

MISA Communique (Zimbabwe Statement)



September 18, 2003

Statement on attacks and closure of media organisations in Zimbabwe

The Media Caucus formed at the World Summit on the Information Society in Geneva condemns the closure of the Harare newspaper, the Daily News, by the Zimbabwe police. The caucus noted that the Daily News entered a challenge in the Supreme Court to provisions of Zimbabwe's Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act which requires newspapers and their journalists to register with the Media and Information Commission.

Instead of considering the constitutionality of the law, the Supreme Court refused to hear the matter on the grounds that the Daily News was acting illegally by failing to register. However, customary practice in such circumstances is for the merits of the challenge and the legality of the law to be examined before the requirement to comply is invoked. This is done so that the Supreme Court would not be seen to be implementing a law that could be unconstitutional.

By its action the court provided an incentive for the authorities to close the paper, the only independent daily showing opposition to President Robert Mugabe's repressive government.

The action conflicts with the laudable aims of the World Summit on the Information Society which Zimbabwe government representatives are attending. The aims of the summit are to expand communications so that they reach as many of the world's people as possible. By closing the paper and thus a means of communication the government of Zimbabwe has negated these principles of freedom of expression.

The caucus is well aware of the many major Press Freedom violations and closures of papers and other media in many countries -- including recent assaults on journalists in Geneva itself -- but it has raised a protest against the incidents in Zimbabwe because of the extraordinary coincidence with Prepcom3's discussions on media freedom and the expansion of communication throughout the world.

Equally unacceptable is the government's clamping down on the Zimbabwe Chapter of the Media Institute of Southern Africa which it has classified as an unregistered media organisation.

It should be noted that if the Act is applied to MISA-Zimbabwe's operations it could then be applied to every large commercial operation in the country that has a public relations department and issues public statements on behalf of its company.

The Media Caucus calls on the Zimbabwe government to restore the equipment to the Daily News, remove its armed police and allow the paper to continue publishing. In addition it calls on the Zimbabwe Supreme Court to hear the appeal of the newspaper against the Act on the grounds of its constitutionality as a matter of urgency.

Media Caucus
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