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Rwandan journalists' imprisonment condemned

Amnesty International has condemned the imprisonment of two Rwandan journalists who criticized president Paul Kagame ahead of last year's elections.

Agnes Nkusi Uwimana, editor of the private Kinyarwanda tabloid newspaper, Umurabyo, and her deputy editor, Saidati Mukakibibi, were sentenced today to respectively 17 and 7 years imprisonment over opinion pieces they wrote ahead of the August 2010 presidential elections.

"Today's verdict marks yet another blow to freedom of expression and opinion in Rwanda", said Amnesty International's Africa Programme Director, Erwin van der Borght.

"Rwanda's clampdown on critics shows no sign of abating after last year's elections".

Agnes Nkusi Uwimana was found guilty of threatening state security, genocide ideology, divisionism and defamation and Saidati Mukakibibi was found guilty of threatening state security.

The pair was prosecuted over several articles they had written in which they criticized government policies and made corruption allegations against senior government officials, including President Kagame. The articles also made references to the prevailing feeling of insecurity prior to the elections in 2010 and contended there were growing divisions within the security forces.

"The government has not adequately demonstrated how the articles could be construed as a threat to national security or were intended, or likely, to incite violence" said Erwin van der Borght.

"The journalists should not have been subjected to criminal sanctions."

Uwimana said she accepted some of her articles may have lacked professionalism.

"Journalists must be free to criticize public officials and policies without fear of criminal sanctions for defamation", said Erwin van der Borght. "Rwandan officials should respond to criticism, rather than try to stamp it out".

Vague laws on "genocide ideology" and "sectarianism" laws were introduced in Rwanda in the decade after the 1994 genocide to restrict speech that could promote hatred.

Rwandan media incited ethnic hatred before and during the genocide, in which up to 800,000 Rwandans were killed, mostly ethnic Tutsi, but also Hutu who opposed the organized killing.

The Rwandan government expressed commitment in April 2010 to review the "genocide ideology" law. The draft law is said to be on the agenda for February's cabinet meeting.