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Rwanda: Government should honour its commitment to respect press freedom

Amnesty International is urging the Government of Rwanda to do its utmost to foster the independence of the press and to refrain from interfering in judicial decisions by using the law to repress journalistic activities.

Charles Kabonero, the 24-year-old editor of the beleaguered newspaper Umuseso, Rwanda's main independent weekly, is awaiting a verdict in a lawsuit brought by the Vice-President of the Chamber of Deputies, Denis Polisi. The District Prosecutor has requested a four-year prison sentence and a fine of 300,000 Rwandan francs (about US \$540). Mr. Polisi's lawyer has asked for damages of 50,000,000 Rwandan francs (about US \$90,090). The verdict is expected on Tuesday, November 23.

Mr. Kabonero was tried on 16 November on criminal charges of "divisionism" and defamation, primarily for writing about Mr. Polisi's supposed political ambitions in an article published in early August 2004. The imposition of 50,000,000 Rwandan francs in damages would effectively shut down the independent newspaper.

Last Wednesday, two other journalists were detained: Patrice Nsengiyumva, the director of the Press House (Maison de la Presse), and Bonaventure Bizimuremyi, editor-in-chief of the independent newspaper Umucyo. They were brought before a magistrate after one week, considerably longer than the 72 hours mandated by law. They were held incommunicado, but were eventually granted access to lawyers and family members. They were provisionally released on 18 November, and judicial investigations were ongoing.

The Rwanda Law Reform Commission noted in June 2003 its commitment to reinforcing the independence of the judiciary "as the basis for sustainable peace and development in Rwanda". Amnesty International commends those judges and magistrates who struggle to withstand political pressures and the temptation of corruption to uphold the rule of law.

Public Document

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