

**For Immediate Release**

## **Uganda: Stranglehold on Independent Groups**

*Parliamentary Committee should Reject Bill's Repressive Measures, Criminal Sanctions*

(Kampala, July 2, 2015) – [Uganda](#)'s parliamentary committee on defense and internal affairs should reject many provisions of a bill to regulate non-governmental organizations, thirteen Ugandan and international groups said today. In its current form, the bill would subject independent groups to extensive and unjustified government control and interference, and violate basic rights.

The [new Non-Governmental Organisations \(NGO\) bill](#) would grant Uganda's internal affairs minister and the National Board for Non-governmental Organisations broad powers to supervise, approve, inspect, and dissolve all nongovernmental, community-based, and faith-based organizations, and impose severe criminal penalties for violations. Among several troubling, broad, and [vaguely worded provisions](#), it would require organizations to “not engage in any activity which is ... contrary to the dignity of the people of Uganda.” The bill introduces severe restrictions that would put a stranglehold on independent criticism of government that is central to a democratic society, the groups said.

“Who gets to define something as subjective as the dignity of Ugandans? We have the freedom to disagree, debate and advocate for the policy priorities our country needs,” said Dennis Odwe, Executive Director of [Action Group for Health, Human Rights and HIV/AIDS Uganda](#). “This bill would gag civil society from criticizing public policy design and implementation that affects the lives of the vulnerable Ugandans. Legitimate criticism of government's lack of prioritization of health spending could be considered ‘contrary to the dignity of the people of Uganda.’ NGOs by their mandates are watchdogs and this is what government should promote, rather than stifling our work with this bill.”

As Uganda prepares for the 2016 elections, independent groups are facing an increasingly difficult and hostile environment. Organizations working on controversial and politically sensitive issues such as oil revenue transparency, land acquisition compensation, corruption, access to health care and protection of human rights have faced intimidation and threats.

“Uganda needs a strong civil society to help fight the corruption that affects us all,” said Cissy Kagaba, executive director of Anti-Corruption Coalition Uganda. “We cannot be subject to endless bureaucratic hurdles and do our jobs effectively. This bill smacks of an attempt to stifle our efforts to address corruption and other key issues.”

Under the proposed legislation, merely operating without a permit could lead to fines, prosecution, and criminal penalties of between four and eight years in prison for the organization's directors. The significant punitive dimensions of the law threaten well-established international and regional standards of freedom of association to establish and run independent groups and the organizations' freedom of expression, the groups said.

“Non-governmental organizations have a key role holding government accountable,” said Winnie Ngabiirwe, executive director of [Global Rights Alert](#). “We should not face criminal sentences if our work – research, advocacy or service delivery – touches on subjects sensitive to people in power. For those of us advocating for land rights and transparency in the oil sector, we could face real problems if this vague bill is passed as is.”

Another troubling provision of the bill would allow the board to revoke a permit, or dissolve an organization, – if, according to the bill, “in the opinion of the Board, it is in the public interest to do so.”

Most problematic, the new bill retains the current system under which resident district commissioners, who are in every district throughout the country, and are appointed directly by the president, would chair the district and sub-county committees on nongovernmental organizations. District and sub-county officials working for the domestic intelligence agency would be specifically required to serve on such committees, maintaining the implicit assumption that the operations of nongovernmental groups are a potential threat to district or national security.

Currently Uganda’s NGO board, the government body regulating NGOs is housed within the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The groups are calling for the bill to be amended, so that the NGO board is removed from the Internal Affairs ministry and its activities are reported directly to parliament. Moreover, the Board’s decisions should be subject to judicial review, the groups said.

“The existence of independent groups in Uganda is no more a threat to national security than respecting fundamental human rights is, and they should not be subject to control by intelligence agencies,” said [Maria Burnett](#), senior Africa researcher at [Human Rights Watch](#). “Intelligence bodies have no role in oversight of independent organizations.”

**Signatory groups:**

Anti-Corruption Coalition Uganda  
Action Group for Health, Human Rights and HIV/AIDS Uganda  
Chapter Four Uganda  
Global Rights Alert  
Health GAP  
Human Rights Watch  
Human Rights Awareness and Promotion Forum  
Uganda Network of AIDS Service Organisations  
Uganda Health and Sciences Press Association  
Coalition for Health Promotion and Social Development  
Unwanted Witness  
East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project  
Initiative for Social and Economic Rights

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