Journalists in Nigeria detained, harassed, and assaulted

ABUJA, Nigeria - Nigerian authorities should investigate and hold accountable those responsible for the detention, harassment, and assault of journalists nationwide during the March 9 gubernatorial and state assembly elections, the Committee to Protect Journalists said.

Nigerian elections. Credit: CPJ Africa.

Journalists covering the elections told CPJ they were detained and harassed by security services or other armed individuals, denied access to report on polling stations, forced to delete photographs, and assaulted.

"The freedom and fairness of any election requires that journalists are permitted to work unimpeded and without fear," said Angela Quintal, CPJ Africa program coordinator, in New York. "Nigeria must act to ensure journalists can work safely during elections, and the first step is to hold responsible those who attacked or impeded the media during the recent polls."

Nonso Isiguzo, a news editor with the privately owned Nigeria Info radio station, told CPJ that he was traveling on election day between polling stations to report on elections in the Ahoada West local government area in Rivers state when armed men, some wearing camouflage uniforms, stopped their Nigeria Info-branded car, told Isiguzo and his driver, Sunday Isiitu, to get out, and took their car keys. Shortly afterwards, a second car carrying five others whom Isiguzo identified as journalists with accredited press tags was also stopped at the same point on the road, he said.

"I said, 'I'm a journalist. I'm just here to monitor the election'," Isiguzo told CPJ. But the armed men told Isiguzo, without

elaborating, that their "boss" was being held by the military and the journalists would only be released once the boss was free.

The men released Isiguzo, Isiitu, and the other journalists after holding them on the side of the road for two hours, after which Isiguzo did not continue reporting in the area, he told CPJ. CPJ could not immediately determine the identities of the five people from the second car.

Disruption

On March 10, Nigeria's Independent National Electoral Commission suspended all election processes in Rivers due to "widespread disruption," including violence and hostage taking, according to a statement posted on the official election administration body's verified Twitter account.

Also on election day, Segun Adewale, a local politician known as "Aeroland" and a member of the People's Democratic Party, hit and shoved BBC reporter Ajoke Ulohotse in Nigeria's southwestern Lagos-Abeokuta area, according to a report by BBC Pidgin, which included video of the incident, and a BBC statement emailed to CPJ.

"We will be notifying the police in due course following an incident involving a BBC reporter in Lagos-Abeokuta on 9 March," the BBC statement said.

Adewale claimed the BBC "lied" and he did not "beat up a lady," in a tweet from a social media account linked to his official webpage. CPJ emailed Adewale for comment but received an error message stating that his account was no longer active.

In Damatuzu, a local government area in Nigeria's northeastern Yobe state, members of the Nigerian military detained for over an hour journalists Musa Mingyi, with the privately owned *Blueprint* newspaper, and Hamisu Kabir Matazu, of the privately owned *Daily Trust* newspaper, according to Mingyi and the *Daily Trust*.

"We told them we are journalists and we are covering [the] election," Mingyi told CPJ. "They did not harm us, but they denied us access to go do our rightful duties."

A statement issued on the Nigerian army's Facebook page by Njoka Irabor, the army's acting assistant director of public relations, said "no journalist was held hostage" and the journalists' car was stopped as part of "routine checks on vehicles as part of security measures during the elections." CPJ called Irabor repeatedly for comment and was disconnected; texts to his number were not immediately returned.

Harassment

Kunle Sanni, a reporter for the privately owned *Premium Times* news website, told CPJ he was held for nearly 30 minutes in the Shendam local government area of Plateau state and forced by three men who identified themselves as "farmers" to delete photos of what he believed were underage voters.

After witnessing Sanni photograph children holding voting cards, the men took him aside, charged his phone because it had died, searched through his apps (including his social media accounts), and deleted images, Sanni said.

"They [even] went into the Google backup and deleted [photos]," Sanni said, but added he had already managed to send several photos to his editor.

Collin Ossai, a broadcast reporter with the privately owned Channels TV station, told CPJ that he, his cameraperson, and a radio journalist with Speed FM were blocked from reporting at a polling station in the Esan Central local government area in Edo state.

Ossai said a man identifying himself as a state assembly candidate blocked their car from approaching the polling station at

around 7:35 a.m., as the journalists were trying to see if election materials had arrived on time.

Ossai told CPJ that he exited the car and tried negotiate passage with the candidate. But about 10 men surrounded the car and began pushing him and telling him he could not enter the polling station, he said. The journalists left without gaining access, and Ossai said that "big guys" intimidated him into not bringing his camera out while trying to cover several other polling stations in the area.

Attacked

In Kaduna state, a group of more than 20 men attacked Shinzong Bala, a reporter with the publicly funded Radio Nigeria station, and Amos Tauna, a reporter with the privately owned *Daily Post* newspaper, while they were investigating alleged election-related arrests and burning cars around the town of Zonkwa's police station, Bala and Tauna told CPJ.

"We tried to identify ourselves... we were even wearing media vests that were given to us by INEC [the Independent National Electoral Commission]," Bala told CPJ.

Bala managed to retrieve his belongings after paying the men, but said his clothes were ripped and his body was bruised in the attack. Tauna said his pass was not returned.

CPJ contacted Yakubu Soba, a public relations officer for the Nigerian police in Kaduna, via WhatsApp for comment. Soba requested more specifics about the incident for the police to be able to follow up, which CPJ provided.

During Nigeria's 2019 federal and state elections, CPJ worked with local civil society and press freedom groups including YIAGA, Civil Society Situation Room, Premium Times Centre for Investigative Journalism, Institute for Media and Society, the Nigerian Union of Journalists, and the Lagos-based International Press Centre to track press freedom issues.

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