

## **Statement of the Zimbabwe Fact Finding Mission of African Media Organisations: 13 June 2008. Harare, Zimbabwe**

From June 8 to 13 a Mission made up of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ Africa Office based in Senegal), Southern Africa Editors' Forum (SAEF), Southern Africa Journalists Association (SAJA), the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) Regional Office and the Network of African Freedom of Expression Organisations (NAFEO) visited Zimbabwe on a fact finding mission to ascertain the conditions of media and freedom of expression in Zimbabwe in the light of the arrests of journalists, both local and foreign and the deteriorating freedom of expression environment. This mission also comes in the context of the forthcoming Presidential election run off slated for 27 June 2008.

The mission notes that Zimbabwe is going through serious political violence perpetrated by the party in power, ZANU PF. This violence is also taking place in a context of major economic challenges that the country faces where inflation is estimated to be greater than 1 million percent. There have also been food shortages, which are further exacerbated through the banning of humanitarian food distribution by NGOs by the government.

The mission met a number of Zimbabwean journalists, editors and media owners working in urban, peri-urban and rural areas and a cross section of representatives of local civic organisations working countrywide. The mission expresses its shock at the level of fear pervading the Zimbabwe media and society at large. The mission talked to journalists who had been arrested on flimsy charges, beaten and had their property confiscated and in some cases destroyed. Journalists operate under the constant fear of being abducted, arrested, detained or beaten up for doing their work. At the time of this fact finding visit, the mission notes that there are three foreign media workers in state prison on charges of breaching broadcasting and telecommunication laws. At the same time, workers of a media monitoring and advocacy organisation were arrested and released after four days for allegedly organising an "illegal meeting". Some of these organisations were also being raided and threatened with closure for allegedly working with the media against the government.

In interviews with various players in the media as well as civic organisations, it is clear that Zimbabwe's media is operating under tremendous pressure from the state and security agents, as well as non-state actors such as youth militia, ZANU PF supporters and war veterans. Almost all those interviewed, especially freelance journalists tell of harrowing and saddening stories of arrests, beatings and intimidation. Zimbabwean journalists face a difficult operating environment in which they are not only expected to be

licensed by a government appointed Media and Information Commission (MIC) but have to brave political violence and the challenges of a failing economy. Those journalists working for the state media live in fear of being fired or suspended for not showing sufficient enthusiasm for the reporting and coverage of the party in power.

Laws that include the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) and Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) are being used with impunity to narrow the operating space for journalists. The mission was told that unlicensed journalists face a daily task of avoiding arrest. More so, the licensed journalists cannot travel outside the city centres to cover rural areas because of fear of security agents and militia who have set up base in rural areas. The combined effect is that Zimbabweans in general lack access to election related information to empower them to make informed choices. In the past five years, four newspapers were banned. A few weeks ago 60,000 copies and a truck belonging to The Zimbabwean newspaper printed outside the country were petrol-bombed by unknown assailants. This situation is worsened by the imposition of a punitive duty on all foreign publications. This situation is worsened by the harassment, arrests and threats on human rights defenders including media and human rights lawyers. Media lawyers have been arrested and others have fled the country fearing for their lives.

The few remaining independent newspapers in Zimbabwe face the challenge of surviving a harsh economic environment in which almost all inputs are imported. Apart from the shortages of equipment, print consumables and newsprint, the government imposes price restrictions on newspapers and other publications through the National Incomes and Pricing Commission. Independent newspapers in Zimbabwe, which do not have government subsidies, are therefore struggling to break even. The economic challenges that the independent media are facing, combined with the arrests, threats and harassment has meant that this media is barely surviving and their impact as alternative sources of information severely curtailed.

The mission noted that the accreditation of foreign journalists and media organisations is at the discretion of the MIC and in this election the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC). Consequently a number of local and foreign journalists have been denied accreditation to cover elections.

The mission observed that the state media is under severe control by the party in power as an exclusive campaign tool. A simple media monitoring of the content of the state owned newspapers and broadcast news bulletins over the period of the visit show a biased reporting embedded in hate language. The state media is thus contributing to the heightening of political

tensions in Zimbabwe through its reportage, especially making allegations of political violence allegedly being perpetrated by the opposition without conclusive police investigations. The mission also noted that harassment of journalists at the state media is meant to inculcate fear and an unquestioning loyalty within the journalists. At the time of our visit seven journalists were under suspension and the Zimbabwean Broadcast Corporation (ZBC) CEO had recently been fired. The purge of the state media is meant to remove any form of professionalism and create a compliant and unquestioning reporter.

This takes place in a situation where no non-state radio and television channels have license to operate in Zimbabwe, and only short and media-wave radios produced outside the country provide an alternative to the state radio and television under ZBC. These signals of these external broadcasts are frequently being jammed.

The mission came to the conclusion that the media and freedom of expression environment is severely constrained. The mission further notes that no proper and professional media work can take place in Zimbabwe under the circumstances to allow for free and fair elections. The mission takes note and congratulates brave Zimbabwean journalists and independent newspapers who still express interest of continuing with their work despite all these daunting challenges.

In light of the media and freedom of expression environment in Zimbabwe, the mission recommends that:

- Regional and International Community monitor the situation of journalists and independent media and ensure that this issue is maintained on the regional and international public agenda.
- Regional and international organisations make preparations to assist Zimbabwean journalists and media who might be forced into either leaving the country or seeking medical or legal assistance.
- Pressure be maintained on the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) by the regional and international community to resolve the deepening political and economic crisis in Zimbabwe that affects the ability of the media to perform their duties in informing the Zimbabwe people.
- The SADC and AU observer missions prevail upon the government of Zimbabwe to allow greater observance and monitoring of the election process by the international community and ensure the security and freedoms of journalists and the media in Zimbabwe.

The full report of the mission will be available within a week.

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