

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

UGANDA: End attacks on journalists, hold perpetrators to account *Lack of accountability denies justice and promotes impunity*

(Kampala, August 14, 2018) – The targeted attacks on journalists in Arua town as candidates engaged in the last day of campaigns for the area Member of Parliament (MP) by-election is a deeply concerning development. It represents a direct and severe threat to press freedom in Uganda and access to information by the public during elections.

The Uganda Police Force should unconditionally drop all charges preferred against the journalists that were arrested, return all confiscated equipment, and hold persons responsible for the violations to account. The police should further take meaningful measures to ensure a safe and enabling environment for journalists in Arua town and across the country, Chapter Four Uganda said today.

On August 13, 2018, NTV Uganda journalists Herbert Zziwa and Ronald Muwanga were attacked by security officers under the watch of the Uganda Police. They were reporting live from Arua town about a scuffle at Pacific Hotel and the shooting to death of Kawuma Yasin, a driver of Robert Kyagulanyi, the Kyadondo East Member of Parliament.

They were detained at Gulu Central Police Station where the charges of inciting violence and malicious damage were preferred against them. They have since been released on police bond.

Several other journalists operating in Arua town have also reported incidents of intimidation and harassment by security officers from various security agencies, including the police. Hotel rooms of some of the journalists were reportedly searched by security officers for unknown reasons.

On August 14, 2018, NBS Television also reported an attack on its journalists by security officers in Arua town. While preparing for a live transmission to report about the situation in Arua town, men in security uniform marched towards them, pushed them, and threatened to beat them up if they did not stop covering the area.

“One of our journalists, John Kibalizi was picked and taken to unknown location,” said Ben Ongom, NBS Television journalist in Arua town. During the attack, the journalists were forced to run away for their safety. Their equipment was confiscated by the security officers.

These reports are very concerning and present a worrying indicator of the threatening environment journalists are increasingly working under in Uganda. Journalists have a right to seek, gather, and report news about current events, including demonstrations and crimes. They play a crucial role in informing the public and enabling citizen exercise of democratic freedoms. The government should provide a safe environment for journalists to do their work. Journalism is not a crime.

Whereas we strongly condemn any acts of violence, including attacks on groups of other candidates or obstructing the presidential motorcade, the police should use reasonable and lawful force to manage public order. The use of live ammunition and other means of excessive force that resulted in the brutal killing of Kawuma Yasin and leaving scores injured was unnecessary and unlawful.

The other suspects under arrest, including Robert Kyagulanyi and the by-election candidate Kasiano Wadri and his supporters, should be detained in a place authorized by the law and allowed reasonable access to the next-of-kin, a lawyer, and other fundamental personal liberties guaranteed under Article 23 of the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda.

The crimes reported should be promptly, impartially and effectively investigated for full accountability to end impunity for human rights violations.

We call on the government to comply with its obligations under national and international law, to prosecute all those responsible for the human rights abuses in criminal courts of law, and to protect journalists on duty, especially during tense situations to ensure they are able to do their work.

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