

# Govt jails journo for contempt of court

Authorities in Mauritius yesterday, 20 October 2011, imprisoned a journalist for contempt of the Supreme Court and levied two fines over coverage of a case, according to journalists and news reports. The Committee to Protect Journalists condemned the sentences.

Editor in chief, Dharmanand Dooharika of the weekly *Samedi Plus* was incarcerated in the main prison in the town of Beau-Bassin, even though his appeal is pending against the three month jail sentence handed down Monday by Justice Keshoe Parsad Matadeen of the Mauritius Supreme Court, defense lawyer Ravi Rutnah told the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ).

Matadeen also sentenced Poovanam Chetty of Contact Press Ltd., parent company of the newspaper, to a fine of 300 000 rupees (US\$10nbsp;300) and fined Radio Plus 200nbsp;000 rupees (US\$6nbsp;900), according to news reports. The parent company and the radio station are appealing the fines, they said.

The convictions stem from press coverage in July and August 2010 of a businessman and disbarred lawyer, Dev Hurnam, who represented a car leasing company in a fraud lawsuit against the local subsidiary of the United Kingdom-based global financial services provider Barclays. The Supreme Court ruled against him.

He then made public allegations of partiality against Supreme Court Chief Justice Bernard Sik Yuen. In response to the accusations, the chief justice asked the Mauritian president to take steps to sanction Hurnam, according to news reports. The government's Director of Public Prosecutions then brought complaints against *Samedi Plus* and Radio Plus, although Hurnam's comments were widely covered by the Mauritian private press, according to news reports and local journalists.

In its complaint against Dooharika, director of Public Prosecutions cited in an editorial, dated 14 August 2010, suggested that the allegations against the chief justice should be given credence, according to CPJ research. *Samedi Plus* devoted extensive coverage to the case and Hurnam's allegations, including the front page, the complaint said.

## Accusations

The director accused the journalist of "publicly scandalizing the Supreme Court," "bringing the administration of justice into disrepute," and "thereby committing a contempt of court," and outlined similar accusations against Radio Plus over a July 29, 2010 broadcast interview with Hurnam.

"We condemn the imprisonment of Dharmanand Dooharika and the fines imposed on *Samedi Plus* and Radio Plus, which are not about the administration of justice but about shielding the Supreme Court from criticism," said CPJ Africa advocacy coordinator Mohamed Keita. "We call on Mauritian authorities to immediately release Dooharika on bail pending appeal and

we call on the appeals court to overturn these convictions."

Shortly after the announcement of the verdict Monday, 17 October 2011, Dooharika fainted at the courthouse and was hospitalized under police guard for high blood pressure until Thursday at Apollo Bramwell private hospital, according to local news reports.

Local website Defimedia.info said the sentence marked the first time a journalist had been condemned to prison on the Indian Ocean island. CPJ research shows that three journalists arrested in 2007 were the first to be arrested in the country in 13 years. Those three were released on bail and charges were eventually dropped.

The government of Prime Minister Navin Ramgoolam has been hostile to the independent press, with police interrogations on the rise, according to CPJ research.

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