

Monitor, Red Pepper closures spark protests in Uganda

Ugandan police on Tuesday, 28 May 2013, assaulted and detained several journalists who were among a crowd of demonstrators protesting the government's closure of four independent news outlets, according to news reports and local journalists.

The Committee to Protect Journalists said that the police actions only highlight the government's continuing effort to suppress information concerning a supposed assassination plot.

"Having silenced news outlets for coverage of a critical public issue, Ugandan authorities are now trying to suppress protesters who want to call attention to the censorship," said CPJ East Africa consultant Tom Rhodes. "The indefinite closure of these media outlets serves as a daily reminder that the government wants to deny its citizens important sources of news and information."

About 100 journalists and civil society members protested in Kampala in connection with the 20 May suspension of the Daily Monitor and Red Pepper newspapers and two radio stations affiliated with the Monitor on Tuesday. The protesters demanded that police end the suspension of the dailies and stop occupying the offices, the journalists said.

Police dispersed Tuesday's protest using batons and tear gas, and beat several television journalists. WBS reporters Mulindwa Mukasa and William Ntege; NBS reporter, Bahati Remmy; and NTV reporter, Sudhir Byaruhanga were among the journalists attacked, but no serious injuries were reported. Several journalists said their equipment was also damaged in the attack.

Police briefly detained three members of the Uganda Human Rights Journalist Network who organised the protest, news reports said. Geoffrey Ssebagala, the group's national coordinator, told CPJ he was released without charge, but that two of his colleagues, William Ntege and Mulindwa Mukasa, were charged with unlawful assembly and inciting violence. No court date has been set, he said.

Police shut down the radio stations and the two newspapers, the Monitor and Red Pepper, after the Monitor covered a letter written by top security official Gen. David Sejusa to the director general of Uganda's Internal Security Organisation about an alleged plot for the president's son to succeed him. The letter, which Sejusa confirmed writing, called for an investigation into an alleged plot to assassinate senior government officials who were opposed to Brigadier Muhoozi Kainerugaba, son of President Yoweri Museveni, assuming the presidency in 2016, the Monitor reported.

News accounts reported at the time that police had a search warrant to find the original letter written by Sejusa as well as other unspecified documents. The Inspector General of Police General Kale Kayihura said Tuesday that the Monitor would remain closed until the letter attributed to Sejusa was found, according to news reports.

Lawyers for the Monitor have filed a complaint in court challenging the legality of the police search, James Nangwala, one of the paper's lawyers, said. The case will be heard on Thursday. Journalists and civil society activists plan to begin protesting outside the courtroom and then march to the Monitor's premises, local journalists said.

Outgoing Interior Minister Hilary Onek, who will continue to head the police department until his successor takes the position, told parliament last week that security agencies need to investigate how the Monitor got the letter and "possible violations of the law that may have been committed," given the letter's security classification, according to news reports. Onek also set tough conditions for the Monitor to reopen, including a ban on negative reporting about the army and the first family, the reports said.

Red Pepper was suspended after the paper published a 15 May press release said to have been written by Sejusa's lawyer about the general's letter, according to a statement by the paper. Police had raided the office looking for the press release, the reports said.

The suspensions of the outlets have continued despite a court order last week instructing the police to allow both the Monitor and Red Pepper to resume operations, Monitor lawyer James Nangwala told CPJ. Police said they were appealing, according to local journalists.

Monitor Managing Director Alex Asiimwe has told his staff that they were continuing to negotiate with authorities over the closure, local journalists told CPJ.

Monitor Editor Charles Mwanguhya told CPJ that there were no attacks on journalists during protests that were held outside the Monitor's premises.

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