



HUMAN RIGHTS NETWORK FOR JOURNALISTS - UGANDA

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

11th/April/2017

Press Statement: *For Immediate Release*

'State must end attacks on media and incarcerations of journalists in Uganda, allow free expression'

Human Rights Network for Journalists-Uganda (HRNJ-Uganda) is gravely concerned about the rising despicable and cruel acts against journalists, media houses, academicians and Ugandans expressing themselves on matters of public concern.

These wanton acts of abduction, harassment, intimidation of journalists, theft and vandalism of media property, restrictive legislation and trumped up charges, among others, by both the State and non-state actors have a chilling effect on journalists, social critiques and discourages free expression –which is a fundamental right enshrined in the Constitution of Uganda and other regional and international instruments to which Uganda is a party. Such cruel acts are aimed at keeping the citizenry under control and perpetual fear.

On 8th April 2017, NTV journalist, Gertrude Tumusiime Uwitware, was kidnapped by unknown assailants along Nile Avenue at about 3PM local time as she strolled to her workplace at Serena Conference Center/ Hotel. It is alleged that she was blindfolded and driven around Kampala in a car with three occupants one of whom drew a pistol at her. It is further alleged that she was harassed, threatened and subjected to inhuman and degrading treatment.

After nine hours of incarceration, she was dumped in the areas of Kira division late in the night of Saturday, April 8th, 2017. We thank the team at NTV that acted so fast in the wake of the unfortunate news, alerted police and a rigorous search was mounted.

Before her kidnap, Tumusiime first received death threats via Facebook by one Agaba Tindyebwa over her support for Dr. Stella Nyanzi. ***“Gertrude, how are you? Am here to warn you over your facebook posts about Stella Nyanzi. Please pull them off as soon as you can otherwise your life is at a huge risk.. not only your life + your family, because they will miss you. Please take the matter seriously, we know where....”***

Tumusiime's kidnap came barely a day after the arrest of Dr. Stella Nyanzi on charges of cyber harassment and offensive communication emanating from her social media posts critiquing those in power.

A week earlier, “thugs” broke into the Observer newspaper offices and took away all the computers, uprooted the entire CCTV camera system among others sweeping the office clean for the second time in a space of six months. The gun and uniform were abandoned at the scene by the security guard on duty.

On yet another sad note, last Friday, a day before Uwitware' kidnap, Parliament amended Section 93(3), of the Uganda Communications Act 2013 and granted wild powers to the ICT and Information Minister to make and implement regulations on media without the approval of Parliament. Last year, HRNJ-Uganda and other key players like Telecom companies, students, Human Rights and Civil society organisations among others appeared before the Parliamentary Committee on ICT and articulated the dangers of amending this particular provision of the law on freedom of expression, the media and democracy at large.

Since its enactment, this section had not been tested by the Minister and Uganda Communications Commission. We wonder why the rush! It is unfortunate that Parliament which is supposed to check the powers of the Executive, has become an accomplice in undermining freedom of expression in the country. The passing of the amendment has paved way for government to control and regulate the media in a manner that suits those in power. This has dealt a last blow to freedom of expression and the media.

The state of affairs is the scaring for a free and critical media which is essential in a democracy. The government should re-assure Ugandans and the media in particular about their fundamental rights and freedoms.

We therefore appeal to the police to investigate, make public and prosecute Tumusiime's kidnappers as well as the thugs behind the break-into The Observer newspaper offices

Police should take threats against journalists reported to them seriously and put in place the necessary security measures to ensure their safety and security while dispensing their work.

Furthermore, the Government should embrace voices of dissent and uphold the freedom for Ugandans to express themselves as this is a key tenet of democracy.

For God and My Country



ROBERT SSEMPALA
NATIONAL COORDINATOR