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Gambian journalist gives real-world lesson on press freedom

Edward Fitzpatrick The Providence Journal

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Assuming he was about to die, he handed the change from his bus fare to the woman sitting next to him.

“Just take it,” he told her. “Just pray for me — pray for me.”

As an eager young journalist, he'd been smashed with rifle butts and sliced with bayonets for daring to ask tough questions and challenge government secrecy. He'd resorted to writing for an online publication using a pseudonym. But the president's intelligence agents had hacked into the website, discovering that he was behind the hard-hitting stories.

And, now, every soldier in The Gambia was hunting for Omar Bah.

“They just wanted me dead,” Bah told a class of journalism students at Roger Williams University on Nov. 27. “He had ordered me to be dead.”

Bah provided the students with a real-world lesson about the value of press freedom at a time when authoritarian bullies across the globe are disparaging, marginalizing, prosecuting, jailing and murdering reporters.

For example, Turkish prosecutors say Jamal Khashoggi, a U.S.-based Saudi contributor to The Washington Post, was dismembered after he entered the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in October. Myanmar has jailed two Reuters journalists who were investigating a massacre of Rohingya Muslims. And Philippine prosecutors just filed tax cases against a critical news site, Rappler, including criminal charges that could allow for the arrest of the site's editor.

Earlier in the class, the RWU students had been talking about how they're entering journalism at a time when “fake news” has become a reflexive taunt and the president of the United States has branded major media outlets “the enemy of the people.” At the same time, the students said, many people have encouraged them, saying the nation needs good reporters now more than ever.

Bah offered a blend of hope and concern.

He said former Gambian President Yahya Jammeh called journalists “illegitimate sons of Africa,” and he said he’s concerned “seeing a president of a democratic country like America saying certain things that dictators would say.” He’s also alarmed that President Donald Trump praised a congressman for body slamming a reporter. “It’s openly endorsing violence or attacks against journalists,” he said.

But Bah is hopeful because “American structures are very strong — there are checks and balances.” He noted that a federal judge restored the press pass for CNN’s Jim Acosta after the White House revoked it. And he noted that U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr. stood up for an independent judiciary after Trump denounced a judge.

By contrast, “all the courts are controlled by the president in The Gambia,” he said. “They are a tool of the dictatorship.”

Bah told the students that he grew up in one of the poorest parts of The Gambia, a country of 2.1 million people in West Africa. People were dying of malaria and riding in the back of donkey carts used as ambulances while the president was living lavishly and riding in Hummer limousines, he said.

Now 39, Bah said that when he was the RWU students’ age, he dreamed of becoming a lawyer who could fight for human rights, or a journalist who could provide a voice for others. Unable to afford law school, he convinced a biweekly newspaper to let him cover the courts.

When he tried to report on a secret trial at a military barracks in 2001, soldiers beat him until he lost consciousness and stuffed him into a closet-sized cell. Luckily, people had seen the attack, and public pressure resulted in his release.

But other reporters weren’t as lucky. “A lot of people I worked with disappeared,” he said. “Their only crime was speaking out or writing about the issues happening in the country.”

Bah kept writing until the day his cellphone rang in the newsroom and he was told: The government knows you’ve been writing the critical stories — if you don’t leave now, you are a dead man.

By nightfall, he was in the back of a 14-passenger bus, heading for the border. A soldier boarded the bus, holding an AK-47 and a flashlight, checking IDs, searching for Bah.

“I was seeing death,” he told the class. He handed his change to the woman next to him, and when the soldier reached the back of the bus, he stood up, raised his hands and closed his eyes as

the flashlight shown in his face.

The soldier began to say his name — "Omar B ..." — and then lowered the flashlight.

Bah opened his eyes and saw a familiar face: The soldier was a middle school classmate — a friend who had chaired his campaign for "head boy," or class president.

The soldier made a split-second decision, stepped off the bus and yelled at the driver: "Move! Move!"

"Because of that person, I am here today," Bah told the class in Bristol.

Bah explained that he eventually made his way to Providence, where he founded the Refugee Dream Center to help those facing similar journeys. He became a U.S. citizen, graduated from RWU with a master's degree, and is now pursuing a doctorate at William James College. Someday, he said, he'd like to launch a "very vibrant newspaper" to hold the government accountable in The Gambia.

After class, RWU junior Noah Ashe said Bah's story underscores the need to protect and promote First Amendment values — and to "never stop seeking the truth and to hold government and its officials accountable to the public."

"I cannot imagine what it must be like to know that an entire country is looking for you, looking to kill you," Ashe said. "His story has made me question: Why doesn't every country have a First Amendment? We are so lucky to have the First Amendment and the ability to speak our minds freely. Americans should take the time to cherish that fact."

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