Concern mounts over missing SA journo as govt scrambles to assist

By Issa Sikiti da Silva

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As concern mounts over the fate of Anton Hammerl, a South African photographer missing in Libya alongside two US journalists and one Spanish photographer, the Presidency said yesterday, Wednesday, 20 April 2011, that President Jacob Zuma has been briefed on the attempts made by the SA mission in Libya to locate Hammerl. Reports from Washington DC also suggest that the White House is very concerned about their well-being and it is trying hard to assist them in any way it can.



"The president instructed the department of international relations and cooperation to use the necessary diplomatic channels to obtain information regarding his whereabouts," Zuma's spokesperson Zizi Kodwa said in a statement issued yesterday afternoon, amid criticism by Hammerl's colleagues that the government 'does not care' and is 'doing nothing' to help.

Difficult to obtain information

But Kodwa said it had been difficult to obtain information following the evacuation of all South Africans in Libya at the time of the disappearance of Hammerl and the other three journalists.

"The SA mission in Tripoli has now partially opened and doing everything possible to locate Mr Hammerl, and the department continues to provide consular assistance to the family of Hammerl and other South Africans in distress."

A group of journalists, members of the public and friends of Hammerl held demonstrations yesterday in Cape Town, according to media reports. Today in Johannesburg there will be a demonstration on the grass verge on the corner of Jan Smuts and William Nicol Drive, next to Hyde Park Corner, between 12 noon and 2pm.

US government very concerned

Yesterday, the New Zealand Herald Online reported that White House spokesman Jay Carney wrote on Twitter that the US government was very concerned about the disappearance of Clare Gillis (the Atlantic.com), J Foley (GlobalPost.com freelance reporter), Hammerl and Spanish photographer Manu Brabo.

The Free Anton Hammerl Facebook page this morning quoted Carney as saying: "Journalists across the globe risk their lives each day to keep us informed, demand accountability from world leaders and give a voice to those who would not otherwise be heard."

It is believed that hundreds of African journalists have disappeared without trace for 'offending' their respective governments, while others are being held in secret locations throughout Africa in appalling conditions and without access to medical and legal assistance and family visits.

Huge cause of concern

It is therefore against this backdrop that the fate of the four missing journalists has become a huge cause of concern for their governments, colleagues and families.

Muammar Gaddafi's spokesperson Musa Ibrahim told the AFP that the four journalists are currently in detention in an undisclosed Libyan military jail. "They are being treated correctly, will be transferred to Tripoli and freed," he said, without giving any timeframe.

But, given the Libyan government's litanies of promises and lies and hypocrisy, concerned colleagues and friends of the four journalists are pessimistic for a happy ending.

Two more photographers killed

Meanwhile, *The Guardian* reports that British award-winning news photographer Tim Hetherington (40) of US magazine *Vanity Fair* was killed by mortar fire on Tuesday in the besieged Libyan city of Misrata. Chris Hondros (41), a US Pulitzer nominee who works for Getty Images, was also killed in the attack, while two colleagues were wounded.

The Guardian also said Hetherington wrote in his last post on Twitter on Tuesday: "In besieged Libyan city of Misrata. Indiscriminate shelling by Gaddafi forces. No sign of Nato."

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