

Ugandans to the rescue



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Rights watchdog warns on media freedom

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HUMAN Rights Watch says as Uganda goes to general elections next year, freedom of expression is in jeopardy. "Supporters of the ruling party, including government officials, are threatening and intimidating journalists in an effort to curb criticism of the Government," the organization said in a report released in Kampala yesterday.

The report is titled: A media minefield: Increased threats to freedom of expression in Uganda. It documents criminal cases pending against 39 journalists and talk-show hosts. The report said on the superficial level, the Ugandan media seem to enjoy considerable latitude, especially those based in Kampala. "In reality, however, genuine free and independent journalism is under threat, particularly outside the capital," stated the report which was released at a press conference on the eve of the World Press Freedom Day.

In a reaction, the Government Chief Whip, Daudi Migereko, said the statements were not true. "I am surprised that such a report is published. We need to study it. It is difficult to understand the basis of their submission because there is freedom of expression, freedom of speech and the print and electronic media have been doing their work uninhibited."

Despite this view, the report said the Government deploys many tactics to stifle critical reporting, from physical violence to threats, harassment, bureaucratic interference, and criminal charges. It noted that the increasing use of these tactics during the political unrest in September 2009, and in the run-up to the February 2010 vote, threatens to undermine media freedoms necessary for a free and fair election.

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The watchdog recommended many solutions among them the re-opening the Central Broadcasting Station and impartial investigations into threats and intimidation of radio and print journalists reportedly carried out by resident district commissioners and their staff.

The organisation's Africa advocacy director, Jon Elliott, and researcher for Africa division Maria Burnett also addressed the conference. During discussions, FDC spokesperson Wafula Oguttu accused state minister for information, Kabakumba Masiko, in absentia, of being an enemy of the media.

He said the minister had come up with "obnoxious" laws to replace the good media laws. The minister says the laws are meant to ensure that the media is regulated and it reports in a way which does not harm national security and relations with other countries.