



COVID-19 Response in Africa: Together for Reliable Information

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Ghana: Briefing on attacks against journalists March 2020–July 2021

At a glance

Global Expression Report 2021 score:

79/100

2

journalists physically attacked

1

journalist arrested/detained

At least 1

journalist threatened/verbally threatened

About this briefing

Journalists play a vital role in ensuring the right to freedom of expression and access to information, which is protected under international human rights law and Ghana’s Constitution. The protection of media freedom becomes even more relevant during a pandemic.

However, physical attacks, arrests, and threats against journalists during the first year of COVID-19 violated this fundamental right, putting both freedom of expression and journalists’ safety at grave risk, as this briefing shows.

We urge the Government of Ghana to follow the recommendations in this briefing to ensure the right to freedom of expression and the safety of journalists are guaranteed – especially in the COVID-19 pandemic.



A police officer controls a car at a roadblock to restrict inter-city movement during partial lockdown in the cities of Accra and Kumasi to slow the spread of COVID-19 in the Circle neighborhood of Accra, Ghana, 31 March 2020. (Photo: REUTERS/Francis Kokoroko)

Physical attacks, threats, and verbal attacks against journalists

The protection of journalists and human rights defenders, and ending impunity for attacks against them, is a global priority for safeguarding freedom of expression. Threats, attacks, arbitrary arrests, and detention, and, in the gravest cases, enforced disappearance or killings, constitute not only a violation of the right to freedom of expression but also a violation of the right to life and bodily integrity, and sometimes the right to health. Physical attacks are those that inflict pain, harm, or injury, including death, against a person.

Soldier attacks General Manager of Kumasi-based Zuria FM

On 3 April 2020, the General Manager of Kumasi-based Zuria FM and correspondent for Deutsche Welle Radio, Abdul Ganiyu, received a [threat](#) via phone from someone who was then unknown to him. The person threatened him about a critical report his radio station had published on Facebook about alleged military brutalities against a 71-year-old man, who they claimed had flouted the COVID-19 lockdown order.

Two days later, on 5 April, the unknown caller revealed herself to Ganiyu in person as Lieutenant Betrot Ampoma at a community clean-up exercise to reduce unsanitary conditions and fight the spread of COVID-19. Ganiyu was conducting an interview when Lt. Ampoma, who Ganiyu understood was the commander of the patrol team at Asokore Mampong Municipality, reportedly confronted him. She again asked him about Zuria FM's publication of the story about alleged brutality against a 71-year-old man. Ganiyu reported that she then bundled him into a patrol car and slapped him several times.

“ She [Lt. Ampoma] told me she was the one who had called to warn me and my station to desist from discrediting the military. ”

- Abdul Ganiyu, Zuria FM, as told to [MWFA](#)

According to the [Media Foundation for West Africa \(MFWA\)](#), the soldiers only released Ganiyu after Honourable Alhaji Alidu Seidu, the Asokore Mampong Municipal Chief Executive and leader of the clean-up exercise Ganiyu had been covering, intervened.

MFWA reported that Ganiyu went to the Ashanti Regional Police Headquarters to make a complaint. He was asked to return the next day to give a statement. However, five soldiers later stormed Ganiyu's office at Zuria FM and took him back to the Ashanti headquarters to lodge a complaint of false reporting against him. No further information was available at the time of writing (October 2021).

Soldier assaults TV Africa reporter for allegedly breaking lockdown

On 10 April 2020, a soldier [assaulted](#) Samuel Adobah, a reporter with TV Africa, for allegedly breaking lockdown protocols. The incident happened in Accra while the reporter was covering a fire outbreak in a suburb in the capital.

The soldier, identified only as Damfour, arrived at the scene of the fire after Adobah had identified himself to the military team that was already enforcing lockdown protocols on the ground. Security guards had

granted Adobah access to cover the incident. Upon reaching the scene, Damfour slapped Adobah from behind several times and further [assaulted](#) him for breaking lockdown protocols. Adobah made a formal complaint to the police, after which he went to hospital, where he was treated for headaches and body pains.

On 3 May 2020, the MFWA petitioned the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) of the Ghana Armed Forces, Lieutenant General Obed Boamah Akwa, to investigate

the incident. In a letter dated 13 May 2020, the Chief of Staff, Rear Admiral Issah Adams Yakubu, on behalf of the CDS, [stated](#) that 'any soldier found culpable will be dealt with in accordance with our disciplinary code'.

However, at the time of writing (October 2021), no further information was available regarding disciplinary or any other measures taken against the soldiers who attacked the journalist.

Freedom of expression under international law

Everyone has the right to express themselves freely – orally, in writing, and online. The right to freedom of expression includes the right to access information, which is particularly important in a pandemic. It is guaranteed under the ICCPR and in Ghana's [Constitution](#) (Chapter 5, Section 21).

'All persons shall have the right to-

a) freedom of speech and expression, which shall include freedom of the press and other media...'

– Constitution of Ghana (Chapter 5, Section 21)

But while the right to freedom of expression is fundamental, it is not absolute. Under international law, it can be limited for the purposes of protecting public health – but any limitation must be **legitimate, necessary, and proportionate** (Article 19 of the ICCPR).

Recommendations

ARTICLE 19 calls on the Government of Ghana to:

- **Take all measures necessary to guarantee the safety and security of journalists**, by ensuring that all law-enforcement and military officers are aware that arbitrary arrests, detentions, and violence will not be tolerated.
- **Ensure that, in cases of violations, swift and effective investigations are carried out** and perpetrators held accountable within the rule of law.
- **Ensure there are reparations for victims of violence by law-enforcement and military officers**, including adequate compensation.
- **Any restrictions on freedom of expression on the basis of protection of public health must meet the test of legality, necessity, and proportionality**, as required by international freedom of expression standards.
- **Implement the provisions of the African Commission Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa 2019**, including in relation to the safety of journalists.
- **Adopt the recommendations of the [resolution on the safety of journalists](#)**, adopted by the UN Human Rights Council on 6 October 2020, which provide guidance on ensuring the safety of journalists in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The evidence presented in this briefing was sourced from media houses, media watchdogs, journalists' unions, and legal analysis between March 2020 and July 2021. It is limited to human rights violations against journalists in the context of COVID-19 during that time (rather than non-pandemic-related violations against journalists, or violations against non-journalists during COVID-19). For our methodology, see www.article19.org/covid-19-response-in-africa/.