

Dead silence: when journalists are muzzled, corruption goes unchecked

World Press Freedom Day reminds us of courage and sacrifice in the fight against corruption

**By David Nussbaum, Chief Executive
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3 May 2006 - When the court trying the accused murderers of Georgiy Gongadze, a journalist investigating the role of Ukraine's then-president Leonid Kuchma in a corruption scandal, saw the coroner's report they must have gasped. Gongadze had been brutally beaten, shot in the head, doused in acid, decapitated and left in a forest outside Kiev. His head was never found.

A journalist attempting to uncover corruption lays his life on the line. Powerful political and business forces – feeling the visceral threat to their illicit activity that the sunshine of exposure can create – often respond with violence. Around the world, journalists are threatened, harassed, kidnapped, jailed and terrorised for exposing corrupt authority. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, 58 reporters around the world are known to have been assassinated in 2005 because of their profession; 12 have already met the same fate in 2006. Fourteen of the journalists murdered in 2005 and three in 2006 were investigating or denouncing alleged corruption.

From the early days of the fight against corruption, when the word itself was only whispered in the halls of power, investigative journalists have faced barriers to the truth erected by those who fear exposure: censorship, surveillance, oppressive criminal libel and defamation laws, state control of media, and other official hurdles.

In Kazakhstan, for instance, proving the truth of an allegation has not been accepted as a defence against libel, thus justifying 17 defamation lawsuits against one newspaper in three years that resulted in US \$180,000 in fines, while forbidding the paper from offering in court the evidence that might have proved the accuracy of its news stories.

In the post September 11 world, many governments are relying more frequently on the security argument to justify closing the information borders. Denying information to a citizen or a reporter is easier when national security or state secrets can be cited as the rationale. A curtain of supposed patriotism can shield the corrupt: incriminating documents can be more easily classified; freedom of information requests turned aside. The protection of security becomes a blanket for the corrupt.

Last summer the son of a Belarusian opposition leader was arrested in a raid on his father's home; the police claimed that he had drugs and ammunition. But according to the *Washington Post*, the real target of the raid was a

professional quality printing press, one of fewer than 10 in Belarus not controlled by the country's president, Alexander Lukashenko. Possessing a printing press in Belarus, one activist noted in the *Post*, requires special permission from the Ministry of Information and Press. And for good reason: information is power. In the hands of the people, it can change the course of history.

In Latin America, investigative journalists played a central role in exposing corruption stories that resulted in the ousting of four presidents: Abdalá Bucarám Ortíz of Ecuador, Carlos Andrés Pérez of Venezuela, Fernando Collor de Mello of Brazil, and Alberto Fujimori of Peru.

In the Philippines, it was the reporting of a team of investigative journalists that revealed the extravagant mansions and other luxuries President Joseph Estrada allegedly afforded himself at public expense. The reports were so thoroughly investigated that they were used in congressional impeachment hearings. Yet journalists in the Philippines still face intimidation under the current administration.

Today, on World Press Freedom Day, the voices of journalists murdered in their pursuit of the truth must be heard. In their honour, governments around the world must recognise and enshrine in law the citizen's right to information. There can be no meaningful freedom of expression without it. Yet only 60 countries have such laws in place. Many fail to fully implement them.

If journalists fall silent, corruption will remain a powerful tear in the social fabric, contributing to failed social programmes, inefficient public services, organised crime, misused or misdirected aid, unsafe buildings, lawlessness, and unmerited contracts and educational qualifications.

The media is a vital check on power. But journalism is only one pillar in a social and legal infrastructure to ensure the people's right to know. Strong, evenly enforced access to information laws, legal guarantees of freedom of expression, fair and independent judges, courageous public prosecutors, professional and honest police and public officials all facilitate the media's role as an effective public watchdog and keep a check on corruption. Laws that properly balance national security with the public's right to information and self-generated journalistic codes of conduct should be developed in partnership between media professionals and the general public.

Through more than 90 national chapters worldwide, Transparency International promotes the right to access information by raising awareness, lobbying for legislation, training media and public officials and monitoring newly enacted or existing legislation. TI Bangladesh uses theatre to raise awareness; TI Peru monitors implementation of that country's access to information law. National chapters in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia analyse why requests for information are denied by public authorities. Legal assistance is given to citizens, journalists and entrepreneurs who seek information on public officials.

Six journalists have received Transparency International's Integrity Award over the last few years, honouring their outstanding courage in uncovering corruption. Five of these tributes were awarded posthumously; no doubt they will not be the last. A fitting tribute to these brave individuals is to pursue resolutely the freedom of the press for which they made the ultimate sacrifice.