

2002 - Geoffrey Nyarota, Zimbabwe

Laureate of the UNESCO / Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize 2002

Zimbabwean editor Geoffrey Nyarota is the winner of this year's UNESCO/Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize.* Andrew Meldrum in Harare spoke to Nyarota about his fight for a free press.

As the editor of The Daily News, Zimbabwe's only independent daily newspaper, Nyarota is in the thick of the struggle to maintain a free press in Zimbabwe.

Just two days before this interview Nyarota was held by police for eight hours and charged with criminal defamation for stories that claimed government officials had falsified voting results in the March presidential election. Nyarota and his family see strange cars lingering in front of their house and Nyarota has received death threats.

The government has pressed five charges against Nyarota for articles exposing corruption and human rights abuses. Under Zimbabwe's new media law he could be sentenced to jail and the newspaper could be closed down.

But Nyarota remains unshaken. "There is no substance to these charges. Our stories were solid and our cases are air-tight. The government's charges will not hold up in court," he says confidently. "The government wants all the press and, indeed, all Zimbabweans to be reduced to a level of subservience so that we accept whatever it tells us. We reject that."

With that quiet but unyielding determination, Nyarota has put his newspaper at the forefront of the battle to keep an independent and critical press alive in Zimbabwe. Since founding The Daily News in 1999, Nyarota has steered the newspaper to become the biggest seller in Zimbabwe, outselling by far the state-owned Herald.

The Daily News has had to withstand considerable obstruction and Nyarota has received death threats. In April 2000 The Daily News offices were bombed and in January 2001 a massive explosion destroyed the paper's printing presses. Despite all that the paper has not missed a single day of publication.

"I never thought that my journalistic career would take me to this present situation," sighs Nyarota. "I started off wanting to write about cars, not politics."

He became one of the first black reporters at The Herald, when the southern African country was known as Rhodesia and under white minority rule. Nyarota came to prominence covering the country's first majority rule elections in 1980 which brought Robert Mugabe and his party to power. Nyarota became editor of the state-owned The Manica Post, a weekly newspaper in the eastern border town of Mutare. In one year he doubled the paper's circulation. "It was not difficult," says Nyarota. "The paper had previously catered only to the white minority. I simply opened the paper up to a general readership and the circulation soared." Then Nyarota was promoted to become editor of another state-owned newspaper, The Bulawayo Chronicle, the daily newspaper in Zimbabwe's second city.

At The Bulawayo Chronicle, Nyarota exposed the "Willowgate" scandal in which the state-owned Willowvale vehicle assembly plant allocated scarce cars to government ministers who

then sold them at considerable profit. The Chronicle's series forced the resignations of five cabinet ministers. But the government was not pleased to have been so embarrassed and Nyarota was removed from The Chronicle. After leaving the government service, he briefly edited a privately-owned weekly newspaper, The Financial Gazette, and then taught journalism at the Nordic/SADC School of Journalism in Mozambique. In 1998 he returned to Zimbabwe as a founder of the Associated Newspapers of Zimbabwe, which gave birth to The Daily News.

With lively reporting, biting cartoons and a snappy design the paper quickly became the most popular one in Harare. Solid investigative stories exposed widespread corruption, human rights abuses and economic mismanagement. As the paper won an enthusiastic readership, it earned the enmity of the government. Nyarota's growing determination to keep The Daily News publishing its independent view of events in Zimbabwe has led him to win several awards.

"I have won these honours, but really it has been a collective effort," says Nyarota. "I am the leader of a team that has earned these awards. The entire team has faced threats and violence. The government has targeted our journalists. Now it is stopping distribution of our paper in rural areas. In the run up to the elections people were only exposed to government information, news and views. To limit the population's access to information only from the government network is in direct contravention of democratic principles."

Shortly after he was re-elected President of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe signed into law a press act that gives the government the power to ban journalists and newspapers. The country has a pressing need for more independent newspaper coverage and Nyarota says he is up to the challenge.

Nyarota said he is delighted with the World Press Freedom award from UNESCO. "The entire team at The Daily News is encouraged by the award and we are inspired to continue our work. It is a great honour, but there is one more award that I dearly want," he says. "That is to see genuine press freedom for Zimbabwe. That is the ultimate award our country could receive. All the pain, all the sacrifices, the humiliation we have endured must yield something and true press freedom in Zimbabwe would benefit the entire nation."