

## EAST AND HORN OF AFRICA HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS NETWORK

Press release

15<sup>th</sup> September 2009

### Kampala: **Ugandan government should immediately end attacks on the media**

The East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project (EHAHRDP) is deeply concerned by continued restrictions on freedom of expression and the media, including attacks on individual journalists, following last week's protests in Kampala. The Ugandan government's decision to shut down four radio stations and to suspend live public debates should be immediately revoked and those found responsible for violations against individual journalists held to account in order to abide by its national, regional and international legal obligations.

The first radio station to be affected by the ban was the Central Broadcasting Service (CBS) which belongs to the Kingdom of Buganda on Thursday 10<sup>th</sup> September. Uganda's governmental broadcasting monitoring body, the Uganda Broadcasting Council, informed CBS that it would be immediately shut down without recourse of law. The following day, the Broadcasting Council, closed three other radio stations, *Suubi FM*, *Radio Sapienta* and *Radio Two Akaboozi ku Bbiri*, whilst the Minister of Information Matsiko announced the suspension at a press conference charging the stations of inciting violence, riots and destruction of property. Recording material and other equipment was seized and destroyed during the closures.

The closure of these stations, coupled with the suspension of live public debates, known as *bibeza*, on the grounds that the presenters of the debates had failed to control the discussions and comments by callers represents a stark violation of Uganda's laws on freedom of the media and expression.

The suspensions resulted in a dearth of information at the very height of the tensions which increased people's concerns, insecurity, frustration and played a significant part in the spreading of alarming rumours.

Individual journalists were also personally targeted during the attacks on the media. The host of Radio's One's *Spectrum* programme, Kalundi Robert Serumaga, was abducted late on the 11<sup>th</sup> September by unknown persons and held in detention, initially in an ungazetted area and later transferred to Central Police Station (CPS), without charges or access to his lawyer. He was severely beaten during his interrogations and was therefore admitted on Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> to a police medical unit and later transferred to one of Kampala's main hospitals. Mr. Serumaga is today appearing in court on charges of six counts of sedition.

These attacks on the media come after protests and riots broke out in Kampala on Thursday following the decision by the authorities to refuse to allow the Kabaka, the King of the Buganda Kingdom which is the largest ethnic group in Kampala, to take part in a Youth Day Celebrations in a contested northeastern district of the city.

The riots have since subsided yet Mr Serumaga's fate remains unclear and the suspension of the radio stations and the live public debates have been upheld. None of the radio stations have of yet been informed when they will be allowed back on air.

*"The government and the media industry have a range of measures at their disposal to prevent excessive and potentially dangerous reporting and radio discussions. Nevertheless, as developments last week have shown, clamping down on the media only accentuates problems. In light of the forthcoming 2011 elections, the reaction of the authorities towards the media is of utmost concern. Both the government and key stakeholders, within the diplomatic community, should take immediate steps to revoke the current suspension and to ensure that Ugandan domestic provisions to protect freedom of expression and the media are respected and re-enforced"* says Mr. Hassan Shire Sheikh, Executive Director of EHAHRDP.

EHAHRDP therefore calls on the Ugandan authorities and the Uganda Broadcasting Council to:

- Ensure that Mr. Serumaga is tried in a fair and independent trial that meet international fair trial standards;
- Investigate in an impartial and independent manner cases of excessive use of force, assault, torture, arbitrary arrest and detention by the security forces against journalists;
- Ensure that those found responsible for these violations are held to account;
- Immediately revoke the suspension of CBS, *Suubi FM*, *Radio Sapienta* and *Radio Two Akaboozi ku Bbiri* and end the suspension of *Bibeza*;
- End all practices which threaten the freedom of the media and expression;
- Observe the provisions of the 1998 UN Declaration on human rights defenders, the African Charter on Human and People's Rights and other human rights treaties to which Uganda is treaty and which guarantee freedom of expression and association amongst other rights.

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