

# INTERVIEW WITH A DEAD MAN

**Norbert Zongo**

**@ L'Independant Newspaper**

**Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso**

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[Index on Free Expression](#)

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**keith harmon snow**

Mention that you are writing about Burkina Faso and some people will inquire, "Who is that?"

Like neighbor Niger, land-locked Burkina Faso, formerly Upper Volta, is in media whiteout. The occasional [National Geographic](#) article Orientalizes the Sahel's Tuareg people, amplifying sexual intrigue and the mysteries of the veil [1]. Lost to the fatalistic [National Geographic](#) editors are those nomadic transnational corporations, operating throughout the Sahel, whose directorships are shared by [National Geographic](#) trustees [2].

When is the last time you saw a news article on Burkina Faso? When is the first?

Exxon (Esso) has for decades mined uranium in an international consortium exploiting vast tracts of the Sahara. Barrick Gold—a George H.W. Bush (former CIA director and US President), Brian Mulroney (former Prime Minister of Canada), Howard Baker (former U.S. Senator) enterprise -- operates by dictator's proxy in Mali and Niger—in the Liptako frontiere with Burkina Faso. No matter. Foreign interests are anathema to the media mythology of poverty, famine, overpopulation, drought and desertification in the Sahel.

Burkina Faso is hands-off to United States' intervention due to its strategic importance as Israeli outpost for Sahelian oversight. Extrajudicial execution and detention without trial persist. President Blaise Compaore has cavorted with UNITA's Jonas Savimbi in Angola, and with Charles Taylor, sacrificing lives of Burkinabes in exchange for pay-outs from rebel war chests. Taylor and Compaore have been sowing terror in Sierra Leone.

Landmines have been stockpiled by Burkina Faso, and the regime is newly implicated in weapons shipments in contravention of arms embargoes on Angola and Sierra Leone [3]. Diamonds float around the circles of power in Ouagadougou. Perhaps that's why they call the government *tueur*

*mais travailleur*—killing but hard-working.

Ouagadougou is a nightmare of unregulated exhaust, traffic and noise. Attendants make a dollar an hour at shiny new Royal Dutch/Shell gas stations. Shell advertises cycle over the TV. Forced child marriage and female genital mutilation keep the women down.

Tuareg refugees float around in white turbans and indigo robes: tens of thousands flooded Burkina in the early 1990's to escape war in Mali and Niger. Some 35,000 remained in Burkina as of 1997. Refugees speak of unmitigated slaughter—their children's throats slit before their eyes—and deracination. "How can we go back to nothing?" they ask of an uncertain U.N. repatriation program and rumors of repression on return.

Local newspapers get their international news shipped to them by the U.S. Embassy. "Every week we get a package of information from the U.S. Embassy," said Mr. Ouedraogo, the Directeur de L'Observateur newspaper, "The information from the U.S. Embassy is in French, and it is very good."

According to U.S. Embassy attache' Virgil Bodeen, the U.S. Embassy and U.S. Information Agency (USIA) in Ouaga weekly get complete texts of clips from U.S. news sources like the L.A. Times, Washington Post and New York Times, which the U.S. State Department finds important. "These are not distributed outside the Embassy," Bodeen countered quickly. On his desk was a recent New York Times article by Howard French: "Ouagadougou Journal: A Grisly Assassination that Won't Stay Buried," dated March 10, 1997, about the 1987 murder of Thomas Sankara [4].

On May 19, 1997, Halidou Ouedraogo, President of the Mouvement Burkinabe des Droits de L'Homme et des Peuples (MBDHP), was lecturing at the University of Ouagadougou about impunity for human rights abuses and military repression targeting students that spring: students were repeatedly harassed, arrested, some beaten, some tortured, women stripped—attacks were ignored by the international media [5].

Seated next to Ouedraogo was student leader Andre' Tibirie, President of the Association Nationale Etudiantes de Burkinabe (ANEB): both were arrested again—December 1, 1998, and May 17, 1999, after massive civil unrest and strikes following the grisly assassination of journalist and editor Norbert Zongo. Trade unionists, lawyers and journalists have also been targeted. Human rights activists continue to face arrests, threats and intimidation. Ouedraogo's car was bombed in 1991 and 1994. Such social inequities are infrequently reported.

Trained by Israeli and French military experts, the elite Regiment de la Securite Presidentielle (RSP)—the main instrument in the regime's crimes de sang (blood crimes)—was implicated in the murder of David Ouedraogo, childhood friend and chauffeur for President Compaore's younger brother Francoise, who was tortured to death on January 18, 1998. Many believe Norbert Zongo was investigating the murder a bit too persistently and vigorously.

On December 13, 1998, Norbert Zongo was found dead, his car burned, with his brother Yembi Ernest Zongo, his chauffeur Ablaise' Nikiema, and Blaise Ilboudo, some 100 kilometers from the capital. An Independent Commission of Inquiry in May 1999, found that Zongo was murdered for political reasons: Six members of the RSP were named as serious suspects.

