

Tanzania shuts major East African newspaper

Arusha - Tanzania has suspended the publication of a major regional newspaper, the *East African*, with diplomats voicing concern at a possible crackdown on press freedom ahead of elections in October.

The Nairobi-based weekly, part of the influential regional Nation Media Group, has been sold in Tanzania for 20 years, but earlier this month the government ordered its printing and publication be stopped as it was not officially registered.

European Union nations, along with Canada, Norway and Switzerland, said in a statement Tuesday that they were "concerned" by the decision.



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"It is the duty of the media to work within the law and to make every effort to adopt and adhere to professional standards," the statement read. "But press freedom and freedom to express opinions are fundamental rights of the people, which call for circumspection and proportionality in the application of the law."

Tanzania is due to hold parliamentary and presidential elections in October. The newspaper's Tanzanian chief, Christopher Kidanka, was questioned by senior information ministry officials, and the Nation Media Group said he had been accused of "having a negative agenda against Tanzania".

The government reportedly also objected to a recent cartoon that portrayed Tanzanian President Jakaya Kikwete reclining on a sofa being fed grapes from scantily clad women labelled "cronyism, incompetence and corruption".

The Nation Media Group has protested against the closure. "Surely they can't just wake up now and declare us illegal,"

Nation Media Group chairman Wilfred Kiboro said, in a statement printed in Kenya's Daily Nation on Tuesday. "If it were an issue of regularising files, that would not require such a draconian measure of banning a newspaper."

Journalist rights groups say Tanzania has previously cracked down on reporters and shut newspapers, with Reporters Without Borders saying there are "noticeable problems". Tanzania is placed 69th out of 180 countries on its press freedom index.

Source: AFP

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