broadcasts. He would be televised speaking at some event but his voice would always be closed out.

It has to be learnt from the coverage of war situations by the media in Britain and America that when national pride, posterity and heritage are at stake, newsmen and women stand by the government of the day for the sake of the nation. Even when the government of the day may be undesirable or even worthless in the view of a media organisation, nationhood counts first.

Our head of state has to be commended for enduring floods of personal offence,

injury and insult all in the interest of building our young democracy, which includes freedom of the press and freedom of speech. In other countries within the region papers like *The Post* would have closed years ago.

Censorship in times of war, or threat of war, is international practice even in advanced democracies. A careless comment or report could easily throw a country into flames. However, *The Post* has reported not carelessly but diligently, studiously and deliberately. It looks like the editors simply decided to dare government and see what would happen. That behaviour is simply outside the perimeters of journalism, and nobody should sympathise with newsmen and women who themselves do not care about endangering their own country.

## The Post's Fred M'membe responds

This is not the first time we are being criticised by *The Times of Zambia* when our journalists have been arrested over some story *The Post* has published.

They did the same in 1996 when the late Bright Mwape, Lucy Sichone and I were arrested and indefinitely imprisoned for criticising, in our respective columns, Vice-President Godfrey Miyanda's criticism of Supreme Court judges in Parliament where they could not defend themselves. Again that year they did the same when Bright, Masautso Phiri and I were arrested and detained for publishing a story exposing the government's decision to hold a snap referendum over the constitution – said to be a violation of state secrets.

In both these cases, different High Court judges ruled in our favour. In the case with Parliament, the state has appealed to the Supreme Court and judgment is yet to be delivered.

We pay a lot of attention to criticism, trying to find out what earned us the criticism. Criticism sometimes can be very painful, but we have learned to welcome it.

Of course those who don't like us are always on the lookout for our mistakes. If we don't confront our own errors, those who don't like us will turn them against us. That is why we deal with our own errors seriously and forthrightly. Since the paper was launched on July 26, 1991, we have

considered carefully what we have done well, and where we have gone astray.

Ours has never been 'journalism for the sake of journalism'. The idea of 'journalism for journalism's sake' is as strange in our times as 'wealth for wealth's sake', 'science for science's sake' and so forth. All human activities must serve humankind if they are not to remain useless and idle occupations.

*The Times of Zambia* editorial accuses us of daring the government to see what would happen over the story of the Angolan army being stronger than the Zambian army. They say our behaviour is outside the perimeters of journalism and nobody should sympathise with us for endangering our country.

For those who judge the facts in this way it is well to remember that the current Zambian government has never needed pretexts to perpetrate its villainy on any of its citizens. Government's efforts to smash *The Post* began early in 1992, less than three months after it had assumed power, when the newspaper started to question its political decisions, especially its appointments.

Exposure of the comparative weaknesses of the Zambian army might be used as a pretext, but shall never be the sole factor behind the Zambian government's efforts to annihilate *The Post*. Not informing the Zambian people about the consequences of war breaking out between their country

and Angola, so that they can influence their political leaders wisely, amounts to ostrich-like journalism. It has nothing to do with enhancing the threat of war, as the *Times* argues.

Our journalists have been arrested and detained several times over the past eight years. But none of this frightens us. We are revolutionary journalists pursuing progressive journalism; we act out of principle, not out of fear. Eight years of hardship and struggle, of unyielding tenacity and experience, are not worthless.

Many times in history revolutionary processes have been preceded by adverse episodes. South African journalists went to jail for opposing and exposing the apartheid warmongers – but today they triumph with the revelations made before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

In all ages and under all circumstances there will always exist abundant reasons not to oppose the powerful. But that will be the only way not to advance liberties and peace in our countries and region.

With all certainty our *Times of Zambia* critics – with their cowardice and eternal lack of action – will survive to evidence their own stupidity. We thank them for their advice, but we don't intend to take it. We cannot be led by empty heads with narrow, chauvinist outlooks.

Moreover, the senior Zambia army offi-

cers helped us alert people to information already available on at least two websites and in a similar article published in an African magazine in 1978.

The truth is we are not prepared to let our people live with false hopes, thinking their government can do this or that when the reality is different. What would be gained from that?

We sincerely believe that our duty of telling our people the truth stands above all considerations of convenience. We believe there's no better tactic or strategy in our efforts to contribute to the building of a more open and peaceful society in our country and region than to fight with clean hands, with the truth. We believe these are the only weapons that inspire confidence, faith and dignity.

It is only through this critical journalism – based on reason, morality, truth and our ability to defend ideas, positions and proposals – that we will be able to make best use of our journalistic skills to contribute to the building of a better world, a world with more justice, a world that is truly more humane and for which it is our duty to struggle. We will always behave as journalists who are aware of their task and a new stage in the history of humanity.

FRED M'MEMBE is Editor of *The Post*.