

Honourable Senator Monica Mutsvangwa
Ministry of Information, Publicity and Broadcasting Services
76 Samora Machel Avenue
Corner 1st / S. Machel
Harare
Zimbabwe

August 3rd, 2020

Re: Open letter of concern on the increasing number of arrests and attacks on journalists by state security agents (police officers and soldiers) in connection with the lockdown measures

Dear Minister of Information, Publicity and Broadcasting Services,

Reporters Without Borders (RSF), a leading international organisation defending press freedom, and the Zimbabwean Chapter of the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA Zimbabwe), would like to draw your attention and express our deep concern about the multiple arrests and assaults on Zimbabwean journalists while conducting their lawful duties which also include coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown measures.

Since the lockdown measures were declared by President Emmerson Mnangagwa on 30 March 2020, Zimbabwe has been the most repressive country in sub-Saharan Africa in terms of press freedom violations¹. At the time of the writing of this communication, and since the start of the lockdown, a total of 24 media violations involving the police and uniformed forces, have been recorded. The latest of these is the case of investigative journalist Hopewell Chin'ono, who was arrested on 20 July² and arbitrarily placed in pre-trial detention whereas he only exercised his rightful duty by reporting about a planned anti-corruption protest. He recently participated in exposing a large-scale fraud about the acquisition of medical equipment to combat Covid-19 and therefore greatly contributed to inform the public and help the authorities to fight corruption.

Moreover, four journalists have been severely assaulted by security forces while covering the health crisis. These abuses were all committed by the security forces, despite the fact that the media have been labeled as an "essential service" in terms of SI 93 of 2020³ and are therefore authorised to work without hindrance during the COVID-19 lockdown.

¹ <https://rsf.org/en/tracker19-Coronavirus-Covid19>

² <https://rsf.org/en/news/zimbabwe-well-known-journalist-arrested-his-harare-home>

³ <https://ewn.co.za/2020/04/20/zimbabwe-declares-media-an-essential-service-during-covid-19-lockdown>

Following MISA Zimbabwe's successful court application, we hail the Harare High Court's decision⁴ of 20 April 2020 banning the police from harassing, arresting and detaining journalists in the exercise of their legal duties.

The Court also ordered the police to recognise the use of 2019 press cards pending the issue of the new 2020 cards, in line with the extension of press cards previously granted by the Zimbabwe Media Commission (ZMC)⁵.

Despite this decision issued by a Court, the security forces keep using the COVID-19 lockdown measures to interfere with the work of journalists⁶, demonstrating that harassment of the media is still going on in today's Zimbabwe, in contradiction with the promise made by President Emmerson Mnangagwa to make the country a true "democratic space"⁷ when he took office in 2018.

This intimidation and arbitrary detention of Zimbabwean journalists is completely contrary to Zimbabwe's international and African commitments in this area, which enshrine freedom of expression and information as inalienable rights⁸, prohibit all attacks on journalists in the course of their work and oblige the states parties to these conventions to take effective measures to combat such abuses⁹.

The coronavirus crisis is merely indicative of the state of press freedom in which Zimbabwe has found itself in since the overthrow of former President Robert Mugabe. As much as we welcome the intention to put an end to decades of systematic press freedom violations, tangible and significant changes are expected.

As Minister of Information, Publicity and Broadcasting Services, we urge you to take swift and concrete measures to combat the increase in abuses against journalists, which are jeopardising their work, preventing the population from accessing to the information they need to protect themselves from the pandemic and undermining Zimbabwe's legitimate aspirations to enjoy a strongly established free press after too many years of repression against media practitioners.

Since 2017, Zimbabwe is only up two places at 126th out of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index established by RSF, which leaves room for important improvements.

⁴ <https://zimbabwe.misa.org/2020/04/20/zim-high-court-orders-police-not-to-arrest-journalists/>

⁵ <https://www.herald.co.zw/journalists-get-nod-to-use-2019-press-cards/>

⁶ <https://rsf.org/en/news/zimbabwe-two-journalists-held-violating-coronavirus-lockdown-rules>

⁷ <https://bulawayo24.com/index-id-opinion-sc-speeches-byo-143852.html>

⁸ <https://bit.ly/déclaration-de-principes-sur-la-liberte-expression-Afrique>

⁹ <https://bit.ly/press-freedom-obligations-in-Africa>

We therefore call on your government to:

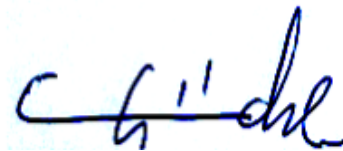
- Publicly condemn and forbid threats and verbal violence against journalists and ensure that there is no further physical violence against journalists by the security forces;
- Publicly reiterate that media and journalists are among the services considered "essential" authorised to carry out their activity despite the COVID-19 lockdown measures and make sure this message gets across and is implemented by the security forces;
- Declare a moratorium on arrests of journalists;
- Decriminalise press offences in accordance with Zimbabwe's international and African commitments to uphold press freedom;
- Put an end to impunity by systematically prosecuting the perpetrators of violence against journalists and in particular the security forces.

Zimbabwean journalists and people rely on your administration. We urge you to take the necessary steps to guarantee a safe and enabling environment for journalists.

Please accept, Madam Minister, the assurances of our highest consideration.



Isabel Amossé
RSF Head of Advocacy



Golden Maunganidze
MISA National Chairperson