

Banjul, Gambia, June 9 (Infosplusgabon) - The new Gambian government has started paying families of two journalists who were victims of Yahya Jammeh's reign of terror as declared by a sub-regional court, on Saturday.

The Community Court of ECOWAS, sitting in Abuja, Nigeria, has ruled that the former Gambian government failed to conduct a proper investigation into the murder of journalist Deyda Hydera and ordered the state to pay US\$50,000 to his family.

The same court in 2008, also ordered The Gambia to pay US\$100,000 in compensatory damages to the disappeared journalist Ebrima Manneh, or in his absence, to his family.

Now, according to the Ghana-based rights body, Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) the Gambia has started rolling out payments to the families of the two journalists.

“There has been a major breakthrough in efforts to secure reparation for journalist victims of Yahya Jammeh's reign of terror as the new government in The Gambia has paid 50% of the compensations to the families of two of the victims, Chief Ebrima Manneh and Deyda Haydara,” MFWA revealed in a statement.

“The initial 50% payment of the compensations is in fulfillment of commitments made by the Adama Barrow-led government following discussions between the families of the victims, MFWA and the Gambia Press Union (GPU).”

Speaking to PANA in Banjul, the eldest son of the slain editor, Baba Hydara confirmed the half payment of what he called “court’s reward” to the Hydara family by the Barrow government.

He clarified that the money was not actually compensation but rather a reward from the court to the family for winning the case against the Jammeh government which had failed to properly investigate Hydara’s murder.

He said the present government promised to pay the second half later, adding: “it is really good that the Barrow Government respects the court’s decision.”

Deyda Hydara, who was co-founder and editor of The Point newspaper, was shot and killed on 16 December 2004.

The compensation package for the third high-profile victim, Musa Saidykhan, is however, still being worked out between the government and the journalist.

In the case of Chief Manneh, who worked for the Daily Observer newspaper, he was arrested and detained by then National Intelligence Agency (NIA), now renamed State Intelligence Service, and eventually disappeared.

Like Manneh, Saidykhan, then editor-in-chief of the now defunct Independent newspaper, was arrested by the NIA and brutally tortured in detention.

Meanwhile, the three journalists became symbols of Yahya Jammeh's brutal crackdown on press freedom during the strongman's 22-year dictatorship.

In 2010, the ECOWAS court also ordered The Gambia to pay Mr. Saidykhan, who now lives in America, the sum of US\$200,000. Jammeh's government refused to abide by the ruling and rejected repeated calls to do so.

However upon assumption of office in January 2017, President Barrow expressed his government's commitment to comply with the court's judgments.

Working with its national partner organization, the GPU and with financial support from IFEX, the MFWA subsequently presented a legal position paper to the government urging them to comply with the court's decision.

Following that, the MFWA and the GPU facilitated meetings between Gambian Ministry of Justice and the families of Manneh, Saïdykhan and Hydera to discuss and negotiate the payment of the compensations.

At the meetings, the government representatives promised to make an initial 50% payment in the first half of 2018 and pay the rest by the end of the year.

"The eventual fulfillment of this pledge is a major achievement in the long fight for justice for the victims as it comes during the 10th anniversary of the ECOWAS court ruling on the Manneh case," MFWA remarked.

“The government’s decision also amply demonstrates its goodwill and commitment to justice, reconciliation and respect for human rights in the country.”

The sub-regional rights body also hailed the progress made so far and reaffirmed its continued commitment to supporting the process to ensure that the Gambian state’s outstanding obligations in respect of “these emblematic cases are redeemed.”

“While we applaud the new government for this gesture, we call on the government to use June 5, 2018, being the tenth anniversary of the judgment of the ECOWAS Court, to once and for all disclose the whereabouts of the disappeared journalist,” MFWA concluded.

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