

In first for Togo, RSF identifies spyware on phones of two Togolese journalists

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It was serial espionage. Evidence of at least 23 spyware intrusions between 1 February and 10 July 2021 were identified on one of the phones used by **Loïc Lawson**, the publisher of *Flambeau des Démocrates*, a leading independent weekly in Togo. Freelance journalist **Anani Sossou** was the target of a similar attack on his phone a few months later, on 25 October 2021.

After several months of investigation, this was the conclusion of the technical analyses conducted by [Digital Security Lab](#), an RSF forensic service for journalists that detects digital attacks on their phones.

The intrusions into the phones of these Togolese journalists were carried out by means of Pegasus, one of the world's most powerful and effective spywares. It is sold by NSO Group, an Israeli company of which the Togolese government was a [proven client](#) at the time. The findings of RSF's technical analyses (see file attached) were independently confirmed by Amnesty International's Security Lab, which has identified many cases of Pegasus surveillance around the world and is regarded as a leading authority in this field.

“It was while investigating the circumstances of the completely arbitrary arrest of these journalists and the charges brought against them that we discovered that they had in fact been in the crosshairs of the Togolese authorities for a long time, as shown by the industrial-scale cyber-espionage to which Loïc Lawson was subjected in 2021. Until the Pegasus scandal broke in July of that year and implicated Togo, the intrusions on his phone occurred with an astonishing frequency, up to several times a week for six months, giving the perpetrators access to all of this journalist's data. These are the first proven cases of journalists being targeted by spyware in Togo. It is now up to the justice system to establish the responsibility of the Togolese authorities and NSO Group, the company that provided them with this spyware.

Arnaud Froger

head of RSF's investigation desk

“By mobilising its network of cyber defenders, engineers and technicians, RSF has reinforced its capacity to conduct digital forensics investigations. This makes a big difference. Today, we can shed light on the use of these methods to target journalists and we can send a strong signal to spyware vendors and to their clients.

Nicolas Diaz

head of digital security and operations at RSF

After RSF told Lawson he had been subjected to close cyber-surveillance and whereas he was still in shock from his recent detention, he said he was “very concerned about the extent of the information to which those responsible for this operation may have had access.” They may have been able to identify some of his sources, he said.

Togolese communication minister and government spokesman Yawa Kouigan did not respond to RSF's request for an explanation of the surveillance operation targeting journalists and the use of such methods in Togo.

Journalists often targeted by Togo's authorities

Three other Togolese journalists, **Ferdinand Ayité**, **Luc Abaki** and **Carlos Ketohou**, were on the list of 50,000 potential Pegasus targets that were identified by an [international consortium's investigation](#) in 2021. But it was not possible at the time to conduct a technical analysis of their phones to establish whether they had indeed been compromised. In the wake of this investigation, RSF filed several complaints in France concerning 25 journalists in ten countries and is now registered as an interested party in the [judicial investigation](#) initiated in France.

The Togolese authorities often target critical journalists and media. Ayité, who is the publisher of the news website *L'Alternative*, and **Isidore Kouwonou**, its editor, were forced to flee the country in March 2023 after being arrested and subjected to intimidation. They were [sentenced in absentia](#) to three years in prison on charges of “contempt of authority” and “spreading mendacious comments on social media” as a result of complaints by two government ministers.

Source: <https://rsf.org/en/first-togo-rsf-identifies-spyware-phones-two-togolese-journalists>