

## Kenyan Media Freedom Goes Up in Smoke

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Maja Daruwala, Director of the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, has condemned Thursday's raids on print and television media in Kenya as a shocking and violent new tactic by the Kenyan government to quiet the voice of the media and limit freedom of expression. "The international community will not tolerate such flagrant abuse of human rights and freedom of the press," Ms Daruwala said. "These raids mark a sad day for the Kenyan people, for the impartiality of the Kenyan police force, and for freedom of the media in Kenya."

Just after 12.30am Thursday morning, masked plain clothes police stormed the printing presses of a major East African daily newspaper, the Standard, disabling equipment, assaulting staff and lighting massive bonfires of Thursday's edition in the streets outside. Moments before, another police squad raided the city headquarters of the paper, and a sister television network, KTN-TV, was breached and pulled off air.

Last weekend's Saturday edition of the Standard carried a story relating to an alleged secret meeting between the Kenyan President, Mwai Kibaki, and opposition leader Kalonzo Musyoka. On Tuesday, three Standard journalists – the weekend managing editor, Chacha Mwitwa, the weekend news editor, Dennis Onyango and a reporter, Ayub Sayula – were arrested and taken into custody in connection with the report. They were charged with publishing a false rumour, and have been released on bail.

The raids are a particular shock in a country that has enjoyed a relatively free press, and the government has supported people's rights to freedom of expression. The disturbing response of Kenya's Internal Security Minister, John Michuki, to local and international condemnation of the raids, was, "If you rattle a snake, you must be prepared to be bitten by it."

"The Internal Security Minister's statement shows disregard for the rights of Kenya's people to express themselves openly, or access a free media," noted Ms Daruwala. "The statement is also made without regard for Kenya's obligations as a member of the African Union, the Commonwealth and the United Nations to uphold basic freedoms and human rights."

The raids also reveal the concerning partisanship of the police. Ms Daruwala said, "The police exist to protect and serve the people in their community. Police do not exist to prop up the ruling regime using violence, brutality and illegality." The Standard has subsequently reported that top level police officers, including the Police Commissioner, were not told about the operation, and that it was organised and run by the Internal Security Minister, the head of the police Criminal Investigations Division, and a special advisor to the President. The Standard further claimed that three Ministers monitored the raid remotely by telephone.

Ms Daruwala said, "This kind of political manipulation of the police shows the unaccountable, undemocratic and unacceptable nature of policing in Kenya. The Government must make good on promises for an accountable government to give the people of Kenya the police they deserve."

For more information, contact:

Clare Doube at CHRI ([clare@humanrightsinitiative.org](mailto:clare@humanrightsinitiative.org)) or +91 9810 260 313.

*The Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) is an independent, non-partisan, international NGO working for the practical realisation of human rights in the countries of the Commonwealth: [www.humanrightsinitiative.org](http://www.humanrightsinitiative.org).*