

Repression of Freedom of Expression and imprisonment of journalists in the Gambia

TUC comments

1 The TUC welcomes this opportunity to put forward its views on the freedom of expression, notably, the press freedom in the Gambia and hopes that the UN Human Rights Council will take them into serious consideration and demand that the Gambian authorities take adequate and appropriate measures to safeguard them.

2 The TUC and its affiliates attach great importance to freedom of expression, consider it an essential element of a free society and a clear indication of a country's commitment to democratic principles and processes and view recent event in the Gambia with grave concern.

3 The TUC General Council has kept a close watch on developments in the Gambia and takes a serious view of the rapidly deteriorating human rights situation in the country. On Monday 20 July, 2009, the TUC, the National Union of Journalist in the UK and Ireland (NUJ) and Amnesty International held a protest at the Gambian High Commission in London attended by dozens of demonstrators,

4 We are dismayed over the sentencing of the six journalists to two years' imprisonment for their criticism of the Government of Gambia. Three of the journalists concerned are members of the Gambian Press Union affiliated to the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) while three others were reporters of The Point newspaper and Foroyaa newspaper. The journalists concerned were also fined some USD 10,000 each, according to Agency reports. As many commentators have pointed out that their trial was fraught with numerous irregularities and tainted with political interference.¹ Moreover, as the Gambia Press Union (GPU) has pointed out that the trial was held in camera while the presiding judge, Justice Wowo, refused to withdraw from the case despite the lawyers' argument that their clients had no confidence in a trial presided over by him.

5 The raids of newspaper offices, intimidation and arrests of journalists critical of the policies of the Government have long been a common occurrence in the Gambia despite the representations and protests² made by their professional bodies and the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ)

¹ "This was a trial that showed the dead hand of political interference in the honest work of journalists", Rodney Pinder, Director, International News Safety Institute.

² "There is absolute intolerance of any form of criticism" in Gambia, with death threats, surveillance and arbitrary night-time arrests the daily lot of journalists "who do not sing the government's praises". Reporters Sans Frontières,

and their affiliates. “The lack of independence of the judiciary in cases involving journalists and human rights defenders is increasing in Gambia and there has been a history of media repression in Gambia”, comments Amnesty International³.

6 The climate of intolerance and fear has been pervasive and worsened over the years. In 2007, Fadzai Gwaradzimba, Representative of the UN Development Programme was asked to leave the country when she expressed doubts about the effectiveness of the cure for AIDS proposed by the Gambian President⁴.

7 The campaign against media intensified following the introduction in parliament of legislation in 2004 which provided for jail sentences for journalists found guilty of libel or sedition. Deyda Hydara, editor of The Point and a leading critic of the regime was shot dead in the wake of the passage of the law.

8 The TUC is also disturbed over the reports of homophobic comments by the Gambian Head of State, strongly condemns arbitrary arrests of citizens alleged to have engaged in homosexual practices and the invasion of their privacy and expresses support for human rights organisations defending their human rights and associated freedoms.

9 The TUC expresses support for, and solidarity with, the Gambian journalists, the IFJ and human rights organisations, in their initiatives to protect and promote democracy, freedom of expression and the rule of law in the Gambia and joins the international trade union movement and human rights organisations in the condemnation of attacks on journalists and media personnel exercising their profession.

³ Amnesty International, Press Release, 7 August 2009

⁴ The President, according to news reports, recommends a herbal paste