

EXTERNAL

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Further information on UA 66/97 (AFR 33/01/97, 11 March 1997) - Fear for safety

LESOTHO Candi Ramainoane, newspaper editor

No-one has yet been arrested in connection with the incidents against Candi Ramainoane reported in this Urgent Action.

In the increasingly tense political climate in Lesotho, there have been a number of steps taken against journalists attempting to cover political rallies. In one incident in June 1997, Candi Ramainoane was refused entry to such a rally and allegedly told by a government minister that he should count himself lucky that he was not being allowed in as he would not have come out alive (see further below).

On 11 August 1997 the Lesotho High Court ordered four government ministers to stop using the Lesotho Attorney-General to represent them in a private defamation suit they initiated against the privately-owned Sesotho language newspaper *MoAfrika*, of which Candi Ramainoane is editor-in-chief. The court ordered the four to find private lawyers to represent them. The ministers had initiated their suit in October 1996 following stories published in the 20 September 1996 edition of *MoAfrika* because they objected to expressions such as "the crooked government", "the hidden truth", "a bloodstained government", used in the newspaper. In addition to damages, they were seeking an injunction banning *MoAfrika* from publishing defamatory articles against them.

In replies to members of the Urgent Action Network, Lesotho government officials have accused Candi Ramainoane of using his journalism as a cloak for his own political agenda, and that of a faction of the Basotholand Congress Party (BCP) to which he is allegedly aligned. The letters also allege that, in the past, his newspaper articles helped create a climate in which his opponents within the BCP (now associated with the breakaway Lesotho Congress for Democracy) became vulnerable to attack. The officials make the serious allegation that Candi Ramainoane's "reckless propaganda" played a role in the events leading up to the abduction of cabinet ministers and the killing of one minister by members of the army in 1994. Despite this serious claim, Candi Ramainoane has never been charged with any offence, including any charge of criminal incitement.

In replies to the UA Network, the Minister of Information and Broadcasting acknowledged that he told Candi Ramainoane on a radio phone-in debate that Candi Ramainoane and one member of parliament were "knocking on the prison door", but the Minister denied that this statement could have provoked others to attack Candi Ramainoane or his property (as Amnesty International had feared).

The incidents against Candi Ramainoane seem to form part of a pattern of extreme government sensitivity to a critical media.

FURTHER RECENT BACKGROUND

1997 has been a politically tense and turbulent year in Lesotho. In February, a faction within the police force mutinied in protest against moves to arrest eight police officers, apparently in connection with an armed confrontation inside Maseru Central Charge Office in September 1995 in which senior police officers were shot dead. The eight protested their innocence, and resisted arrest with the support of a sizeable group within the police ranks. This group occupied the police headquarters building, and "dismissed" their commanding officers. The army forcibly dispersed them on 16 February.

Articles in *MoAfrika* at the time raised concerns about the effectiveness of the government's control over the country and the security forces, and about the evident tensions within and between the government, army and police factions. Such articles appear to have been seen by the government and its supporters as threatening to the government's position.

A political and constitutional crisis ensued when on 7 June 1997 the Prime Minister and his supporters in the BCP split from the BCP and announced the formation of a new party, the Lesotho Congress for Democracy (LCD). The breakaway group, which comprised a parliamentary majority, formed a new government, retaining Ntsu Mokhele as Prime Minister. The remaining BCP members of parliament condemned their action and challenged its constitutionality, but they are *de facto* now the minority (opposition) party. Tension over these developments has paralyzed the workings of parliament.

In the aftermath, some journalists covering rallies protesting the formation of the LCD and subsequent parliamentary developments have been abused and harassed. On 28 August the Speaker of the National Assembly banned journalists (and the public) from attending and covering the proceedings. On 1 September armed police officers dispersed journalists protesting the ban. The journalists (led by Candi Ramainoane and by Media Institute of Lesotho (MILES) national director Bethuel Thai) went to parliament to deliver a petition to the Speaker, but the police locked the gates and pushed the journalists out of the parliament building. The police reportedly told them that the Speaker had given instructions that the journalists were not to be allowed even to step into the parliament building. In the following days, repeated efforts by journalists and their legal representatives failed to secure them an audience with the Speaker to appeal against the ban. On 3 September the members of the (unelected) upper house allowed journalists to enter and cover their proceedings. The ban appeared to be an attempt to prevent the public from following debates in the house on the political turnabouts which have led to the power struggle between the BCP and the breakaway LCD. The Speaker lifted the ban on journalists on 15 September.

A number of journalists have been attacked personally and in a public manner by members of the government following the journalists' reports on radio or in print. For instance, it was reported in the independent newspaper *Mopheme* in July 1997 that two journalists, Khutliso Sekoati of *Mopheme* and Christopher Shale of *Mleletsi oa Basotho*, were named on a "hit list". Others said to be on this list included police and supporters of opposition parties "who are giving Mokhele's government a headache". On 11 June army officers allegedly threatened Sekoati and Shale when they were following some army officers during their operations to carry out an arrest

in the Qoaling area. An army officer allegedly threatened to shoot the journalists with his automatic rifle if they did not leave the scene. Sekoati had been threatened over the phone in May by a police officer who demanded to know the source of his article on the trial of the police officers for mutiny.

No further action by Urgent Action participants is requested. Amnesty International is continuing to monitor the situation of individuals believed to be at risk and will take measures on their behalf as appropriate. Many thanks to all who sent appeals on this case. Those many participants who received replies from government officials are asked not to respond, apart from, if they wish, to thank the senders and inform them that their reply has been forwarded on to the International Secretariat.