



STATEMENT FROM THE UGANDA HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION ON WORLD PRESS FREEDOM DAY, 3RD MAY, 2020

The Uganda Human Rights Commission in conjunction with other stakeholders annually commemorates the World Press Freedom Day which is celebrated every 3rd of May of every year. The Commission does so in order to fulfill its constitutional mandate as the National Human Rights Institution which is mandated to protect and promote human rights for all people in this country as enshrined under Article 52 of the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda.

The World Press Freedom Day was proclaimed by the UN General Assembly in December 1993, following the recommendation of UNESCO's General Conference and since then, 3rd May is celebrated worldwide every year as World Press Freedom Day (WPFDD).

The day therefore serves as a reminder to all of us, of the need to respect the commitment to media freedoms and is also a time for reflection among journalists and all other media practitioners on their roles, duties and responsibilities as they continue to serve as the eyes and ears of society and the voice of the voiceless.

The Commission pays tribute to all journalists and media practitioners in Uganda, who have played well and responsibly their professional roles and also similarly performed their duties and responsibilities. The Commission also urges them to strive in the same manner to achieve this year's theme, which is: *'Journalism Without Fear or Favour'*. The theme calls on all actors to step up support to journalists and media practitioners to among other things, ensure their safety while on duty; their independence from political, sectarian or commercial influence; gender and other opportunity equality in all aspects of their work; unbiased, fair, professional, responsible and patriotic reporting; and adequate remuneration.

The critical role of the media in the protection and promotion of human rights cannot be overemphasised. The journalists and other media practitioners facilitate the citizens' enjoyment of the freedom of expression which includes freedom of the press and

other media, and the right to information under Articles 29(1) (a) and 41(1), respectively of the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda, 1995.

Journalists and other media practitioners facilitate the flow of information between the citizens as rights holders and the duty bearers, in addition to playing the watchdog role of pre-empting or exposing human rights violations. The citizens depend on the journalists and other media practitioners generally to report the fair and undistorted truth especially in the present era when fake news, disinformation and misinformation are rampant in Uganda and the world over.

Journalists and all media practitioners are also instrumental in enabling the citizens to know and appreciate properly their own rights and to also fulfil their own duties and responsibilities. For this reason therefore, we recognise the invaluable contribution made by journalist and the other media practitioners in this country and all over the world, in the realisation of peoples' freedoms and liberties, particularly in respect to freedom of speech and expression and free access to information.

This year's commemoration which has fallen during the global COVID 19 pandemic and the lockdown responses made in many

countries in the world including Uganda, has provided an opportunity for the media to demonstrate its importance by providing pertinent information, facilitating the necessary public debate and holding governments and other relevant duty bearers to account. However, in the middle of this global pandemic when the public is also receiving excessive amounts of information, including misinformation and disinformation about the novel Corona Virus and its impact, it is very important for the media to exercise patriotism as well as professionalism and responsible reporting.

As Human Rights Defenders therefore, we commend the contribution that journalists and the other media practitioners in Uganda have made so far and for the great work they have done and continue to do as the country strives to prevent the spread of COVID 19. Since the outbreak of the COVID 19 pandemic, the media has served the public's right to know by providing vital, accurate and relevant information on the disease and the appropriate measures for prevention of its spread, and also facilitated necessary actions for monitoring the responses made by government and other duty bearers. The media in Uganda

have also ensured that all Presidential addresses (12 as of today) and information from the Ministry of Health and all other Ministries, Departments and Agencies is shared with the public in the languages that are best understood by the general public. Additionally, the journalists have also covered the views of the general public about the interventions made by government and other relevant duty bearers in preventing the spread of COVID 19, which has helped the relevant Ministries, Departments, Agencies and other duty bearers in strategic planning and operationalisation of the planned responses.

This year, the Commission has together with its partners who include the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, African Centre for Media Excellence, Media Focus on Africa, African Centre for Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture Victims, Uganda National Commission for UNESCO, Embassy of Denmark, Uganda, CCEDU, Human Rights Network for Journalists, Uganda Journalists Association and Uganda Christian University Department of Mass Communication, carried out joint advocacy activities to commemorate the World Press Freedom Day, even amidst the current lockdown period.

