

Africa's editors unite behind free speech campaign

More than 100 participants from 25 countries attending this week's African Editors Forum in Kigali, Rwanda, heard how the Declaration of Table Mountain campaign and a complimentary initiative led by African Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression, Pansy Tlakula, are encouraging heads of state to repeal criminal speech laws and lift restrictions on a free press.

What is hindering Africa's press?

A panel discussion hosted by the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA) and the Office of the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression at the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, revealed how criminal defamation and insult laws are hindering Africa's press and in turn, the economic and social progress of its people.

Speaking on behalf of WAN-IFRA's continent-wide Declaration of Table Mountain campaign, initiated by African editors during the 2007 World Newspaper Congress in Cape Town, media expert Amadou Kanoute warned: "The big challenge ahead is to create and enable a conducive environment for journalists to report the news without the threat of jail."

Following a 2010 resolution from the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights that called on heads of state to repeal criminal defamation, Tlakula's office launched a complimentary pan-African campaign in October 2012.

A spokesperson for Tlakula's initiative, Lola Shyllon, said there were two main objectives: "We want to repeal criminal defamation and insult laws so that journalists can write the news freely without the fear of committing a criminal offence, and we want to ensure that any fines under civil statutes are proportional."

Most African states still have criminal defamation on their books, including Rwanda where there are at least two journalists currently serving prison terms for defamation under the country's penal code. This is in contrast to Ghana, where criminal defamation was repealed a decade ago.

"Democracy cannot thrive without a free press," said Abdul-Rahman Harruna Attah, editor of the *Accra Mail* in Ghana. "Media professionals must continue to strive for ethical and editorial perfection and the state must recognise that laws which restrict freedom of the press restrict the growth of a nation."

These sentiments were echoed by Boubacar Diallo, president of the Maison de la Presse in Niger, who said "As democracy needs a plural press, as the public need sound information, journalists must be respectful of the rules of the profession."

The African Editors Forum has been instrumental in gaining the support of president Mahamadou Issoufou of Niger and

president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia, both of who have signed the Declaration of Table Mountain and committed to repealing criminal defamation and insult laws.

Participants at the Kigali congress were encouraged to join their colleagues in Niger, Liberia and Ghana and advocate for their heads of state to repeal laws that criminalise speech.

Declaration of Table Mountain

The Declaration of Table Mountain is part of an ambitious strategic partnership between the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) and WAN-IFRA to advance media development and press freedom worldwide. The partnership allows WAN-IFRA to broaden and develop its press freedom and media development activities to support free and financially sustainable media worldwide.

African organisations that have endorsed the Declaration of Table Mountain include: The African Editors Forum, Freedom of Expression Institute, Media Institute of Southern Africa, Media Foundation for West Africa, Observatoire-OLPEC, The Egyptian Organisation for Human Rights, Institute for the Advancement of Journalism, South African National Editors' Forum, Journaliste En Danger, National Union of Somali Journalists, African Media Initiative, and Liberian Media.

International organisations that have endorsed the Declaration include: International Pen, Reporters Without Borders, Article 19, Index on Censorship, International Press Institute, World Press Freedom Committee, Committee to Protect Journalists, Media Rights Agenda, Freedom House, International Publishers Association and the Media Legal Defence Initiative.

For more, go to www.wan-ifra.org/pressfreedom

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