

IPI, WAN-IFRA call for imprisoned journalists' release

Two leading international media organisations today called for the unconditional release of imprisoned Ethiopian journalists and pledged to join forces to help improve the working and legislative environment for news media, during a joint press freedom mission to the country.



Addis Ababa. (Image: Wikimedia Commons)

The International Press Institute (IPI) and World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA) urged the government to release five journalists imprisoned under the country's anti-terrorism laws, and to immediately review statutes that have also been used to convict opposition politicians.

The joint appeal from IPI and WAN-IFRA capped four days of discussions with journalists, lawyers, media executives and members of the Ethiopian government and the African Union ahead of the African Media Leaders Forum (AMLF) taking place in the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa.

"Article 29 of Ethiopia's constitution defends the right to free expression and exchange of information and we urge the government to make sure that it upholds these rights," Alison Bethel McKenzie, executive director of IPI said in Addis Ababa. "While we commend the government for its efforts in improving the lives of its people, we stand firm on the belief that a free press will not only contribute to these efforts, but are crucial for economic development and a democratic society. To that end, I implore the government to show its commitment to defend press freedom and release those journalists it has jailed without condition."

She added that IPI and WAN-IFRA have committed to helping improve the professionalism, quality and independence of journalism in Ethiopia.

Tomas Brunegård, WAN-IFRA president, said: "Our organisations would like to see independent publishers cooperate to develop a strong publishers association that promotes self regulation and works together to create a vibrant and sustainable press."

Meeting

The IPI and WAN-IFRA team met with more than 25 editors, journalists, lawyers, politicians and bloggers as well as associates of the imprisoned journalists. The delegation also held meetings with the ambassadors of Austria and United States; a senior African Union official, an Ethiopian lawmaker; and Redwan Hussien, minister, Government Communication Affairs Office, who engaged in a frank, two-hour discussion with the delegation and the members of the African Media Initiative.

IPI and WAN-IFRA hope that the meeting with Hussein is the beginning of constructive dialogue on critical press freedom issues in Ethiopia.

Regrettably Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn's office did not respond to repeated requests for a meeting. But in an address before delegates of the African Media Leaders' Forum, Desalegn said his government has plans to increase the capacity of all elements of the media and are encouraging the media to establish its own self-regulatory mechanisms.

"There is always room for improvement and as a developing country, we are open to suggestions on improving our media industry," said Desalegn, making no mention of the jailed journalists

IPI/WAN-IFRA also were not granted access to the imprisoned journalists.

The two organisations will produce a comprehensive mission report in the coming weeks.

In its preliminary recommendations, the organisations called for:

- The Ethiopian government to release all journalists convicted under the sedition provisions of the country's 2009 anti-terrorism laws. These journalists include Solomon Kebede, Wubset Taye, Reyot Alemu, Eskinder Nega and Yusuf Getachew.
- Ethiopia's often-fragmented and partisan newspapers to step up cooperation to improve professionalism and independence, and to form a unified front to defend press freedom.
- Publishers and editors should also increase cooperation to reduce expenses, including joint investment in media training, distribution and infrastructure. Such cooperation would foster a freer and more conducive environment for competition in news gathering and reporting.

In addition, IPI and WAN-IFRA agreed to help improve the quality of political reporting ahead of scheduled parliamentary elections in 2015 and urged donor organisations to follow suit. While the IPI/WAN-IFRA representatives saw a broad commitment among journalists to electoral coverage based on sound, in-depth reporting, there is concern about the current level of professionalism.

In addition to Bethel McKenzie and Brunegård, The IPI-WAN-IFRA delegation was comprised of Ferial Haffajee, editor-in-chief of City Press in South Africa; Kabiru Yusuf, chairman of Media Trust Ltd. in Nigeria; Alison Meston, press freedom director for WAN-IFRA; and Timothy Spence, IPI senior press freedom advisor for Africa and the Middle East. IPI will head from Ethiopia to a fact-finding mission in Tanzania.