

Kenya's democratic mirage affects journalists

The disputed presidential election in Kenya which brought chaos to the country has been affecting agricultural journalists too. Catherine Mgendi, who works in Media Relations for the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), based in Nairobi, wrote this report for the IFAJ E-News in late January.

Before December 29, 2007, Kenya could easily have passed for a fast-maturing democratically governed state save for a curiously out-of-place attack on press freedom earlier in the year when government security forces invaded one of the media houses, the Standard Group, dismantling and carrying away equipment therefore paralysing operations.

But disputed presidential election results have thrown the country into a quandary, the media and journalists too. The broadcast media has additionally had to contend with a ban on live broadcasts.

The country's science journalists who report on agriculture, environment, health, and anything else deemed too technical for the regular reporter have found themselves thrust onto the streets and into stinging clouds of teargas.

"The post-election crisis is affecting us very badly," says Wandera Ojanji, science writer with *The Standard* newspaper. "I am struggling to find articles for my pages. It is extremely difficult to find sources. The few scientists you reach are more concerned about the political situation."

Kimani Chege, a correspondent for SciDev.Net and editor of a monthly science magazine, *TechNews*, had to postpone developing stories that would have required him to travel out of Nairobi to areas badly affected by post-election violence "until things settle down".

He had to go back to his database of stories from last year to put together the January issue of the magazine, and then contend with production houses that grounded their operations for the greater part of the month.

Mr Ojanji, who specialises in reporting on biotechnology, says he is constantly at loggerheads with his bosses in the newsroom for pursuing science stories while they want him to cover politics. He cannot wait to get back to his regular beat.

Another senior journalist with the *Daily Nation*, Jeff Otieno, who constantly struggles to write science stories is very clear on the priorities: "I have to finish off the political story first then I'll see what to do with the agriculture story," he emphatically told this writer. Fortunately, he got the agriculture story published on the very day it was released, probably due to a hunger for apolitical stories among the paper's editors.

All papers have had to rely on newswire stories to fill their science magazine pages this week. *Capital FM* radio journalist Catherine Karong'o also had to delve into her archives to produce stories for the station's weekend feature, *Green Desk*.

"I have managed to put together three features from a field trip last year. The last runs this weekend (January 26-27, 2008) and beyond that I have no more materials," she says.