



Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) Press Statement:
Halt attacks on media freedom in Uganda
29 May 2013

Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) is deeply concerned at the recent media siege conducted by the police in Kampala, Uganda. On 20 May 2013, the police raided the offices of Monitor Publications Limited and Red Pepper Newspaper. The police also blocked broadcasts of Dembe FM and KFM, two radio stations housed by Monitor Publications. Armed policemen then disabled equipment and suspended the operations of the media houses.

This clampdown is reportedly a part of attempts by the police to obtain information on a leaked letter recently published in the country's media. According to reports, the letter is by General David Sejusa to the Director of the Internal Security Organisation, a state intelligence agency, and concerns the succession of President Yoweri Museveni's son, Brigadier Muhoozi Kainerugaba to power when his father steps down. The letter alleges a plot to assassinate officials who oppose this plan.

Initially, media workers were questioned by the authorities and compelled to produce copies of the letter in their possession and disclose its source. Following this, a search warrant was sanctioned by a Ugandan court to obtain the letter. The Uganda Communications Commission also warned it might withdraw licences of media houses that have reported on this letter.

On 22 May 2013, the court is reported to have revoked the search warrant and directed the police to vacate the media offices. Defying these orders a heavy police presence remains at the premises of the media houses and they have been prevented from resuming normal operations. The two radio stations remain off the air and the two newspapers are unable to publish material in print.

There are reports that journalists and human rights defenders demonstrating against the media siege have been harassed by police authorities. Tear gas has been used to disperse peaceful demonstrations taking place outside Monitor Publications. Human rights defenders have also been arrested and briefly detained for peacefully protesting the attacks on press freedom.

This continued clampdown and intimidation violates the right to free expression guaranteed in the Constitution of Uganda. The government also has obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the African Charter on Human and People's Rights to protect freedom of expression. Uganda has also signed the Commonwealth Charter which expressly affirms freedom of expression as a core part of Commonwealth values.

At the UN Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review of Uganda in 2011, the government pledged to guarantee freedom of expression. It further undertook to end intimidation, threats and attacks on media workers and agreed to promote reporting and commentary on issues of public concern.

The raid on the media and suppression of peaceful non-violent dissent is disproportionate and in contravention to Uganda's international obligations.

CHRI calls on the government of Uganda to halt the attacks on media freedom and to respect freedom of expression. CHRI urges the authorities to respect the rights of media workers and human rights defenders in accordance with Uganda's legal obligations.

CHRI further calls upon the Commonwealth Secretary-General to take note of developments in Uganda and urge the Ugandan government to respect its obligations to Commonwealth and international human rights standards.