

forgive us our press passes

Africa has the highest number of danger spots on any continent and in most cases where there is conflict, there is a war raging for the creation of a stable democracy. It is within this mayhem and darkness that many journalists become victims.

The news becomes a victim and the very people who write the headlines become the headline

By KERRY DIMMER

In one of his last, most professional acts this year, Edward Chikomba smuggled a video out of his homeland, Zimbabwe. The video showed clear evidence of the brutal beating that opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai underwent at the hands of the Zimbabwean authorities. Chikomba's badly beaten and tortured body was discovered days later and there is no doubt that his freelance camerawork was an integral factor in his death.

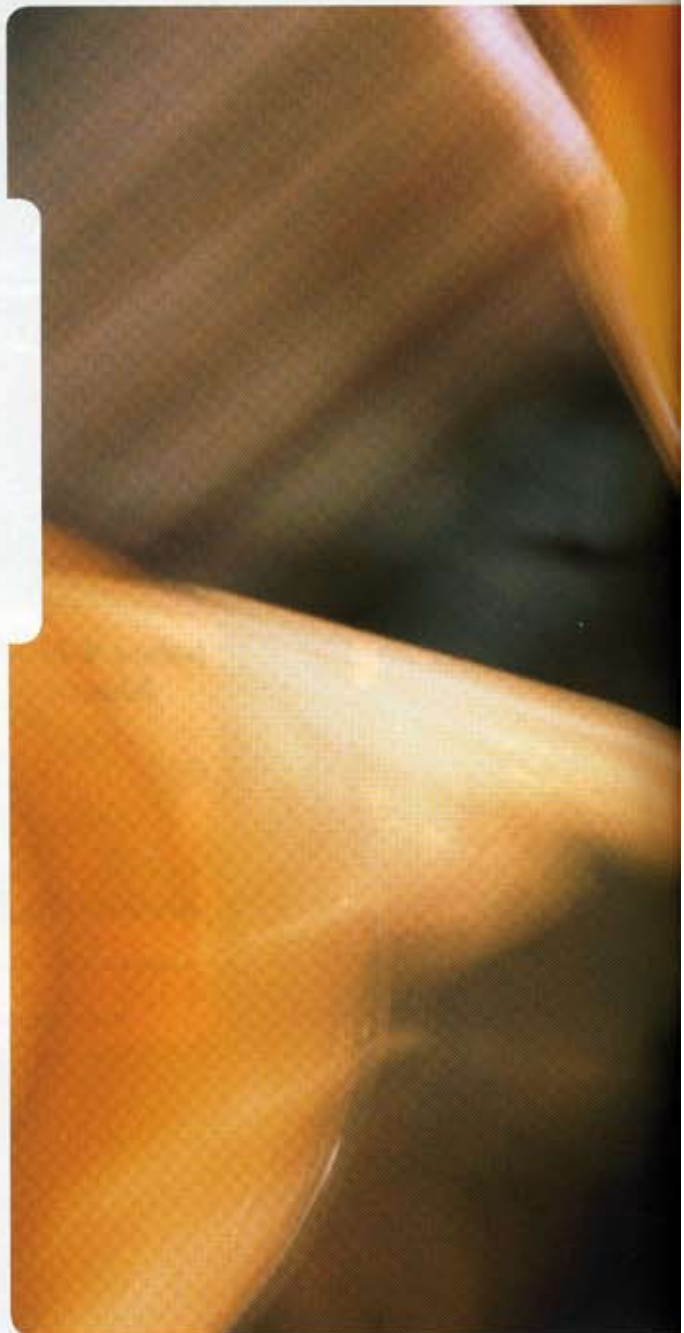
In Zimbabwe and Eritrea, political upheavals have had a serious impact on press freedom. It is not uncommon that where such conflict exists, the disappearance of a journalist will follow. This

is an occupational hazard for many African-based journalists, especially in Eritrea. When the government imposed a ban on the media in 2001, journalists were arrested as a matter of course – 13 were imprisoned, some never even being formally charged of a crime. Others faced being labelled an 'enemy of the state' or, for lack of anything better to charge them with, 'the avoidance of compulsory military service'. It is understood that four of these reporters have died in jail under the most extreme and appalling circumstances.

Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF) – Reporters Without Borders – has a separate Africa desk

headed up by Léonard Vincent. 'When governments arrest reporters, it disturbs the public order of things,' he says. 'Censorship is tantamount to attacking the structure of a country because free speech and the telling of stories is the way a country can look at itself. Press freedom allows for a calming of the spirit of the people. Restructuring the way reporting is presented is like shooting yourself in the foot. Why would you want to cause further injury?

'Some years ago,' continues Vincent, 'the RSF had a provocation campaign that included the phrase: "If you kill an elephant in Africa you may be sent to jail. Kill a journalist and you may not





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even be charged with a crime." If a country is truly intent on building democracy and initiating restoration, then a free and responsible press is one of the most helpful tools at its disposal.'

When a journalist disappears in Africa, the truth can become almost impossible to establish. The RSF has evidence of press members being arrested for so-called slander and thrown in prison. 'Even when there is no legal procedure in place, the red tape, coupled with corrupt officials, makes it extremely difficult to prove innocence, let alone obtain a release from jail,' says Vincent. In the case of two Rwandan journalists, the RSF was able to prove they were

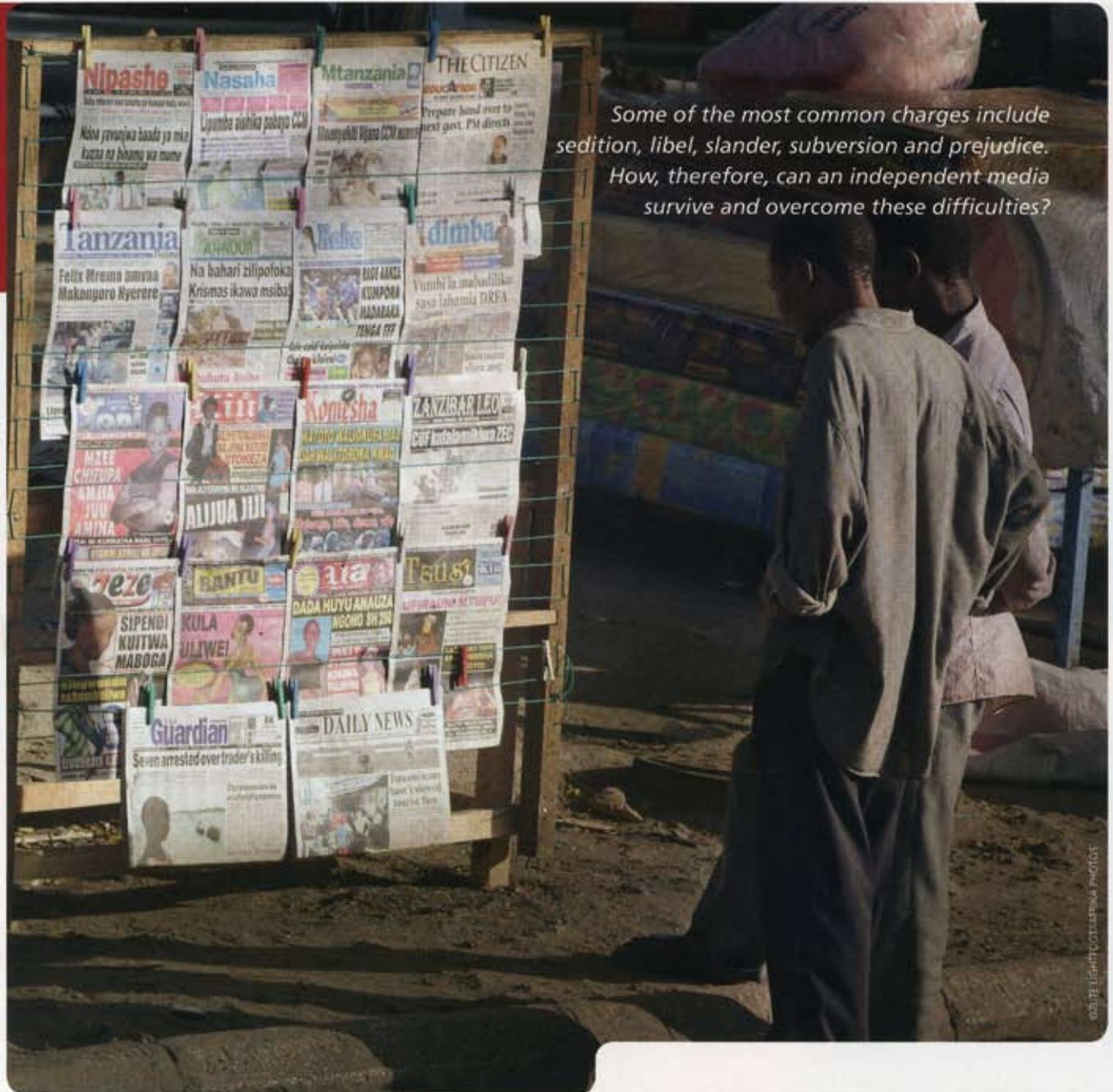
never involved in the crime of genocide, yet they remain behind bars to this day.

