



Association of Caribbean Mediaworkers

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On World Press Freedom Day, UN independent expert calls for end to censorship

May 3, 2008 - The following statement was released by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, Mr. Ambeyi Ligabo, on the occasion of World Press Freedom Day.

"World Press Freedom Day is an occasion to celebrate the virtues of a free press, a fundamental human right enshrined in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The benefits of a free and independent press should be self-evident to everyone.

However, this basic right unfortunately continues to be denied to the millions of people around the world living under oppressive regimes who stifle any sign of dissent.

Censorship of the media constitutes the most abominable violation to freedom of the press - and yet it is also the most frequent of all restrictions. In most cases, censorship is but a pretext to silence criticism, protecting those in power from popular scrutiny and public accountability, serving to conceal corruption, mismanagement and abuse of authority.

Censorship contributes to the creation of a protective aura around those who due to the nature of their functions need to be held permanently accountable for their actions, placing them beyond public criticism.

States have recently relied on a large array of measures that, albeit in different degrees, promote direct or indirect censorship. The more traditional restrictions, such as the outright banning and suspension of media outlets, confiscation of newspapers and magazines from newsstands and overt editorial interference by censors, are still widespread.

The prevalence of these measures is illustrated by recent events in Sudan, where the circulation of five independent newspapers - Al-Sudani, al-Ahdath, Ajras al-Huriya, al-Rai al-Shaab and The Citizen - was banned due to their publication of critical articles. In Tonga, the Government recently appointed an editorial committee whose responsibility is to review and edit campaign speeches by candidates, removing any reference to the pro-democracy protests in November 2006.

The new media, particularly the Internet, have not remained free of censorship or direct repression. Due to its low cost, decentralized nature and large audience, the Internet has become one of the most important means for the circulation of independent ideas. As a result, it is a key target of attempts to monitor, control



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and censor the digital media, particularly bloggers, Internet contributors and cyber-dissidents.

In some cases, Governments have blocked virtually all access to the Internet by its own citizens, such as during the peaceful protests in Myanmar in September 2007, thus thwarting all communication with the outside world. In other cases, Internet access has been allowed but independent websites, and even "politically sensitive terms" within search engines, remain censored.

This has been possible to a large extent due to the complicity of leading Internet corporations – the majority of which are based in democratic countries - that have accepted these limitations. Worryingly, some Internet companies have even disclosed personal information of their users in order to allow Governments to identify and convict internet writers.

These explicit censorship measures now exist alongside more subtle tactics that severely restrict the independence of the press whilst seemingly allowing States to maintain a façade of respect to democratic principles such as freedom of expression. In this regard, Governments have exerted severe economic pressure, including through selective use of State advertisement, aiming to strangle independent media outlets.

They have also exploited subjective regulations such as licensing to suspend or shut down the broadcast or printed media. Libel lawsuits have similarly been used deliberately as a means to imprison critical journalists or to punish them with disproportionate fines. Examples of these measures abound. In Guyana, for instance, CNS Channel 6 was suspended for four months for "infringing the terms of its license" after an interviewee, speaking during a live broadcast, called for attacks against the President.

The impact of these measures is not restricted to the media outlets or journalists they target. Rather, they serve to create an unsafe and unstable environment for the functioning of the press as a whole, leading them to shun critical reporting and impose self-censorship.

International legal instruments protect the right of every citizen to receive information and ideas of all kinds, through any media of his or her choice. Governments have thus a legally binding commitment to end censorship, protect a free and independent media and guarantee their right to criticize.

Freedom of the press cannot be applicable exclusively for those with whom we agree. On the contrary, the key to freedom of expression is to respect the rights



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of those with whom we disagree to voice their own opinion. Without this right, democracy itself cannot flourish.

I therefore call on all states to dismantle policies that contribute directly or indirectly to censorship, eliminating a practice of which the sole goal is to silence dissent, opposition and criticism.