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ACM PRESIDENT – ANTI-MEDIA EPIDEMIC SWEEPING THE REGION

June 3, 2005 - President of the Association of Caribbean Media Workers (ACM), Wesley Gibbings, has spoken of a “looming epidemic of oppressive broadcast media laws and regulations currently hovering over the Caribbean region.”

The remark was made at a meeting of hemispheric press freedom organizations at the University of Austin at Texas in June.

Gibbings referred to current attempts by several regional governments to impose new broadcasting regulations: “Our governments have moved to tighten, not liberalise media laws and regulations,” Gibbings said.

“More and more journalists are being brought before our courts on criminal charges when civil remedies are available and the field of broadcasting remains under a dark and ominous cloud of proposed legislation and regulation.”

He said in Trinidad and Tobago, “even elements of the media fraternity have joined in endorsing conditions of prior official censorship through the designs of a broadcasting code.”

Gibbings told participants of the Austin Forum that the Office of the Special Rapporteur for Free Expression had written the government of Trinidad and Tobago on that country’s proposed broadcasting code but its correspondence had not even been acknowledged.

He said that “despite earlier interventions by the ACM”, the May 5 general election “led almost immediately to announcement of another look at broadcasting regulations to reel in certain elements of the media.”

The ACM President also cited the fine imposed on St Vincent and the Grenadines broadcaster, Elwardo Lynch and the suspension of the television license of Guyana's CNS Channel 6 “at the height of a national flood crisis.”

“It might be no coincidence,” he said, “that the liberalising of broadcast media, particularly in the English-speaking Caribbean has marked one of the more important developments in the democratising of public affairs in the history of regional mass media and our societies generally.”

“The corridors of power are being stormed by broadcast-mediated public opinion in ways never before envisaged.,” he added. “In our own unsophisticated, sometimes clumsy way, our people are taking the stage.”

Gibbings however warned that “if we do not act now to ensure that darkness does not shut out the emerging light, our societies will never forgive us.”