



PRESS STATEMENT

WORLD PRESS FREEDOM DAY: INFORMATION AS A PUBLIC GOOD

3 May 2021

The Centre for Human Rights, University of Pretoria wishes to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the World Press Freedom Day today, 3 May 2021. The celebrations for the World Press Freedom Day began in 1991 at the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's (UNESCO) Conference where the landmark [Windhoek Declaration](#) was adopted. The Declaration which focused on print media, considered various issues on freedom of expression, access to information and the public service role of journalism.

A decade after, it included the airwaves in its new Declaration which led to the [African Charter on Broadcasting](#). Now, three decades later, our celebration today requires us as stakeholders to rethink the issues surrounding freedom of expression, access to information and the public service role of journalism. We must urgently begin to think of what the press means to us as Africans, its impacts and insistence on stronger protection for it. An important question all stakeholders must consider is "how do we ensure the right of the press and to the press given the COVID-19 pandemic and development of new technologies?"

In a video message to mark the [World Press Freedom Day 2020](#), the United Nations' Secretary-General stated that:

Journalists and media workers are crucial to helping us make informed decisions. During a pandemic, those decisions can make the difference between life and death. COVID-19 has given rise to a second lethal pandemic of misinformation, harmful health advice and wild conspiracy theories.

The press can provide the antidote: verified, scientific, fact-based news and analysis. But since the virus took hold, many media workers have been subjected to increased restrictions and punishments simply for doing their jobs.

Few months after the Secretary-General's statement, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (African Commission) adopted [Resolution 449](#) on "Human and Peoples' Rights as central pillar of successful response to COVID-19 and recovery from its socio-political impacts." The Resolution urged state parties to guarantee, within the framework of article 9 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (African Charter) "the unrestricted operation of journalists and free press and media as essential public services in the context of social distancing for access to information including about the pandemic." In addition to these, UNESCO [facilitated](#) a Massive Online Open Course (MOOC) on the COVID-19 pandemic and journalism. The MOOC, which launched about a year ago, was to demonstrate the centrality of the role of journalists during the pandemic.

In 2019, the African Commission also adopted the revised [Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information](#) (the revised Declaration). Part II of the revised Declaration addresses the role of state parties on various issues on the right to freedom of expression, media diversity and pluralism, media independence, protection, and safety of journalists among others. More than a year since its launch, violations of press freedoms continue to rise in African countries especially within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

On 16 April 2021, the African Commission published its ruling in the case of [Agnès Uwimana-Nkusi & Saidat Mukakibibi v Rwanda](#) (Communication 426/12) and found that the provisions of Articles 166 and 391 of the Rwandan Penal Code (Law No 21/77) on criminal defamation, insults and the offence of threatening national security violated the right to freedom of expression of the complainants under Article 9 of the African Charter. It required the respondent state to amend its laws according to international standards and pay compensation to the complainants. In this case, the African Commission restated its commitment to advancing the protection of the press and journalists and also applied the provisions of Principle 21 of the revised Declaration on protecting reputations for the first time in its ruling.

Today, democratic governance across the world, including African countries is on a [constant decline](#) just as the plight of the journalists worsens. According to the Committee to Protect Journalist (CPJ), at least 32 journalists were killed across the world in 2020 while more than 274 are currently imprisoned. Between 1992 to 2021, at least 70 journalists have been killed in Somalia with 60 from Algeria.

On 24 October 2020, during the #EndSARS protests in Nigeria that focused on police reform and ending police brutality, the [Nigeria Police Force](#) was alleged to have killed a journalist, Pelumi Onifade. On 20 July 2020, Hopewell Chin'ono, a freelance Zimbabwean journalist was [arrested and charged](#) with incitement to participate in public offence. Chin'ono had uncovered an alleged government scandal in COVID-19 tenders which had led a Minister of government to resign. He was [granted bail in](#) January 2021 after he has been jailed three times in at least six months.

[Azarrah Karrim](#), a reporter with News24 in South Africa had rubber bullets fired at her while covering the nationwide lockdown kick-off because of the COVID-19 pandemic in April 2020. During the 2021 general elections in [Uganda](#), several journalists were allegedly attacked by law enforcement agencies. Some of the journalists that were targeted were those covering opposition candidates in the general elections. This is to mention a very few examples of the many attacks that the press and journalists face in doing their work especially in Africa.

As we join various stakeholders in marking this anniversary, we are again presented with an opportunity as various actors to not only rethink our responsibilities but also ensure that we work together in protecting the press. The theme for this year's World Press Freedom Day, is "[Information as a public good](#)." This year's campaign has three imperatives: to ensure the economic viability of the news media, ensure more transparency from Internet companies and enhance media, information, and journalism literacy. These three imperatives fit into the important questions all stakeholders must begin to ask themselves on protecting the press both in the digital age and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In achieving this, the Centre calls for multi-stakeholder driven approaches in safeguarding the press in Africa. Such an approach should strive for ensuring that information is treated as a public good – treated neither as an impediment for development nor as a means of control by governments. The Centre enjoins state parties to the African Charter to put safeguards in place to protect the press and journalists both from violence and the COVID-19 pandemic. The Centre reiterates the need for state parties to the African Charter to be guided by the revised Declaration by the African Commission. The Centre asks all stakeholders, especially state parties to the African Charter, that in limiting the right to freedom of expression, such limitations must be prescribed by law; serve a legitimate aim and be necessary and proportionate.

For more information, please contact:

Mr Tomiwa Ilori

Researcher: Expression, Information and Digital Rights Unit

Centre for Human Rights,

Faculty of Law, University of Pretoria

Email: oluwatomwa.ilor@up.ac.za

www.chr.up.ac.za