

AU Human Rights Commission urged “To rein in impunity and crimes committed against journalists”

The Federation of African Journalists, the African group of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), and the Eastern Africa Journalists Association (EAJA) in a statement supported by the International Trade Union Confederation of the African Region (ITUC-Africa) today told the 50th Ordinary Session of the African Commission on Human and People’s Rights (ACHPR), sitting in Banjul, The Gambia, that African continent is experiencing renewed and aggressive premeditated attacks on journalists, and media organizations all with conscious attempts to control, manipulate and censor the free press and free speech.

“Journalists continue to face deadly attacks, criminal charges, intimidation and harassments by security forces and, in some cases, with manifest support of judicial authorities,” said Omar Faruk Osman, FAJ President, who is also the Secretary General of EAJA, during his address at the 50th session of the African Union’s human rights body.

“We address this august gathering of AU members States, National Human Rights Institutions and Civil Society to highlight the repressive and precarious conditions in which journalists work in Africa and to call on the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights for urgent actions to secure effective protection for media professionals,” said Osman.

To elucidate the concerns, FAJ and EAJA stated that Somalia still remains the most deadly country to be a journalist and practice journalism in Africa as media professionals continue to pay the ultimate price. Two journalists were killed within one month in Mogadishu and the African Union peacekeeping troops in Somalia (AMISOM) are the prime suspects of these killings, though AMISOM admitted the murder of one journalist.

In September 2011, journalists and the free expression community commemorated the 10th anniversary of the brutal repression on the right to freedom of expression in Eritrea which has been decidedly anti-media over the last decade and has the largest number of journalists, about 30, serving in jail, in extremely pathetic conditions and are kept incommunicado. Access to the country is limited and very little information is known about the conditions of the journalists, some four journalists are reported to have died in dreadful military prisons. Eritrea is today the worst jailer of journalists in Africa.

Five journalists, among them two from Sweden, have been charged under anti-terror laws by the Ethiopian government which is also threatening other journalists under same legal instrument, some of whom have had to flee into exile. The climate of fear brought by the renewed squelching has

severely limited the rights of journalists to do their work and impacted on the free flow of information in a country that already has restrictive laws against media freedom.

The Sudanese security forces have sustained their onslaught on editors and reporters of the print media in Khartoum, charging a number of them with crimes based on despicable laws and harassing individual journalists, raiding media outlets and confiscating copies of newspapers. Before and after the presidential pardon of Sudanese president Omar Hassan Al-Bashir to detained journalists in August 2011, harassment, intimidation and attacks on journalists by the security apparatus continue unabated.

The shrinking space for press freedom and protection of journalists in Burundi is another issue of great concern to the African journalists' community. The government of Burundi has intensified its efforts to create and instill fear in the hearts of journalists through direct attacks and the deployment of sophisticated tactics to pile pressure on journalists. Burundi has issued the largest number of summons to a particular journalist on the continent in this current year. Security forces of Burundi continue to trail and spy on journalists, including the top leadership of Union Burundaise des Journalists. Two media outlets have sacked 25 journalists under the pretext of financial operational difficulties. However, we have strong cause to believe that these journalists were sacked on the basis of pressure from state authorities on the media owners because of these journalists' critical and independent reporting.

In Nigeria, militia groups continue to kidnap, attack and kill journalists as part of their strategies to gain publicity and visibility as well as deplore fear against the state and entire populace. On Saturday 22nd October 2011, in Maiduguri, Northeast Nigeria, a journalist was shot dead by the notorious Boko Haram sect.

In recent months, violence against journalists and the media community has intensified in DRC. Gunmen murdered one journalist in June; dozens of others were beaten, assaulted by the security forces (eight in two months). Arsonists razed two media houses down. All these acts have gone uninvestigated, while justice for the victims and owners of the outfits is in limbo. As the country approaches the elections on 28 November, intolerance, intimidation, threats and other degrading practices against journalists may worsen an already precarious situation.

In Zimbabwe, arrests, detentions, threats, harassment, intimidation, repressive laws and violence have been used against journalists and other media personnel. The Cameroonian authorities continue to endanger the safety and security of journalists and randomly detain journalists without charge.

In Uganda, the government of President Yoweri Museveni has been continuing its repressive acts on the media, with security personnel beating and injuring a number of journalists during the “walk to work” protests. Persons who carried out these acts as well as previous ones have gone uninvestigated and unprosecuted. Clearly, the state and government of Uganda tacitly and openly support impunity. As supporting evidence, on the 12th of October 2011 during a Presidential address by President Yoweri Museveni, he publicly and verbally insulted and assaulted a journalist, calling him an idiot in response to the current oil bribery crisis rocking the Ugandan parliament.

“We appeal to the Commission to take all necessary actions aimed at effective protection of journalists, especially by calling on the states concerned to decisively pursue accountability and justice so as to rein in impunity of crimes committed against journalists,” added Osman.