



Association of Caribbean MediaWorkers

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Message of the Association of Caribbean MediaWorkers on the Occasion of World Press Freedom Day 2010

Port of Spain, May 3, 2010 - The Association of Caribbean MediaWorkers (ACM) observes World Press Freedom Day 2010 confident that our message of freedom of the press as the preserve of all citizens and not of a single privileged group or sector, including the media industry, is a position on which we find common universal cause.

Indeed, this right derives from the broader concept of free expression out of which virtually all other rights and freedoms flow or are maintained. If people cannot generate, seek and receive expression, human development in all its manifestations is jeopardised. Everywhere in the Caribbean there is the call for people to become responsible for themselves, to seek our own social and economic independence but how can this be achieved if we are not at first truly free to think and to speak and to express ourselves?

As United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon has reminded us on this occasion; around the world, there are governments and those wielding other forms of power who find many ways to obstruct free expression. We know this story very well. There are governments, special economic interests and misguided individuals and groups, firm in the belief that the case for freedom of the press should begin from a position of barriers ostensibly erected to somehow protect our societies from others and from ourselves.

The freedom perspective is the position the ACM has brought to the table of ideas and positions on this question of media and the work of journalists. Our leading role in the Global Forum for Media Development on which we serve as a representative of the Latin America and Caribbean region, our position on the Coordinating Committee of the Latin American and Caribbean Alliance of the International Freedom of Expression Exchange and our working relationship with the International Press Institute, Committee to Protect Journalists and Reporters with Borders all point to deep entrenchment of the view that professional development among media operatives and the networking of journalists find roots and strength in the need to operate in an environment in which freedom prevails.

Secretary General Ban also notes in his World Press Freedom Day message that even as countries move to introduce laws that recognise the universal right to publicly-held information, very often they don't translate into action. This, he attributes to what he calls a "culture of secrecy and a lack of accountability."

This, indeed, is a persistent Caribbean reality. While we continue to advocate for the introduction of access to information laws in all our territories, we urge those jurisdictions in which they already exist to honour both the spirit and the letter of such an undertaking. There is also a corresponding injunction to encourage more pervasive use of such a facility and we encourage journalists to learn more about this important legislation and to make better use of it.



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All of this however appears rather fanciful when we consider that in some of our countries in the Caribbean, the penalty for asking too many questions and challenging the status quo is physical, judicial or commercial death. I mention here the plight of our former Assistant General Secretary, Guy Delva of Haiti who, even in the face of great destruction, death and despair in his native land, faces the threat of assassination at the hands of persons he played a role in convicting for the killing of journalist, Jacques Roche in 2005.

We are also paying attention to a situation in the Cayman Islands that emerged only a few days ago. There, an edict from the judiciary pronounces on the question of identifying criminal defendants when no clear statute on the matter appears to exist as is the case of legislation on matters involving minors or those related to sexual offences in some Caribbean jurisdictions.

It is also suspected that rapidly declining state advertising contracts with the Kaieteur News in Guyana result from what has been a recurring charge of political bias on the part of the newspaper. In this regard, we recall the protracted advertising boycott of the Stabroek News between 2006 and 2007 that was later withdrawn. The head of our affiliate there, Mr Gordon Moseley, also remains banned from attending any event at the country's State House and Office of the President.

Punishing those who attempt to freely express themselves or report the news also remains the norm rather than the exception in Cuba and on this occasion, we remember Orlando Zapata a prisoner of conscience who passed away in February following a hunger strike. We also keep in our minds those Cubans who continue to defy the tentacles of direct and indirect censorship and who continue to risk their own safety and liberty to keep the world informed. We make special mention of the bloggers who continue their work despite official controls and threats.

There is a lot of work to be done to bring our countries more in line with the basic objectives of Article 19 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and a growing number of judicial precedents within the global and Inter-American systems. Now in our ninth year, the ACM remains committed to upholding such an aspiration. We join with our counterpart organisations throughout this hemisphere and elsewhere in recognizing the urgent importance of this event.

Wesley Gibbings
President