

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

AI Index: AFR/006/2005 (Public)
News Service No: 224
15 August 2005

Uganda: Independent media and the right to information under threat

Reacting to the interrogation and charging of radio journalist Andrew Mwenda with sedition, Amnesty International condemned this latest attack on press freedoms in Uganda and urged the government to publicly affirm its commitment to freedom of expression and freedom of the media.

The Ugandan Broadcasting Council suspended the licence of KFM Radio on 11 August, after it broadcast a chat show hosted by Andrew Mwenda featuring a discussion on the fatal helicopter crash that killed Sudan's former First Vice-President and Southern Sudanese Leader John Garang and seven Ugandan crew members.

Andrew Mwenda was arrested the next day, following lengthy interrogations at the Central Criminal Investigations offices of the Uganda Police Force. He spent the following two days, 13 - 14 August, in custody at the Central Police Station in Kampala. On Monday, 15 August, he underwent further interrogations in the presence of his lawyer. He was charged with sedition and was subsequently released on bail.

Amnesty International called on the Ugandan government to lift the suspension of the licence of Radio KFM and allow its broadcasts to resume without further delay. The organization also urged the Ugandan government to cease all threats against the media.

The timing of this latest incident is also of concern, coming just after President Museveni publicly threatened local media outlets with closure over accusations of endangering regional security by reporting about neighbouring countries and the Ugandan army.

Amnesty International said that the Ugandan authorities must "stop and publicly condemn any harassment of the independent media," adding that "all journalists should be allowed to work without fear of retribution from the government."

Background

The closure of KFM and the arrest of journalist Andrew Mwenda is the latest in a series of actions taken by the Ugandan authorities that undermine their commitment to freedom of expression and the media.

- o In October 2004, a radio station was compelled to pay a fine for hosting a live talk show with sexual rights activists. The Broadcasting Council imposed a fine on FM Radio Simba, claiming that the programme breached existing laws.

- o On 22 June 2003, Soroti-based private FM radio station Kyoga Veritas was closed, allegedly because it defied a ministerial directive to refrain from broadcasting news about the Lord's Resistance Army's (LRA) attacks in the region

o In October 2003, The Monitor, an independent newspaper in Uganda, was raided by police and closed for seven days after publishing an article alleging that an army helicopter was shot down in the conflict-ridden northern part of the country where the army was fighting the LRA. Journalist Frank Nyakairu, the author, was detained and accused of publishing a false report “likely to cause fear and alarm to the public”. The Supreme Court, in February 2004, ruled at his trial, that the offence of “publication of false news” was unconstitutional.