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Media Freedoms Should Not Be a Target in DR Congo

Cancel Jessie Kabasele's Suspension, Ensure Journalists Can Work Safely, Freely



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Journalists attend an election rally for president President Félix Tshisekedi in Goma, North Kivu province, Democratic Republic of Congo, on December 10, 2023. © 2023 ALEXIS HUGUET/AFP via Getty Images

Last week, the [Congolese](#) government's Communication and Broadcasting Board (Conseil supérieur de l'audiovisuel et de la communication, CSAC) [suspended journalist](#) [Jessy Kabasele](#) for an indefinite period, following his interview with one of the country's most famous singers, Koffi Olomide, on *Le Panier The Morning Show*. During the interview, [aired](#) by the state-run broadcasting company, Olomide criticized the army's response to M23 rebels' assault as too weak.

Congolese authorities have been fighting the [Rwanda-backed M23](#) rebel group since hostilities renewed in 2022 in the North Kivu province.

The CSAC accused Kabasele of failing to reframe Olomide's speech which, it argued, "undermines the enormous efforts and sacrifices made by the government." The media regulator [summoned](#) both Kabasele and Olomide last week, while Olomide's lawyers are said to have [met](#) with a prosecutor on July 15.

Congo's media regulator has been stifling reporting on the conflict. In February, the CSAC issued a [directive](#) requesting the media not to broadcast debates on Congolese army operations without the presence of at least one "expert on the matter." It also requested journalists avoid radio phone-ins discussing the topic and interviewing "negative forces," a vague and unclear term that leaves the door open to arbitrary prohibitions.

In April, the CSAC [recommended](#) that media outlets should no longer "broadcast information relating to the rebellion in eastern DRC without referring to official [government] sources."

While international human rights law allows governments during states of emergency [to derogate](#) from some obligations to respect [freedom of expression](#), there are [strict standards](#) on what governments can do and how. Those standards, which include restrictions having a clear legal basis, being necessary, and proportionate, ensure that the essence of freedom of expression, including freedom to seek, receive, and impart ideas and information, is safeguarded. CSAC's interference with freedom of expression and freedom of the press fails to meet the criteria.

The cases of Olomide and Kabasele are reminiscent of other [journalists](#) and [public figures](#) who have been targeted by the authorities.

The work of Congolese journalists operating in eastern provinces [has been fraught with danger](#) and their dedication and commitment should be commended. Instead of punishing journalists and private citizens for expressing views on a crisis that is devastating the country, the authorities should protect journalists' rights to operate safely and freely.