Journaliste en Danger
Fighting for press freedom

by Geoffrey Chan and Natasha Kanjee

In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), this war-ravaged Central African country that recently held its first elections in more than 40 years, a small but influential press freedom group is slowly planting the seeds of a culture in which freedom of the press may one day thrive.

Journaliste en danger (Journalist in Danger, JED) is a Kinshasa-based NGO that has become a leading defender of media freedom in the DRC and Central Africa since its founding in 1998.

It acts mainly as a watchdog in the region through the Organisation of Central African Media (OMAC), a network of monitors in nine countries who file reports on attacks against journalists. These alerts are distributed globally through the International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX), a worldwide network that re-distributes the information to an international audience numbering tens of thousands.

Through its links to IFEX and groups like the France-based Reporters Without Borders (RSF), the watchdog has successfully used international pressure to effect political change.

It demonstrated this to remarkable effect in March 2006, when a JED-RSF delegation met with President Joseph Kabila and won a pledge from the government to re-open an investigation into the murders of Franck Ngyke and his wife Helène Mpaka. Ngyke, a columnist for the newspaper La Référence Plus, and Mpaka were gunned down in Kinshasa in November 2005. A recent report by the Forum for African Investigative Reporters implicated the Congolese secret service in the murders.

Kabila also promised to have the murder case brought to trial prior to the 30 July elections. So far, three soldiers have been arrested and charged with the crime. Their trial began on 12 July.

JED says its appeals sent through the IFEX network have led to improved prison conditions for Congolese journalists or helped win them an early release from jail.

Now, says JED’s secretary general Tshivis Tshivuadi, “no case of an attack on the press can go unnoticed. People will know as soon as a journalist is imprisoned. And that pressure contributes enormously to getting them released.”

Journalists in the DRC are frequently arrested, intimidated and physically assaulted for reporting the news. In 2005, JED recorded 108 press freedom violations in the country, of which 58 involved the jailing of journalists.

Two journalists – Ngyke and Bapuwa Mwamba – have been murdered in the past year for writing articles critical of government officials. And in the lead-up to the July elections, a spate of attacks on journalists and radio stations raised fears that a climate of intimidation was preventing voters from being adequately informed about the issues.

Aside from monitoring attacks on journalists, JED has been playing a key role in helping improve the quality of journalism in the country. In March 2006, JED held a workshop (sponsored by the Netherlands Institute of Southern Africa) to provide safety and ethics training to journalists. Noting that at least 60% of attacks against journalists stem from inaccurate and unprofessional reporting, JED believes that promoting higher professional standards will help build the credibility of the news profession and hopefully lead to fewer violations against the press.

JED also actively campaigns for legal reform to better protect freedom of expression. JED has been lobbying for access to information legislation that would guarantee journalists and the public the right to obtain government records. For the past year, JED has also been campaigning to change the country’s media law, under which journalists can be jailed for press offences. JED has won a commitment from President Kabila to review the law and eliminate criminal offences. The organisation has offered to help draft a new bill to replace the current “Loi sur la presse”.

Promoting and defending press freedom in a country as politically unstable as the DRC does not come without great risks. JED has often been the target of death threats and harassment because of its work. On more than one occasion, JED’s president, Donat M’Baya Tshimanga, has been forced to flee the country.

Despite the climate of uncertainty and instability, however, JED remains a tenacious advocate for journalists. Its continuing presence in the country and its connections to international networks are ensuring that press freedom is an issue no elected official can afford to ignore.