

US-Nigeria website censored

Nigerian authorities should halt all efforts to intimidate journalists working with the U.S.-headquartered, Nigeria-focused Sahara Reporters news website and ensure they are permitted to continue working to report the news, the Committee to Protect Journalists said.



Police officers detain Sahara Reporters journalist Victor Ogunbenro during a protest in Lagos, Nigeria, on August 5, 2019. Staff at the online newspaper report sustained harassment targeting them and their website. Credit: CPJ/AP/Sunday Alamba.

Sahara Reporters staff told CPJ their Nigerian bank account was frozen without advance notice in October, significantly hindering their operations. The website was separately disabled twice due to allegations of copyright infringement, and staff report cyberattacks and increased surveillance outside their Lagos office, according to *Sahara Reporters* staff who spoke to CPJ.

The site conducts aggressive reporting on corruption, according to CPJ's review of its reporting. Its founder, Omoyele Sowore, is in Department of State Services (DSS) custody after organizing August protests calling for improved governance, according to [CPJ research](#) and [news reports](#). CPJ is unable to confirm a connection between Sowore's arrest and his journalism, but continues to investigate the case.

"*Sahara Reporters* must be permitted to keep the Nigerian public informed without intimidation," said Angela Quintal, CPJ's Africa program coordinator. "Surveillance, cyberattacks, and copyright notices against *Sahara Reporters* mark a concerning pattern of interference and harassment of an investigative news outlet."

Sahara Reporters' Nigeria-based account with Guaranty Trust Bank was frozen without warning in October, La Keisha Landrum Pierre, *Sahara Reporters'* chief operating officer, told CPJ. The outlet has struggled to pay operating costs and salaries and was unable to publish for a day on November 10, Pierre said.

Pierre told CPJ the bank said the account was subject to "a government hold" and "not able to be operated," but would not elaborate. When CPJ requested comment by email, Ijeoma Nwachukwu, a relationship manager with Guaranty Trust Bank, declined to reveal details about specific accounts because of "duty of confidentiality."

In mid-September, *Sahara Reporters* documented [three vehicles](#) carrying security officers parked outside the outlet's Lagos office. Those officers banged on the gates and called for journalists to come out before departing, *Sahara Reporters* news editor Senami Kojah told CPJ.

Staff in Lagos have repeatedly seen vehicles with tinted windows outside the outlet's office with occupants wearing black clothes characteristic of DSS agents, Kojah said. Abiodun Sanusi, a reporter with *Sahara Reporters*, told CPJ by phone that he saw two men wearing black uniforms and caps in a van outside the office on November 5.

Calls CPJ made to DSS spokesperson Peter Afunaya in early December went unanswered.

Pierre told CPJ that *Sahara Reporters'* website has also been subject to cyberattacks and takedown requests. She described at least three incidents since August where exceptionally high traffic consistent with distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks threatened to disable the website, though without success.

The entire site was separately taken down for several hours each on October 16 and November 17 in relation to a copyright complaint under U.S. law, Pierre said. A U.S.-based company involved in hosting the website said that a Nigeria-based complainant had flagged a *Sahara Reporters* article for violating the U.S. Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA), according to notifications reviewed by CPJ. The 1998 DMCA incentivizes intermediaries to remove or disable access to content subject to copyright complaints to avoid liability, according to CPJ [reporting](#) on Ecuador.

Pierre told CPJ that the notifications referenced a 2010 story on political corruption allegations that [another website](#) appeared to have republished with an earlier date. Though *Sahara Reporters'* site was restored each time, the [article](#) was unavailable when CPJ attempted to view it in December; Pierre said they continue to challenge the complaint.

Several *Sahara Reporters* investigations have alleged senior Nigerian officials' involvement in wrongdoing. One [May](#) example based on leaked audio recordings alleged that Godwin Emefiele, governor of Nigeria's central bank, sought to cover up the theft of 500 billion Naira (US\$1.38 billion) in public funds. Central bank spokesperson Isaac Okorafor told local [media](#) the audio was authentic but misleading, since no money was missing. Documents released during the prosecution of whistleblower George Uboh, who accused the banker of taking the money, suggest Emefiele asked Nigeria's police chief to investigate *Sahara Reporters'* source, according to the outlet's [July](#) report.

CPJ called a number listed for Okorafor on December 9 but the person who answered did not respond to questions before the line disconnected; subsequent calls rang unanswered. CPJ's calls to Frank Mba, spokesperson for the Nigerian police, also went unanswered.

DSS agents arrested *Sahara Reporters* founder Omoyele Sowore on August 3 after he planned nationwide protests under the hashtag [#RevolutionNow](#); he is charged with treason, cybercrime, and money laundering, including for transfers allegedly made to *Sahara Reporters'* Nigerian bank account, according to a U.S.-based legal team's [submission](#) to the U.N. working group on arbitrary detention. Sowore has been jailed ever since, aside from one overnight release on bail in early December, according to Pierre and [media reports](#).

CPJ has [documented](#) Nigerian security forces repeatedly attacking journalists, including those [reporting](#) on the August demonstrations or [related](#) protests against Sowore's detention. Following the reelection of Nigerian President Muhammadu

Buhari in February, journalists [told CPJ](#) they worried that his government would feel less restrained in curbing press freedom.

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