



## Journalist finds refuge in R.I.

By: Edward Fitzpatrick  
January 22, 2012

Like so many good stories, it began with an anonymous tip. The caller said: There's a secret trial going on at the military barracks. You cover the courts; you should look into it.

Like any good reporter, he pounced on it, jumping into a taxi and heading to the barracks. As a 21-year-old rookie reporter, he'd never covered a big story before. But he told his editor: I'll give it a try because I think the public deserves to know.

In the United States, a reporter bumping up against government secrecy might get the runaround from a testy public information officer. In The Gambia, a small country of 1.8 million people in West Africa, Omar Bah ended up getting smashed in the head with the butt of a rifle.

"My body was soaked in blood," Bah said. "I was shouting. I thought they were going to kill me because that's the trend in the country that they usually do to journalists."

Bah said a dozen soldiers beat and kicked him until he lost consciousness. When he came to, he found himself stuffed into a storeroom filled with shovels, mice and mosquitoes. The makeshift cell was so small, he could not straighten his legs.

"It is very, very difficult to be a journalist in The Gambia," Bah said. "It's like the whole world is crumbling on you."

But Bah not only survived that 2001 beating, he spent the next five years writing articles and asking questions that the Gambian government didn't want to hear. When censorship became unbearable, he fed stories to a former Gambian journalist who'd established a U.S.-based website. Then, in one gut-wrenching 24-hour ordeal, the government discovered his secret, and he fled for his life.

Last week, Bah smiled as he sat in his new home, holding the latest addition to his new life: a baby boy. With help from the International Institute of Rhode Island, he and his wife and two children have settled near Providence College. And in May, he will make the transition from refugee to U.S. citizen.

Bah, now 32, explained that in 2001 his editor managed to get him released after he'd been held for a day at the military barracks where the secret trial took place. "At all the hospitals around, no one would treat me because it was a military problem," he said.

After his grandmother cleaned his wounds, he headed back to the newspaper to pound out a story about what had happened. Other Gambian newspapers interviewed him, and the incident attracted the attention of groups such as Reporters Without Borders and the Committee to Protect Journalists.

With the world watching, the military took the unusual step of having the soldiers apologize. In a sense, that made matters worse because the soldiers felt humiliated, placing Bah's life in danger. But his grandmother talked to the families of the soldiers, persuading them to let it go.

In 2002, Bah went to work for the nation's biggest newspaper, The Daily Observer, where he wrote a popular question-and-answer column. He posed tough questions, regardless of whether someone was with the ruling party or not. Critics said he was being disrespectful, attempting to introduce Western-style journalism.

One day, one of the newspaper's shareholders marched in and demanded that Bah be fired. His boss said: If Bah goes, I go.

In 2004, Bah became The Daily Observer's news editor. That same year, one of The Gambia's most prominent journalists, Deyda Hydera, was murdered in a drive-by shooting. "That scared everybody," he said. "And my boss left the company in 2005."

Bah began having trouble getting stories critical of the government into the paper. A former Gambian journalist who'd settled in the United States, Pa Nderry M'bai, asked him to secretly feed those censored stories to his website, called the Freedom Newspaper. And the website quickly became a must-read.

But in 2006, a hacker got his hands on a list of the website's subscribers. The Daily Observer published the list, calling the subscribers "informants," and the military arrested dozens of people, Bah said.

A week later, a friend in the United Kingdom called Bah at The Daily Observer, saying: Give me your cell phone number right now and get out of any public place. I'll call you in a couple of seconds.

Bah stepped onto a balcony and his phone rang. His friend said: The government knows you are the source. It's all over the online chat rooms. They have the emails and the stories you sent. Don't spend another minute inside that building. They are coming for you.

Bah slumped to the ground. “My legs wouldn’t carry me anymore,” he said. “Then I grabbed the walls and rose up again.” He found an Internet café, where he saw that it was true: The government knew. People assumed he was already dead.

His cell phone rang. A caller identified himself as a security agent, saying: Report to the nearest police station — we have some questions for you.

Bah ended the call. He’d married Teddi Jallow two months earlier, but he dared not call her, fearing he’d place her in danger. He thought of going to the British or American embassies, but they were already closed. He decided to try to make it out of the country that night.

The Gambia is the smallest country on the African mainland. It’s long and narrow, straddling the Gambia River, surrounded on three sides by Senegal. Bah is from the north. So although he was south of the river, he headed north, into familiar territory. But to get there, he had to take a ferry across the river. And to reach the ferry, he had to cross a bridge onto the island capital of Banjul.

When he arrived at the bridge in a 14-passenger minivan taxi, Bah found his escape route blocked by dozens of soldiers wielding AK-47s. They were searching each vehicle.

Sitting in the back of the minivan, Bah opened a window. He considered jumping out, making a run for it. But he decided that would only make it easier for the soldiers to shoot him.

He sat tight as a soldier began asking everybody in the minivan for ID. The soldier said: We’re looking for somebody.

When it was his turn, Bah simply raised his hands in surrender. The soldier shined a flashlight in Bah’s face and began to say his name: Omar B....

In a flash of recognition, Bah realized he’d gone to middle school with the soldier. Bah had helped him prepare for exams, and he’d helped Bah run for student president.

With doom or deliverance hanging in the balance, the soldier made a split-second decision. He rapped the minivan with his rifle and yelled at the driver: Move! Move! Move!

The minivan lurched forward, and Bah fell back into a seat.

“That was the end of my first life,” Bah said. “I thought I was already dead. Then a new life started for me.”

Bah’s new life began with a month in Senegal, where he watched on TV as Gambian officials declared him a “wanted” man. He spent the next 11 months in Ghana, where

the Media Foundation for West Africa contacted the U.S. Embassy about having Bah resettle in the United States as a refugee.

On May 24, 2007, Bah completed the journey from the African mainland's smallest nation to America's smallest state.

He's already made big strides. He reunited with his wife and is working at Rhode Island Housing. He graduated from URI with a degree in communications and political science, and he's pursuing a master's degree in public administration at Roger Williams University. He leads the new Center for Refugee Advocacy and Support, and he plans to launch a community newspaper or website. Like any good reporter, he's asking hard questions about slums and blight, lead paint and crime.

Like so many good stories, it makes you eager to see what comes next.