

URGENT ACTION

JOURNALIST SENTENCED FOR “HARASSMENT”

On 24 December 2019, a Benin court sentenced investigative journalist Ignace Sossou to 18 months in prison and fined him for “harassment”, for posting tweets containing quotes made by Benin’s Public Prosecutor during a conference hosted by the French media development agency, CFI. The Public Prosecutor alleged his remarks had been taken out of context and issued a complaint against Ignace Sossou to the Court of First Instance. Ignace Sossou is being arbitrarily detained and must be immediately and unconditionally released.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODELLETTER

Patrice Talon, President of the Republic of Benin
Palais de la Marina
Cotonou, Benin
Email: patricetalon@hotmail.fr

Your Excellency,

I am concerned about the sentence given to investigative journalist Ignace Sossou, for “harassment through electronic communication”. On 18 December 2019, Ignace Sossou posted tweets sharing quotes made by the Public Prosecutor during a conference hosted by the French media development agency, CFI. In his tweets, he stated that the Public Prosecutor had described Benin’s digital code as “a weapon” that can be used against journalists and questioned the government’s decision to shut down the internet during elections, in April 2019. The Public Prosecutor alleged that his remarks were taken out of context by Ignace Sossou and issued a complaint against him to the Court of First Instance, in Cotonou.

On 20 December 2019, the Central Office for the Repression of Cybercrime (OCRC) arrested Ignace Sossou without a warrant, supported by the Central Police Station in Godomey, southern Benin. His home was searched in his presence and his phone was analysed by the technical and scientific police.

On 24 December, Ignace Sossou appeared before a judge. He acknowledged having written the tweets but did not confess to harassing the Public Prosecutor. He was sentenced to 18 months in prison and received a fine of 200,000 FCFA (approximately 254 GBP). He is being detained in Maison d’Arret Prison, Cotonou, southern Benin. He has appealed his conviction and is waiting for his appeal hearing to be scheduled.

Amnesty International considers Ignace Sossou’s detention to be arbitrary and in violation of his right to freedom of expression. Amnesty International is concerned about the repressive climate and undue restrictions on the right to freedom of expression in Benin. The authorities must respect, protect, promote and fulfil the rights of journalists, bloggers, activists and human rights defenders, in accordance with the country’s international human rights obligations.

In view of the above, I urge you to ensure:

- The immediate and unconditional release of Ignace Sossou, who is being arbitrarily detained solely for peacefully exercising his right to freedom of expression;
- The amendment of Law No. 2017-20 of 20 April 2018 on the Digital Code, bringing it into conformity with international standards on freedom of expression, particularly by decriminalising press-offences and the publication of false information and online press crimes.

Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

At least 17 journalists, bloggers and political activists in Benin are known to have been prosecuted under the 2018 Digital Law, in under two years' time. The law's repressive provisions undermine rights to freedom of expression and media freedom in the country.

After declaring that it "distances itself from publications and from these types of practices which are unethical and give a bad name to the profession as a whole", CFI has publicly presented "an apology for the unfolding of the events in which he [Ignace Sossou] was a victim".

In another case, Ignace Sossou was prosecuted in August 2019 for publishing "false information" in connection with two articles on tax evasion in Benin. He had been sentenced by the Cotonou First Class Court of First Instance for defamation to a suspended month in prison and a fine of 500,000 FCFA (approximately 635 GBP).

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: French

You can also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 20 March 2020

Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

NAME AND PREFERRED PRONOUN: Ignace Sossou (he/his)

LINK TO PREVIOUS UA: n/a

ADDITIONAL TARGETS: Benin Consulate, 3 Humber Rd, London NW2 6DW