Norbert Zongo was a warm, animated and compassionate man. Founding Directeur and editor of L'Independant (The Independent) newspaper, and President of the Association of Independent Newspaper Editors in Burkina Faso, Zongo emerged from the offices of L'Independant waving the ubiquitous New York Times clipping written by Howard French.

Norbert Zongo: Look at this story! It is about the assassination of revolutionary leader Thomas Sankara [1987]. It is an American anti-France story because there is too much of a French connection with Blaise Compaore. It is the New York Times which keeps the assassination alive. We have lots of problems but they don't report on that. They don't report anything. They keep digging up the Sankara assassination. But he was killed by Compaore's friends. Have you seen this?

Keith Harmon Snow: I've seen it. Howard French is one of the chief propagandists on Africa for the New York Times so it's no surprise to see him manufacturing anti-France propaganda for Burkina. What's more interesting is their silence on the regimes in Cameroon, Gabon and Togo: they are in complete media whiteout in the U.S. But please tell me about the press climate in Burkina Faso...

Zongo: Burkina Faso has laws against Freedom of Press but the Constitution lays out laws about press freedom. In 1994, the government began limiting press freedoms. Government refused to create the Conseil de L'Information designated by the Constitution, which was supposed to be a non-government organization or bureau, but instead created their own Conseil Superior de L'Information, which is not independent—[a.k.a.] there is no separation of powers. In [April] 1997 the government banned all free radio discussion of social problems. The Conseil Superior de L'Information controls the press, radio, TV, journals and newspapers. Last month [April] was the first time the government has banned social exposes.

snow: Like Ghana, Burkina Faso has been held up as an emerging democracy...

Zongo: There were elections last week [May 11, 1997], national elections for regional representatives. These were not good elections, they were not just. Not so many people voted and people boycotted the elections. The President organized all facets of the elections and the President banned organizations of opposition or democratic alternatives. Compaore won the first presidential elections in 1992. He was the only candidate. People refused to be candidates because they feared retribution, because two or three people were murdered in the road. Professor of Science and Technology Oumarou Clement, a famous teacher at the University of Burkina Faso in Ouagadougou, was murdered by a grenade, on the street in his car [possibly December, 1992]. University of Burkina Faso Professor Dr. Tall Moktar [Law Professor] was seriously wounded [possibly 1991]. He was shot and paralyzed. So no one ran against [Compaore]. The next elections we expect possibly in 1998.

But in the May 11 [1997] elections the Compaore party—the Convention Democratique du Peuple—won everything [6]. There were 111 positions up for grabs. His party won 101 positions. There were only 10 positions won by the remaining 20 parties. There was so much electoral fraud!

Voter turnout was another big issue of manipulation. Many people who wanted to vote did not have voter registration cards. The CDP issued cards only to friends. They were very selective about the choice of who to give cards to. I was not given a card. Many people could not vote who wanted to. The government gave voter ID cards to foreigners -- US, French, Canadian, German -- but we have

no idea how many. We estimate there were probably tens of thousands, but not hundreds of thousands of cards sent to foreigners. Other Africans got cards too—Ghanians, Nigerians—to displace legitimate Burkina voters. A couple of foreigners sent their cards to me but most foreigners want to keep their cards as souvenirs.

snow: Certain U.S. agencies fund what they call something like democratization processes—which looks like a euphemism for buying the elections for their person of choice, and they'll dump millions of dollars in. They have funded Niger and Cameroon recently [7]. Does that happen here?

Zongo: I have no information on whether the U.S. is funding elections or democracy in any way in Burkina Faso. France and French-speaking African countries sent international observers who found that the elections were very free and fair. Every time the elections are free and fair. Even before April [1997], all the talk on state-owned TV and radio was everything is O.K. But this [elections rigging] is not a surprise to many people.

There is much bribery to sway and win elections. Widespread bribery. This is well known; everybody recognizes this. This is official bribery. Other parties have no money to bribe people with, to support their platforms. But the newspapers don't print these stories! It's not logical! There are certain events that journalists are obligated to report! They give cards to strangers even though many natives don't have or get cards? That is a good topic for a newspaper.

There are about ten newspapers in the country but the other newspapers refuse to publish the information and claims about corruption and bribery. L'Independant is the most critical. Newspapers refused to say what happened, refuse to discuss or expose problems.

snow: Have you investigated who owns the newspapers?

Zongo: No. We [L'Independant] have never investigated the links between newspaper ownership and people in government or corporations but maybe we should.

snow: So would you say there is a conspiracy of silence on important or crucial issues? Power, corruption, mining, rigged elections? What about the arms trade through the Compaore regime?

Zongo: I know of one instance where a plane of Burkina Faso's was stopped in Moscow, on route to Burkina Faso, loaded with weapons. And yes there is a conspiracy of silence. There is one government-owned TV station and one private TV station with a very small signal radius. These never have criticisms, no opposition, only entertainment. There are more than four or five radio stations: two government-owned and three private stations also with small radius of signal. They play a lot of religious and entertainment shows. Some radio stations previously had good discussions of social problems, but as of April [1997] this is banned.

snow: In Nigeria, Togo, Gabon, and Cameroon—the governments have issued decrees, proscribing the press, which they then use to legitimize repression. What form of restrictions apply here?

