



HUMAN RIGHTS NETWORK FOR JOURNALISTS - UGANDA

In Defence & Promotion of Freedom of Expression, Information & Media Freedom

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Press Statement: For Immediate Release

Police must stop criminalising and blackmailing the media as a way to cover up its own brutality and unprofessional conduct.

'Doctored' Allegations

On 10th October 2015, the country witnessed ugly scenes of the arrest of a Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) mobiliser, one Fatuma Zainab Naigaga, along the Masaka-Mbarara highway who appeared in a video footage being arrested in an inhuman and degrading way where she was undressed during her arrest.

This brutality by the police attracted angry reaction from a wide section of the public, prompting the police to defend its actions. Shockingly the police shifted the blame to media houses for 'doctored' the said video. Fred Enanga, the police spokesperson told Journalists at a press conference on 12th October 2015, at the police headquarters in Naguru, that the television media were biased when showing the Saturday incident with the intent to portray police negatively.

Implications of the allegations:

These uncalled for and unsubstantiated accusations are intended to blackmail, criminalise and intimidate the media. The allegations are further aimed at instilling self-censorship among independent media houses and above all, to silence, stifle and suffocate freedom of expression.

We fear that the police will use these allegations to justify their actions to block, harass, arrest, assault and fabricate charges against journalists, and as a result scare the media from giving comprehensive coverage to political contestants especially those holding dissenting ideologies. The police is trying to hide the publically known misconduct of its errant officers and to divert the public from discussing the continued violations of the peoples' fundamental rights.

Police should substantiate:

The media has a duty to report accurately, objectively and fairly to all parties to the story under normal circumstances. We therefore want to task Mr. Enanga to explain what was doctored, who doctored, and how was it doctored in the undressing footage. He should produce "the right footage" of what transpired during the fracas as opposed to what was carried by the media. 'He, who alleges, must prove.' The onus lies on the police now to prove.

Mr. Enanga threatened that some journalist were to be investigated over their work. He should tell us which journalists are involved and who the complainant is.

Trends and Patterns:

HRNJ-Uganda has over the time recorded several incidences where the police force has shifted blame to the media by accusing it of biased coverage and reporting. Among them is the January 2015 brutal assault of a television journalist, Andrew Lwanga by a senior police officer, the April 2014 incident when FDC's Ingrid Turinawe's breast was fondled by police officers, incidences where police fired teargas in public commuters, schools, health centres and a spate of use of excessive force to enforce police orders especially arrests. In all these incidences, the police have blamed the media of biased reporting and casting it in bad light. It however never produces justification to this effect.

Media freedom:

Freedom of expression and the media is well entrenched in our National Constitution. So the Government and Police should respect the spirit of Article 29(1)(a) of the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda which guarantees freedom of expression.

Way forward:

- If Mr. Enanga cannot prove his allegations, the police should withdraw its doctoring accusations against the media.
- The police should stop inciting the public against the media by blackmailing it as a cover up for its continued professional inadequacies.
- The police should restrict itself to issues of keeping law and order by mostly ensuring the safety and security of journalists where it has most expertise and let issues of the media be handled by the respective professional bodies.

The media should uphold a high degree of professionalism during coverage of this critical and sensitive political season.

No country can be free without a free press. Suppression of the media is detrimental to the decision-making processes and entrenchment of a democratic society. So we should resist it by collectively advocating for a free press and freedom of expression.

For God and My Country



Robert Sempala

National Coordinator