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East and Southern Africa: Journalists targeted amid ongoing crackdown on media

Authorities across East and Southern Africa continued to impose severe restrictions on the right to freedom of expression and media freedom over the past year, said Amnesty International on World Press Freedom Day.

The human rights organization documented widespread intimidation, harassment and detention of journalists in countries throughout the region. Authorities continued to target and brutally crackdown on those who dared to report on corruption allegations and human rights violations.

“Threats to the right to freedom of expression and the media continued unabated across the East and Southern Africa region over the past year. Speaking out against or scrutinising government policies, actions or inaction, or publicly sharing information deemed damaging to the government carried the risk of arrest, arbitrary detention, or death,” said Tigere Chagutah, Amnesty International’s Regional Director for East and Southern Africa.

Amnesty International also documented increased intentional disruption of internet connectivity and the enactment of tough cyber security laws aimed at silencing the media and controlling information dissemination.

Hiding behind the “law”: silencing journalists by all means

Across East and Southern Africa, authorities used national security laws including counter terrorism and cybersecurity legislation to undermine the right to freedom of expression, punish journalists and suppress media freedom.

In Madagascar, the Cybercriminality Code and the Communication Code have forced journalists to self-censor due to fear of reprisals. Broad and vaguely defined provisions within the laws such as “attacks on state security”, “defamation”, “dissemination of fake news” and “incitement to hatred” have been used to intimidate, harass and target journalists.

In February, the Zimbabwean authorities [banned two journalists](#) from covering government functions in Midlands province. Midlands Minister of State and Devolution Affairs singled out Sydney Mubaiwa (Mirror Midlands bureau chief) and NewsDay’s Stephen Chadenga who were at a meeting organized by the Gender Commission and ordered them not to attend future government engagements.

In May, Zimbabwe enacted the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Amendment Act (Patriot Act) [which threatens media freedom](#) as it criminalises wilfully injuring the sovereignty and national interest of Zimbabwe.” Journalists who attend a meeting where there is “reason to believe” that its aim is “to consider or plan armed intervention” might be charged even when they only attend for the purpose of reporting.

In South Sudan, Amnesty International documented intimidation, harassment and censorship of journalists including cases where security officers removed newspaper articles, they deemed critical of the transitional government, blocked journalists from covering some political parties, confiscated accreditation documents as well as equipment of journalists, and suspended the operations of some media houses.

ecoi.net description:

Article on the state crackdown on journalists in East and Southern Africa

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, authorities continued their relentless attacks on the right to freedom of expression and press freedom, against the backdrop of the general elections held in December 2023, inter-community violence in certain regions and the armed escalation in the eastern provinces.

Over the past year, the authorities arbitrarily closed down a dozen media outlets and programmes, on charges ranging from “spreading false rumors” to “inciting revolt against the established authorities” and “defamation”.

In September 2023, journalist Stanis Bujakera [was detained and prosecuted](#) for “spreading false rumors” and “forgery” following the publication by Jeune Afrique of an article implicating the security services in the murder of politician Chérubin Okende.

In March 2024, Bujakera was convicted and sentenced to six months in prison, despite the authorities failing to demonstrate any criminal offense and liability in the case. He was eventually freed from prison because he had already been detained for more than six months. At least three more journalists are currently detained on trumped-up charges across the country.

In Burundi, journalist Floriane Irangabiye is [serving a ten-year prison](#) sentence for critical comments she made about the Burundian government during an online radio show. In January 2023 the High Court of Mukaza found her guilty of “endangering the integrity of the national territory”. She has appealed twice unsuccessfully, and the Supreme Court upheld her conviction on 13 February 2024.

In Zambia, on April 13, police officers arrested Rodgers Mwimba and Innocent Phiri in the town of Kafue, south of the capital, Lusaka, while filming an altercation between police officers and two opposition party leaders. They were detained at Kafue police station, forced to delete their footage and released two hours later.

In Malawi, Macmillan Mhone was arrested and charged with ‘publication of news likely to cause fear and alarm’ over a story that he wrote in August 2023 on the fraudulent activities of a businessman who had been charged with conspiracy to defraud the Malawi government.

Countries:

Burundi, Congo, Democratic Republic, Ethiopia, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, Somalia, South Sudan, Zambia, Zimbabwe

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Amid persistent armed conflicts since 2020, Ethiopian authorities used state of emergency laws to arbitrarily arrest journalists. Since August 2023 at least nine journalists have been detained, with five remaining in custody. Among them, three face terrorism allegations, which could lead to the death penalty if they are convicted.

In Somalia, journalists were subjected to threats, harassment, intimidation, beatings, arbitrary arrests and prosecution. In February 2023, a court in Mogadishu sentenced Abdalle Ahmed Mumin, a journalist and secretary general of the Somali Journalists Syndicate (SJS), to two months' imprisonment for "disobeying government orders" after SJS held a press conference to protest directives issued by the information ministry on coverage of an offensive against al shabab armed group.

In Mozambique, where journalists routinely face intimidation, harassment, death threats, violence and even killings, newspaper editor [Joao Fernando Chamusse](#), was killed at his house in Maputo in December 2023. João Fernando Chamusse was the editor of the newspaper Ponto por Ponto and a commentator on TV Sucesso, which has faced increasing intimidation. Its CEO Gabriel Júnior, received death threats recently.

In Lesotho, investigative journalist Ralikonelo Joki, known as Leqhashasha, was ambushed and fatally shot outside Tšenolo FM studio in Maseru in May 2023. Prior to his killing, believed to be linked to his work as a journalist, he had received death threats on three occasions.

"Amnesty International reiterates its call for authorities in East and Southern Africa to release unlawfully detained journalists, stop targeting the press merely for doing its job, and end the misuse of the justice system to silence journalists and critics, and clampdown on the freedom of the media," said Tigere Chagutah

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