The Commission and its partners have carried out joint radio and television talk shows both in Kampala and on upcountry radio and television stations; Twitter Chats and posts; social media posts; webinar debates; as well as opinion articles and statements in newspapers on the role of the media during the COVID 19 pandemic and the promotion of media freedom and responsible journalism in Uganda.

However, the Commission notes that some journalists have faced some difficulties during performance of their duties during the lockdown period, as some of them have been reported to have allegedly been arrested, assaulted and their equipment confiscated and/or destroyed by some security operatives during their process of enforcing the COVID 19 government directives.

On the other hand, the Commission has also noted that some journalists sometimes carry out their work of covering some events and particularly violent public demonstrations without taking the necessary precautions for their own safety, like embedding themselves in secure positions, and sometimes they interact with security operatives in a provocative way. In some

cases the news reports that are filed and the news that is released to the public are politically biased in favor of certain political groups or parties. Such unprofessional and irresponsible methods of work unfortunately jeopardize the struggle for media freedom in this country.

On a more positive note however, the Commission also notes with appreciation that His Excellency the President has on a number of occasions publicly reminded the chiefs and personnel of the various security agencies to handle any person suspected or found to be in breach of the law and public order without harassment, harm and within the limits and dictates of the law. The Commission has also noted the fact that the improper actions of the aforementioned errant security operatives are as a result of their own personal unprofessional behavior and outside the official policy of government and the security agencies to which they belong. Accordingly, the Commission also highly appreciates the timely actions that have been taken by the relevant commanders and chiefs of the various security agencies, and the sanctions taken against the errant officers, men and women who have acted outside official policy and the law while enforcing the COVID 19 directives. Similarly, the

Commission has itself taken up a number of cases of alleged human rights violations during the lockdown period, for rigorous investigation and further management, and the public shall be informed of the relevant outcomes in due course.

Call for Action:

As we commemorate this year's World Press Freedom Day, and in an effort to enhance the realisation of media freedom in Uganda, we call for the following actions to be taken by government and other duty bearers, media owners, journalists and other media practitioners as well as all other stakeholders:-

- Government should ensure that the rights of journalists and all media practitioners who do their work professionally, responsibly and within the law, including freedom of all the media to inform the public, is exercised freely and without any fear or favour.
- Journalists and all the other media practitioners should at all times apply safe, responsible and professional methods of work as they collect information during various situations, and also ensure application of patriotic, responsible and professional reporting that is free from

distortions, biases, misinformation and sensationalism especially during this period of the COVID 19 pandemic.

- The various security agencies, journalists and other media practitioners are all urged to work harmoniously with each other, and to ensure that all their respective actions are within the limits of the law.
- The Executive and Parliament are urged to resolve the outstanding issue of minimum wage for the entire workforce in this country, in order to address the current plight of poor remuneration for media practitioners.
- Government, proprietors of the various media agencies and farms, and the media practitioners should work together to strengthen journalist and media workers' associations and unions, in order to enhance their respective capacities for collective bargaining.
- Journalists and all media practitioners should invest more resources to ensure acquisition of improved professional skills, in order to improve performance and broaden employment opportunities both within the media industry and outside.

Freedom of the media is a human right that facilitates the realization of the broader freedom of expression and access to information in society. The media is therefore an indispensable key player in the process of citizen's participation in public activities for development and advancement of people's prosperity. Therefore, it is important and necessary to promote a free, independent, responsible, professional and patriotic media in Uganda, which is also adequately empowered to play an effective and constructive role in promoting good governance as well as sustainable ideological, cultural, social, economic and political independence in this country.

Today we, in Uganda Human Rights Commission salute wholeheartedly the media in Uganda for the contribution they have made and continue to make in providing information and promoting accountability, and also remind them that the struggle for the consolidation of the achievement of a free, professional and patriotic media in this country still continues.

FOR GOD AND MY COUNTRY

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Katebalirwe Amooti Wa Irumba'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Dr. Katebalirwe Amooti Wa Irumba

Acting Chairperson

UGANDA HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

Sunday May 3, 2020