Zongo: There are no official restrictions on print news. I can't speak for other press—why there is a conspiracy of silence. There are no official restrictions on L'Independant. Unofficially, they tried to bribe me in the first year of operations. I worked for one press where they did bribe the editors so I left and created L'Independant. They came and offered me 50 million CFA (US\$ 20,000 [8])—"just

to help you”—they said, with the understanding that you won’t be critical of the government. One man came, I don’t know his name, he said, “I agree with your writing and President Compaore does too. We want to help you.” But there was an understanding of self-censorship. It was clear the man worked for the government.

snow: Self-censorship is fully institutionalized in the U.S. and while some journalists and editors admit that they censor, the problem is insidious, and the censor is less obvious. Are you worried about your safety?

Zongo: I don’t understand the behavior of my peers, journalists and editors, we don’t want them to be critical, necessarily, but they have to say what they see and they certainly see what is happening. I was last jailed in 1981 and 1982 for more than one year. I don’t care what they do to me because freedom is more important.

snow: What about transnational corporations operating in Burkina Faso?

Zongo: There are over 200 mining companies operating in Burkina Faso now, all multinationals into gold mining. Many American, Canadian, U.K. and other companies. Multinationals have been heavy here for at least five years; most came with the new government. The situation today is that it is obvious the government has clear links with mining companies. Each company has its own links. There are no restrictions on these companies or other multinationals.

snow: What are their connections to the regime?

Zongo: Many companies have pursued relationships with the president and his wife. We know that. These include oil companies—B.P., Shell, Mobil, and Elf. Mining companies now export tons of gold, the land is cheap [rents] and they never take care of the environment. They destroy nature, they destroy everything. BHP [U.S. Company] for example uses cyanide and sulfuric acid and other chemicals to extract gold...

snow: In the heap leaching process. I’ve seen photos from a mine near Gorum [Burkina] where there is a huge 2-3 kilometer mound, which they dump, cyanide over as a solvent solution...

Zongo: In the north near the town of Essekanne there was a huge bird kill of at least tens of thousands of birds when the water source -- and such water sources are very limited in the Sahel—was contaminated by cyanide runoff from mining and the birds drank the water. I was an eyewitness to all those dead birds, which drank the only water available to them. I drove up there—and it was at least five hours one-way—and saw the birds myself. I don’t know of other sites where this has occurred, and I don’t have photos of this since it was not considered dramatic. The government stopped [BHP] but due to the profit arrangements and not the pollution. Then the government refused them [BHP] to continue exploitation for a while but the government is corrupt and this happens everywhere.

snow: What opportunities does mining offer for local employment?

Zongo: People near mining sites live in very bad conditions, they have no money and no resources. It is very, very poor pay—just to eat—no pay—but without mining the people have nothing. Companies organize people to work for them and I know of one case where a French Company

[Cemob Mining Company] killed two people in the mine because these two people were trying to get gold. The company buried them alive with a bulldozer.

snow: What is the human rights situation in Burkina?

Zongo: On human rights problems talk to Professor Joseph Kizerbo, and Halidou Ouedraogo [MBDHP]. And I suggest you talk to Mr. Ouedraogo, the Directeur de L'Observateur newspaper. He refuses to publish things, but maybe he will talk to you—perhaps he has not been bribed—but maybe he can give you more information.

end.

Notes:

[1] See: Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher, “Brides of the Sahara,” National Geographic, February 1998: 87; and Lutz and Collins, Reading National Geographic, University of Chicago Press, 1993.

[2] Esso (Exxon) for years has been involved with uranium production in Niger. At the time of the most recent National Geographic article on the Tuareg, there was an Exxon director as an acting National Geographic Society trustee.

[3] See: Human Rights Watch, Burkina Arms Inquiry Urged: Weapons Transferred illegally, Human Rights Watch, March 30, 2000.

[4] At 37 years old, President Thomas Sankara was assassinated with twelve of his aides in a counterrevolutionary military coup on October 15, 1987, by troops loyal to Captain Blaise Compaore. See: “Burkina Faso: Whodunit?” Africa Confidential, Vol. 40, No. 20, October 8, 1999.

[5] Private conversation: Halidou Ouedraogo, President of Mouvement Burkinabe des Droits de L’Homme et des Peuples (MBDHP), May 19, 1997.

[6] Convention Democratique du Peuple (CDP) has 101 of 111 seats in the National Assembly. The opposition coalition boycotted the polls in December 1998 and Compaore won the Presidential elections with over 60% of the vote.

[7] See e.g. George E. Moose, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, “FY 1994 Foreign Assistance Budget Request for Africa,” U.S. Department of State Dispatch, Vol. 4, No. 22, May 31, 1994:405.

[8] With the exchange on May 18, 1997, at 546 CFA (central African francs) to the dollar, this is about US\$ 10,000. However, given the CFA devaluation by 50% (structural adjustment) on January 12, 1997, that would be about US\$ 20,000 in 2000.