Two Agence France-Presse journalists beaten, detained in Central Africa

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By Sonia Bakaric and Camille Malplat, AFP

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<https://news.yahoo.com/two-afp-journalists-beaten-detained-c-africa-133548965.html?mc_cid=7c64ef6f86>

Security forces in Central African Republic beat and detained two journalists working for French news wire Agence France-Presse (AFP) covering a banned opposition protest in the capital Bangui, the reporters said Sunday.

Charles Bouessel, 28, and Florent Vergnes, 30, said they were held for more than six hours and questioned three times on Saturday after having been manhandled by members of the Central Office for the Suppression of Banditry (OCRB).

The pair also had their equipment confiscated and a camera smashed up.

AFP condemned the incident as "unjustifiable police violence".

"The protest was going well, the (police) let us film and clearly saw that we were not part of the rally," Bouessel said Sunday.

"Then the protesters were quickly dispersed. Trucks carrying OCRB members arrived and we heard live bullets being fired", he added.

The reporters said they were prevented from leaving the area despite telling the security forces that they were accredited journalists allowed to work in CAR.

The OCRB "seemed furious that we were filming the scene and charged at us," Bouessel said.

"One of them grabbed my camera and smashed it on the ground. I put my hands up in the air but received a first slap to the head. My backpack was snatched from me and thrown to the ground. When I asked to get them back... I received more punches."

- 'Grabbed by the throat' -

Vergnes, meanwhile, said he was "grabbed by the throat", slapped and "pistol-whipped in the back with a Kalashnikov".

Security forces also seized his bag, camera and mobile phone during the arrest.

"I had a nosebleed and my back and jaw hurt," he said, adding he saw a doctor in Bangui on Sunday.

AFP Director for Africa Boris Bachorz said the reporters had done nothing wrong.

"Charles Bouessel and Florent Vergnes did nothing but their work, for which they were duly accredited by the Central African Republic authorities, when they were arrested and beaten by members of the police before being detained for hours," Bachorz said in a statement.

"We ask the CAR authorities for assurances that these two journalists, like all their colleagues in Central African Republic, can continue to carry out their work without having to fear for their physical wellbeing."

Bachorz added that AFP would formally seek those assurances from CAR authorities on Monday.

Justice Minister Flavien Mbata said the two journalists had been arrested because they were present at a protest banned by the police.

"We demanded yesterday that they be released, which has happened," Mbata told AFP, adding further steps would be determined "once we have all the details".

Paris-based media rights campaigners Reporters Without Borders (RSF) denounced the treatment of the journalists.

"This bad treatment must not go unpunished," it said on its Twitter account.

The CAR is ranked 145th out of 180 countries in RSF's 2019 World Press Freedom Index, after dropping 33 places.