

Haiti: Two Years Since the Killing of Journalist Abdias Jean

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He was murdered on January 14, 2005 shortly after finishing his lunch near his home in the Village de Dieu slum.

The killing of Abdias Jean, a young Haitian journalist who reported from Haiti for WKAT radio in Florida, was quickly condemned by Amnesty International, the Director General of UNESCO and the Inter American Press Association. It was reported by Reuters and Associated press wire services. The Secretary General of the Association of Haitian Journalists (AHJ), Guyler Delva, also condemned the murder and expressed dismay at the indifference of the Haitian commercial media to the death of a journalist.

Delva did not share Jeans' political views but the brazen nature of the crime against a fellow journalist impacted him. Delva was part of the opposition that helped to overthrow Haiti's democratically elected government on February 29, 2004 and bring to power de-facto Prime Minister Gerard Latortue, but Delva's protests provoked Latortue's displeasure. According to US based researcher Tom Reeves, who spoke with Reuters employees, Latortue complained to Reuters about an article Delva had written about the murder.

Delva was also a close associate of Reporters San Frontiers' (RSF) Secretary General Robert Menard whose organization failed to mention the killing of Jean and many other assaults on grassroots journalists during the interim period. In August of 2006 the Paris based group RSF was questioned on its failure to report on the murder of Abdias Jean.

RSF's Haiti expert responded "We asked the police about the killings of Abdias Jean and we were told by the police that it was an attack made by the police but that they didn't know he was a journalist. He was taking pictures." The RSF representative admitted that it had not met with a single witness to the murder but that all the information they had on the case was based on the testimony of the police, known for their widespread killings and abuses. The damning police testimony was never published. In a response, Jean-François Julliard, RSF's News Editor, again failed to mention the murder of Jean.

Haitian police spokeswoman Gessy Coicou, speaking for the RCMP trained perpetrators said of Abdias Jean: "I haven't heard of him and I haven't seen his name in any of the files I have. Many journalists have reported that there are many witnesses. I would advise them to file a complaint." The victim's mother filed numerous complaints but nothing has come of them.

In the moments prior to his death, Abdias Jean was investigating murders carried out by the

Haitian police, specifically the killing of two young boys. After taking photos of the victims, he hid in a friend's house when he saw police approaching. But the police spotted him; ordered him out of the house, and shot him in front of several witnesses. Reed Lindsay, a US journalist based in Haiti, reported: "They tied his wrists with his own belt, dragged him a block away and put a bullet through his head" Yet the police claim not to have heard of him. Perhaps they didn't. The police and other armed groups that backed Latortue's de facto government were responsible for 4000 political killings in the greater Port-au-Prince area, according to a scientific study published in the Lancet Medical Journal in August 2006. However, Brian Concannon of the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti asserts "The police know very well who Abdias Jean was. His family filed complaints with the police, the Haitian justice system and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights."

Violence against poor journalists, often those with cameras continued on during the interim period. A young Haitian photojournalist, Jean Ristil, who had photographed MINUSTAH and Haitian police violence in Cite Soleil, said that in November of 2005 he was arrested for the second time. He has been interrogated, tortured and had much of his equipment destroyed by police. On April 7 2005 journalist Robenson Laraque died from injuries suffered while observing a clash between UN troops and members of the disbanded Haitian military in the city of Petit-Goâve. Later that year unknown assailants murdered another Haitian journalist, Jacques Roche. His killing was exploited by the interim government to justify the vilification and imprisonment of a prominent liberation theologian and critic.

The failure to achieve justice for the victims of violence by the interim government's forces and their armed supporters has been widely ignored by the corporate press, many academics and some press freedom groups like RSF which claim impartiality. The killers of Abdias Jean, much like the killers of thousands of Haitians after the coup of February 2004 remain at large. Concannon, a lead lawyer on the historic Raboteau massacre trial, observes, "Abdias Jean's killing is yet one more example of the double standard, where the lives of poor black men in Haiti matter least. Had he been a journalist with a prominent Haitian or foreign outlet visiting Cite de Dieu, he would have been eulogized for his courage in going into that neighborhood. But he was a poor journalist covering his neighbors, so he has been forgotten."

Mario Andersol, chief of the Haitian national police, was unavailable for comment.

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