



Joseph Oduha on reporting – and surviving – in South Sudan

It is one of the hardest and most important jobs in the world – reporting in South Sudan.

Hardest because reporting is so dangerous in the country, states Reporters without Borders: “Harassment, arbitrary detention, torture, or execution-style murder are the prices that journalists pay for refusing to censor themselves” and for continuing to report on the corruption, pollution (especially from Big Oil’s contamination of the country’s water), violence (the number of people killed numbers in the tens of thousands) and rape rampant in South Sudan.

A most important job because the oil-fueled warfare and environmental destruction have caused one third of South Sudan’s population of 12 million to flee for their lives – and thus to be dependent upon international agencies for food and water. Much of the rest of the population is now also facing famine.

And the job of giving these millions of victims a way to tell the world of their horrible plights has fallen upon a small and very brave group of women and men.

One of them is Joseph Oduha, 27 years old and from southern South Sudan. He has been a reporter for nine long years, and is now part of **نحن شهد - Nahnu Nashhad We are Witness**, the fledgling group of front-line reporters who have banded together to tell the world what is going in South Sudan.

Joseph Oduha on reporting in the “world’s most dangerous country for journalists”

“Hard to believe nowadays, but I used to love my chosen profession. That was before civil war broke out in 2013. In the heady pre-civil war era, hopes ran high that South Sudan would have freedom of the press. Those hopes are long gone.

I report on politics, corruption, violations of human rights and of freedom of the press and speech. That makes me a front-line reporter in today’s South Sudan.

Being a front-line reporter means having to go into the field and physically get the stories in this war-torn, broken-infrastructure country.

The only way to do that and to survive while doing so is to build up a large network of reliable and trusted sources who will alert you to hotspots – and to have a news agency that steadfastly backs you up. In my case, it’s The East African, which publishes my stories.

Like those of my colleagues, my life as a journalist is covered by dos and don’ts.

Such as ‘do’ go to the press conferences organized by the UN’s agencies, foreign embassies and other international organizations. ‘Don’t’ attend those conducted by the South Sudanese army and other security agencies. Asking questions at them can get you in lots of very immediate trouble.



'Do' go the Association for Media Development in South Sudan (AMDISS). It is a safe place to meet with colleagues and to get the latest news. This center also has reliable electricity. That's where I charge my smartphone, computer and camera.

The sad truth is, however, that observing these self-imposed rules won't keep you out of trouble forever.

The first time I had to flee South Sudan was in April 2016. My flight was triggered by the grapevine's reporting that I was about to be arrested and tortured for my "critical reporting".

While in exile in Kenya, I met colleagues from other countries who had undergone the same persecution. They encouraged me to give reporting in South Sudan another try. So I returned home in December of 2016.

In January 2018, I found myself once again in the custody of South Sudan's Media Authority, which had summoned me to their office for writing articles that were critical of the government.

While being held by the Authority, I was told to cease reporting on military affairs and government policies because "my reporting was not pleasing the government and its army."

This message was given by Sapana Abuyi, the director of media compliance at the Media Authority, who called me "a rebel from within". This term scared me to death. Being termed a "rebel" is often followed by the security forces coming around to pick you up.

Here is the story that prompted the summons: <http://www.theeastfrican.co.ke/news/South-Sudan-journalists-under-threat/2558-4269280-pjprkiz/index.html>

As I have repeatedly seen in my life as a journalist in South Sudan, the issuance of such threats is often followed by brutal and horrible action.

Particularly bad was 2015, in which seven reporters were murdered in South Sudan.

One of them was Peter Julius Moi. He was my best friend.

They murdered Peter on August 19, 2015, just three days after South Sudanese President Salva Kiir said "If anybody among them (the journalists) does not know that this country has killed people, we will demonstrate it over and over, one day, one at a time."

I got the news a day after the murder. Via Facebook. Via a message from a colleague of Peter and mine.

All of us journalists rushed to the scene of the crime, which was on the outskirts of Juba. Peter had been shot twice in the back by gunmen – still unidentified.



His death terrified and depressed me. Not only were we close friends, we also shared the same beat and had been working together on a number of stories.

One of them was on South Sudan's negotiations with Sudan on oil supply, and how they would further destabilize our economy.

Let's be honest. The threats issued by President Kiir and other senior government officials and institutions to journalists who cover corruption and human rights abuses in South Sudan are having a great impact.

The media in our country has been intimidated and demoralized by them.

I myself live in a state of constant fear and suspicion. And each report of a journalist being kidnapped, tortured, detained or killed makes me more afraid.

Despite this, I still practice journalism in South Sudan.

And I mourn my colleagues who were killed for simply doing their job.





South Sudan's heroic witnesses

In an era of fake, badly-researched and attention-seeking 'news', a collective of South Sudanese reporters is reminding the world what journalism is really all about: finding and getting out the truth, no matter the price to be paid for doing such.

Nahnu Nashhad - "We are Witness" has assigned itself one of the most important and difficult jobs in journalism: to being the voice of the suffering in South Sudan – and to being the world's eyes and ears on and in that crises-plagued country.

To that end, this collective of seasoned journalists will report – via the For South Sudan www.forsouthsudan.com platform – on the environmental catastrophes, conflicts, hunger and thirst afflicting this country of 12 million – and on one of the prime drivers of all these, which is the corruption and poisoning of South Sudan's water, land and politics by oil companies and by their cronies in positions of power.

