

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: AFR 16/004/2006 (Public)
News Service No: 097
18 April 2006

Burundi: Journalists and human rights monitors under attack

Press freedom and human rights in Burundi suffered a severe blow yesterday, when around thirty journalists and human rights monitors were held -- and some severely assaulted -- by police officers after a press conference in Kinindo, Bujumbura.

The press conference had been called by the CNDD-FDD parliamentarian Mathias Basabose.

The journalists faced no difficulties in gaining access to the premises when they arrived. Reports state that members of the national police and intelligence services were already present from the start of the conference.

When the conference ended, the police officers asked journalists to hand in their tapes and recording equipment so that the information could be checked. The condition was that anyone who did so would then be able to leave the premises.

The journalists refused to comply with the orders to hand over their equipment. One journalist, Charles Nshimiye, tried to escape to hand his tapes over to his colleagues waiting outside. A police officer allegedly stopped him from leaving and physically assaulted him. According to reports, the police officer then stood back and took aim at Nshimiye with his gun, but was prevented from shooting when his colleagues intervened.

On hearing the news, other journalists started to arrive in order to investigate the reports of the incident taking place. An estimated 50 police officers were stationed outside to seal off the premises. Several journalists were reportedly beaten by police officers with the butts of their Kalashnikov guns or with their truncheons. Chantal Gatore, a journalist for Radio Isanganiro, was beaten up and taken to hospital.

"The use of force exercised by police officers was clearly excessive and tantamount to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment," said Tawanda Hondora, Acting Director of Amnesty International's Africa Programme.

The conference participants were held for more than six hours. Amongst those held were two human rights monitors from Ligue ITEKA.

Amnesty International considers last night's incident to be an assault on press freedom in Burundi and a violation of the right to freedom of expression as enshrined in international human rights standards, including article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which clearly states that: "Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive

and impart information and ideas of all kinds““

"The Burundian press must be allowed to operate freely, independently, without fear of reprisals and with the full and unconditional protection from the Burundian authorities," said Tawanda Hondora, Deputy Director of the Africa Programme at Amnesty International.

"Journalists provide a vital contribution to making society more open, fair and transparent by independently reporting on and examining the activities and performance of the government. They must not be intimidated into silence."

Public Document

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>

For latest human rights news view <http://news.amnesty.org>