

JOINT ACTION:

Press release

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Kampala: ATTACKS AGAINST JOURNALISTS DURING ELECTIONS IN KAMPALA, UGANDA CONDEMNED

The East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project (EHAHRDP) and Foundation for Human Rights Initiative (FHRI) are deeply concerned and strongly condemn the recent attacks on journalists during the mayoral elections in Kampala on February 23 2011. Freedom of expression is the cornerstone of any democracy and the upholding and respect of this right is significant especially during elections.

While Ugandans were voting for their local council chairpersons and district councillors as well as Mayors for municipalities on 23 February 2011, six journalists were reported to have been attacked and beaten during a scuffle that ensued at Kakeeka polling station in Rubaga division in Kampala, Uganda's capital city. Kakeeka is the voting station at which mayoral candidate Peter Sematimba of the National Resistance Movement (NRM) was registered to vote. Reports indicated that violence was sparked by supporters of Mr. Sematimba when voters started questioning the existence of ballot boxes stuffed with ballot papers at the beginning of the voting exercise. It is reported that several ballot boxes were found filled with pre-ticked ballot papers in favour of Peter Sematimba. As a result of this and other widespread malpractices covering other parts of Kampala city, the voting process was suspended by the Electoral Commission.

The six journalists attacked included; Nabazziwa Lydia a reporter from Bukedde TV, Nixon Bbaale a camera man and Brian Nsimbe, a reporter, both from Channel 44 TV, Nabukeera Florence a reporter with Bukedde newspaper, Namatumbwe Christine a reporter and News anchor at Metro FM whose radio recorder, mobile phone and hand bag were all stolen and Jane Anyango, a senior reporter with UBC TV.

“The media is a watchdog of society and plays an important role of ensuring accountability and prompting checks and balances. It should be the duty of government to ensure that media persons are not unduly hindered in the course of executing their duties because such attacks, especially during this time of political transition where people must have access to balanced information in order to make informed decisions, has a wide implication on the freedom of expression and access to information in Uganda,” says Hassan Shire Sheikh the Executive Director of EHAHDP.

During the presidential and parliamentary elections on February 18, another journalist Julius Odeke from the Red Pepper and the Razor Newspaper was shot at by security agents while covering the vote casting at Budadiri West constituency in Mbale district. Mr. Odeke was injured with a bullet when security operatives tried to confiscate his recordings of electoral violence in this area.

Livingstone Sewanyana the Executive Director Foundation for Human Rights Initiative (FHRI) added, “Journalists have a duty to collect, inform and educate the public and therefore they should not be unduly hindered, harassed and/or mistreated. It is therefore the duty of the government of Uganda to ensure the safety of journalists and to facilitate this role.”

Background

On 18 February 2011, Uganda held presidential and parliamentary elections in an exercise that was largely reported to be free and fair by international electoral observers. However, restrictions on freedom of expression and the media were reported to be on the increase since the start of the official election campaigns in November 2010 as authorities continued to make use of a range of formal and informal tactics to curtail freedom of expression. These include intimidation and threatening of journalists and station managers, police interrogation, criminal charges, and on rare occasions, physical violence.

In March 2010, a new draft legislation the Press and Journalists (Amendment) Bill which is currently before the Attorney General was introduced. This draft Bill grants the Minister of Information the power to appoint the chairperson of the Media High Council which is a body with significant authority, including the power to deny a newspaper a license on the basis of its 'values'. In a country where government control over regulatory bodies is already significant, such measures are concerning. The draft Bill also creates new media crimes including the publication of information that is deemed prejudicial to national security, stability, unity or economic interests, leaving the law open to vague and subjective interpretation.

EHAHRDP and FHRI therefore call on the Ugandan authorities:

- End all practices which undermine freedom of expression in the country including acts of intimidation, legal and judicial harassment and physical attacks against journalists and media workers;
- Ensure that those found responsible for violations are held to account;
- Observe the provisions in the 1995 Uganda Constitution , the 1998 UN Declaration on human rights defenders, the African Charter on Human and People's Rights and other human rights treaties to which Uganda is signatory and which guarantee freedom of expression and association amongst other rights.

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