There are myriad accusations used by various governments wishing to justify the arrest or detention of journalists. Some of the most common charges include sedition, libel, slander, subversion and prejudice. How, therefore, can an independent media survive and overcome these difficulties?

The International Press Institute (IPI), along with the RSF, is another organisation that aims to safeguard press freedom. It consists of a global network of editors, media executives and leading journalists who 'promote the free

flow of news and information as well as the improvement of the practices of journalism'.

Organisations such as the IPI and RSF publicise the plight of the media in the hope that they can influence a positive turn of events. Both produce a list of countries evaluating media suppression. In the RSF's annually published *World Press Freedom Index* (2006) Zimbabwe is ranked 140th and Eritrea 166th out of the 168 countries listed. The highest-placed African countries on this list for experiencing genuine press freedom are Namibia at 26, Mauritius at 32, Ghana at 34, and South Africa in 44th place, (as of June 2007).



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There has been, according to Vincent, only one documented investigation by an African country into a journalist's death in the past 15 years ... that of Mozambiquan Carlos Cardoso, who was gunned down in 2000. At the time of his assassination, Cardoso was investigating the embezzlement of €14 million from the privatisation of Mozambique's Banco Commercial. Six people were convicted of his murder but, according to various press reports, there still remains the question of involvement by the then president's eldest son and other influential businessmen and diplomats. The case, therefore, remains unsolved.

Mozambique's neighbour, South Africa, offers a positive and interesting case study if one reflects on the role the media played in exposing apartheid to the rest of the world. In so doing, the press significantly contributed to the creation of a democracy. South Africa's Constitution is, today, one of the finest in the world because it guarantees freedom of expression, freedom of information and freedom of the media.

One of the goals of the South African National Editors Forum (Sanef) is 'to champion freedom of expression'. A visit to the Sanef website clearly indicates this organisation closely monitors South African press freedom.

It also plays an active role in 'campaigning for the elimination of legislation and commercial pressures that restrict the media'. Surely then, this is a perfect tenet for other African countries to follow? It remains a fact that, in many parts of Africa, censorship, harassment, intimidation, detention, arrest, violence, imprisonment, torture, kidnapping, assassination and death are included in the daily challenges that a news journalist must face in order to get the story – and be published.

'The truth shall set you free' says the old adage. But in many cases, the truth is, the truth may in fact kill you. **AD**