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Spotlight on Omar Faruk Osman (NUSOJ-Somalia)

“Somali workers, including media workers, need international solidarity to bring back their voices”

Brussels, 5 April 2011 (ITUC OnLine): In 2009, Somalia was termed the “deadliest country for journalists in the world”. As more attacks and repression against media professionals and news media organizations are continuously reported, Omar Faruk Osman, general secretary of the National Union of Somali Journalists (NUSOJ) and of the Eastern Africa Journalists Association (EAJA), tells us about the daily fight for press freedom and media workers’ rights.

Also a member of the executive committee of the International Federation of Journalists(*), as well as president of the Federation of African Journalists (FAJ), he exposes the challenge of building a strong independent union movement in a country ruined by 20 years of conflict.

What can you say about the freedom of press in Somalia?

In Somalia, press freedom is gravely violated. Actually, in our country, the rule of law barely exists and the rule of gun is functional. When all major State institutions are either weak or missing, the private media, as the fourth estate, emerged strongly and has been giving voice to the people of Somalia and has been telling the story of Somalia.

But the warlords, Islamists, self-proclaimed administrations and other political forces have attempted to control, manipulate or suppress the media in order to advance their political agenda, which is mostly spoiling for a fight. Journalists and media houses have endeavored to operate in neutral, professional and independent manner. This has resulted in the journalists and the media outlets having to pay a heavy price.

Since February 2007, Somalia has been termed the single most deadly country for journalists in Africa. We have lost 22 journalists who were deliberately murdered for doing their work. More than 200 journalists have either been forced to flee from their home country or resign from the profession for safety reasons. Media houses have been taken over forcefully from their legitimate owners. Death threats are countless and continuous, and there is no political will for the politicians to tackle this longstanding insecurity and human suffering problem because all these killings and attacks on journalists are politically motivated attacks, and so impunity flourishes. Somali journalists’ safety is massively endangered, media houses are denied the freedom to carry out media business, and impunity fuels these crimes to continue.

What are the working conditions of the journalists?

A recent survey that the National Union of Somali Journalists (NUSOJ) carried out on precarious working conditions of journalists has stated how journalists work in appalling conditions. First, they are the most poorly paid professionals in the country. Then, employment for most journalists is typically short-term, and there is no definite duration of

employment contracts. Media owners are often eager to employ young journalists over more well-trained and experienced staff because of a desire to pay less. It is also common for Somali journalists to work under a “name-for-work” system that compensates the journalist only with a by-line recognition of their work. Since there are young workers who are eager to make a name for themselves, there are journalists who will accept this system and work for no monetary compensation. If they are paid, journalists are often paid a flat rate, generally between \$20 and 80\$ USD per month. The bulk of the journalists are paid at the lowest end of the spectrum when the monthly living standard is \$150 for a family. Finally, there are no benefits attached to this work.

What are the current priorities of your trade union and which difficulties do you usually face?

One of the key priorities of the National Union of Somali Journalists (NUSOJ) is to organize media workers through union campaigning in the midst of armed conflicts and widespread insecurity in order to extend solidarity to media workers.

But the utmost priority of NUSOJ is to create a safe environment for journalists, a fair workplace for all media workers, to continue broadly-based campaigns within civil society and journalism, to defend the media freedom, to seek minimum standards of social and professional conditions of service for journalists in this difficult environment and to ensure that all journalists and media staff are adequately paid.

The main difficulties that we face are organising journalists who are employed by employers that do not understand trade unionism and at the same time assume themselves to be journalists; lack of a functioning judiciary and law enforcement bodies that deal with labour issues; armed conflict that prevents the union organisers from going in the field to organise unorganised media workers or represent wronged media workers; and media houses losing incomes to pay their journalists, thus resulting in the weak financial situation of media workers.

What's the role of the international trade union's solidarity in Eastern Africa, and in the whole continent?

International trade union solidarity is absolutely necessary in the Eastern Africa region where gross violations of human and trade union rights are omnipresent. This solidarity is particularly relevant to Somalia, which has not had a nationally functioning government for 20 years and where the workers have suffered enormously. Workers in Somalia can be driving forces of positive change for the country and can lead the efforts to return to peace and stability. In all the peace processes of Somalia, workers have had a limited role or were totally marginalised although they are the immediate victims of conflict and political instability. Somali workers, including media workers, need cross-border solidarity from the international trade union movement to bring back their voice and be able to defend their rights.

Do you think that the current historical evolutions in North Africa could have an impact on the freedom of press in this area?

The revolutions in North Africa are good signs of peoples' expression of their will. The case I would take is Tunisia, where the revolution started. In my capacity as the president of the Federation of African Journalists, I was personally involved in advocating for the respect and protection of journalists' rights and press freedom in Tunisia. The Bin Ali regime had detained, harassed and tortured journalists. Media outlets were outlawed in Tunisia. The space

for free expression was totally clamped down, and then the right to freedom of association was grossly violated. Also in Egypt we hope that the press freedom will flourish thanks to the political change. It is for sure that the changes the revolution brought in North Africa will also improve the press freedom situation in these countries.

What are the biggest difficulties African workers face every day?

The biggest problems that African workers face are rampant social injustice and unfairness at the work workplaces. Threats and intimidations are continuous both at the workplace and outside. Female and young workers are mostly affected people. And I can authoritatively say that journalists are among workers affected by this social injustice.

Can you make a general inventory of the Somali trade union's running and tell us about the difficulties they face?

The Somali trade union collapsed with the military government. Since then the workers were either unorganized or unrepresented. The previous national trade union centre was controlled and lead by the revolutionary party of the military government. Our union of journalists was the first independent trade union formed, and this subsequently inspired other sectoral unions to emerge. The notion of trade unionism in Somalia needs to be rejuvenated. All transitional governments that have come and gone rarely have given priority to the issue of workers. The overwhelming task now is to strengthen the federation of Somali trade unions and build the voice of the workers. They are forces of change, and they are particularly pertinent to the current situation in the country. After 20 years of armed conflict instilling nationalism, now solidarity, equity and social responsibility are indispensable and must be done through the workers.

A few months ago, you received the Democracy Courage Award(*). What does it mean to you?

When we got the World Movement for Democracy Courage Award, it gave us a morale boost and more energy to continue the struggle for human rights, press freedom, and social justice in our country. Since then we have redoubled our tenacious fight for the human rights of journalists, and we have internationalised our advocacy and campaign works to champion press freedom inside and outside the country. And we will continue to do it!

Interview by Anne-Catherine Greatti, with Natacha David.

(*)<http://www.ifj.org>

(**) <http://www.solidaritycenter.org/content.asp?contentid=745>

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