

CPJ calls on AU to uphold press freedom

The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) has addressed a letter to chairperson of the African Union Commission, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, asking the body to mark World Press Freedom Day today by calling for the release of all journalists imprisoned in Africa and appealing for justice in the murders of journalists killed in the line of duty.



The letter, written by Joel Simon, executive director of CPJ, reads as follows:

"Dear Chairperson Zuma,

We ask that you mark World Press Freedom Day, May 3, 2013, by calling for the release of all journalists imprisoned in Africa and appealing for justice in the murders of journalists killed in the line of duty.

At least 41 African journalists will spend World Press Freedom Day imprisoned in direct reprisal for their work, according to CPJ research. It is particularly disturbing that Ethiopia and the Gambia, which host offices of the African Union, are among the nations holding journalists in jail. These imprisonments have silenced important voices, often in contravention of regional and international rulings.

Among the seven journalists imprisoned in Ethiopia is Reeyot Alemu, who is serving a five-year term at Kality Prison on baseless terrorism charges lodged after she wrote columns critical of the government. Reeyot was honored in 2013 with the UNESCO World Press Freedom Prize, and in 2012 with the Courage in Journalism Award from the International Women's Media Foundation. The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, among other international institutions, have censured Ethiopia for the imprisonment of Reeyot and other journalists under the country's overly broad anti-terrorism law.

Eskinder Nega, a 2012 laureate of PEN American Center's Freedom to Write Award, has been imprisoned since September 2011 on fabricated terrorism charges after writing columns discussing the domestic implications of the Arab Spring. The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention ruled that Ethiopia has violated international law by imprisoning Eskinder for the "peaceful exercise of the right to freedom of expression." He is serving an 18-year term in prison.

The Gambia, home to the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, is in violation of rulings by the Court of Justice of the Economic Community of West African States and the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention in connection with the 2007 arrest of journalist Ebrima "Chief" Manneh. These entities found Manneh's detention to be unlawful, and they called for his immediate release. Alarming, Gambian authorities cannot account for Manneh's whereabouts, and over the years have given evasive and inconsistent responses to regional and international inquiries.

More than 80 journalist murders have gone unsolved in Africa since 1992, according to CPJ research. Nigeria and Somalia are among the worst nations in the world in combating deadly, anti-press violence, our 2013 Impunity Index has found. Five journalists have been killed with impunity in Nigeria since 2009. In Somalia, more than 20 murders have gone unsolved over the past decade. These killings are often politically motivated.

Madame chair, critical journalists are not criminals, traitors, or terrorists. Beyond supporting African journalists with training, the African Union should create an open political space that allows news media to report on issues of public interest. Vibrant, independent media that hold government leaders to account are a valuable ally in the pursuit of development and good governance. We urge you to use your office to persuade member states to comply with the letter and spirit of conventions they have signed that uphold press freedom.

*Yours sincerely,
Joel Simon
Executive Director, CPJ"*

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