

71ST Ordinary session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights

Statement under item 5

Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression and access to information

AfricanDefenders and DefendDefenders (East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project) welcome the activity report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression and access to information.

Realisation of the right to freedom of opinion and expression continues to be an uphill struggle in a sub-region riddled with conflict and zero tolerance to dissent. According to Reporters' Without Borders' 2021 Press Freedom Index, countries in the East and Horn of Africa perform poorly in relation to press freedom, with Ethiopia ranking highest at the 101st position out of 180 countries, and Eritrea lowest at the 180th position.

However, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, **Ethiopia** ranked among the worst jailers of journalists in 2021 in Sub Saharan Africa after Eritrea. During the state of emergency declared on 2 November 2021, 14 journalists were arrested. In Burundi, civil society organisations PARCEM and OLUCOME were prohibited from holding a press conference, while Djibouti remains closed with severe restrictions on the right to free expression.

In **Rwanda**, the authorities crackdown on social media activists especially those who use YouTube to express dissent. Dieudonne Niyosenga was sentenced to seven years imprisonment. In **Somalia**, journalists remain between a rock and a hard place, targeted by both state and non-state actors. In **South Sudan**, the National Security Services are the biggest perpetrators of violations against free expression. Eight journalists were arrested in February at the Parliament's premises while covering a press conference. In **Sudan** journalists are under extreme pressure since the anti-coup protest in October 2021 with several journalists subjected to surveillance, harassment, and abuse. In **Uganda** authorities use torture, inhuman, and cruel treatment as a weapon to silence dissent. Human Rights Network for Journalists reported 17 cases of abuse and violations against covering by-elections in Kayunga district.

Positively, **Tanzania's** President Suluhu committed to amending the Media Services Act (2016) which has been used to target media practitioners. Four newspapers previously banned were issued with operating licenses. However, civic space can be reclaimed further as journalists continue to be arrested.

We urge African states to respect the right to freedom of opinion and expression, which is the cornerstone of any democratic state. Additionally, states should implement the guidelines set out in the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression in Africa.

I thank you.