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Africa: Press under continuous attack

The targeting of journalists is a blatant violation of the fundamental right of freedom of expression, Amnesty International said today ahead of World Press Freedom Day, May 3, which, this year, coincides with the tenth anniversary of the Windhoek Declaration.

"When journalists are silenced, it is not only they who are victims of repressive laws and practices, but also ordinary citizens who are deprived of their right to full and objective information," the human rights organization added.

The few cases of relative success in countries such as Senegal, Nigeria, Ghana, Mali, Benin, Mauritius and South Africa, where the media have played a decisive role in the promotion of human rights, are overshadowed by attempts by governments and corporate bodies who hound journalists who seek to promote free speech and information flow.

Across Africa, independent journalists are arrested, ill-treated, exiled, threatened with death and even killed, as a result of their legitimate work in promoting human rights, especially freedom of expression. In some countries, press freedom remains at the mercy of a legal system that has repeatedly shown its hostility to independent journalism. While some of the most egregious violators of press freedom include Zimbabwe, Liberia, Ethiopia, Burundi, Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo, journalists have also come under attack in Ivory Coast, Cameroon, Malawi, Zambia, Tanzania, Namibia, Central African Republic and Kenya.

In Zimbabwe, President Robert Mugabe has carried out his threat, made several times, to take "firm action against the gutter press." In recent months, the *Daily News* has come under severe pressure both from the police and from officials of the ruling ZANU-PF party. In January 2001, its printing presses were bombed a few days after the government described it as an opposition mouthpiece.

Several harsh press laws are used by the government to muzzle the press. The Official Secrets Act, for instance, makes the publication of information not authorized by the government a criminal offense punishable with prison terms. The effect of this law on investigative journalism is obvious. For example, Geoff Nyarota, the editor of the *Daily News*, and two reporters, Sandra Nyaira and Julius Zava, were charged on 4 April 2001, with criminal defamation. The charges stem from articles published in November/December 2000, alleging that Air Harbor Technologies, a company that had won the tender to build a new international airport in Harare, had bribed senior government officials.

Another overly restrictive law adopted by parliament last month, gives President Mugabe the right to withdraw licences from independent broadcasters.

At the height of its crusade against the press and judiciary in March, the government deported two journalists, Joseph Winter of the BBC and Mercedes Sayagues of South Africa's *Mail and Guardian* newspaper.

In Liberia, the repression against the media is one of the worst on the continent. The country's government, which has shown deep-seated antagonism towards the independent media, often invokes threats to security and stability to justify attacks on journalists. Punitive raids against journalists, using police and military forces are common.

Journalists briefly detained last year include Suah Deddeh, Chair of the Liberian Press Union, in March 2000, after the government closed down Star Radio for broadcasting information about human rights abuses in Liberia. Radio Veritas which was also closed down in March was allowed back on the air after public protest.

In August, four journalists working for the UK television, Channel 4, were arrested, beaten and detained for several days and accused of spying. A month later, staff members of the independent *New Democrat*, including its editor, Charles Jackson, fled Liberia following death threats, intimidation and harassment by the security forces. Again in February 2001, four journalists of *The News* were arrested and held for more than a month on charges of espionage for publishing an article criticising government spending on helicopter spare parts and Christmas cards while delaying months of wages for civil servants.

Journalists are particularly at risk in war situations, notably in Burundi, Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In 2000, five reporters were killed in Sierra Leone (3), Somalia (1) and Mozambique (1) because of their work.

"That attacks and harassment on journalists in Africa persists, ten years after the Windhoek Declaration, is totally unacceptable. Governments should ensure that journalists can work freely without suffering human rights abuses," Amnesty International said.

Background

Celebrations of this year's World Press Freedom Day mark the tenth anniversary of the Windhoek Declaration, a series of recommendations adopted by African journalists on promoting an independent and pluralistic press. The impact of the Declaration was such that the UN

General Assembly in December 1993, decided to celebrate World Press Freedom Day on its anniversary.

The Windhoek Declaration became the first in a series of regional commitments to uphold the freedom of people everywhere to voice their opinions, and their access to a variety of independent sources of information.

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW web : <http://www.amnesty.org>