

Burundi bans BBC, VOA ahead of May 17 referendum

Burundi ordered a six-month ban on the broadcast operations of international networks, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and the Voice Of America (VOA), accusing them of failing to respect the country's media laws and ethics.



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The ban, which took effect on May 7, suspends the BBC and VOA from broadcasting in the country because of "falling short of laws governing the press" in the country and "breaching professional ethics."

Philippe Nzobonariba, spokesman of the government, called on the country's regulatory authority to take necessary measures on media houses that do not follow journalism ethics. According to a statement by the communication regulatory body (CNC), the BBC was suspended for broadcasting content that "put national cohesion and reconciliation at stake".

"CNC has sanctioned the BBC for not taking into consideration the warning we sent them on March 16, asking them to take into serious account the balance of information and verification of sources," said Karenga Ramadhan, the chairman of the CNC.

CNC accused the BBC of airing an interview in which "the interviewee and presenter talked about sensitive issues about the country, which also put at stake the reputation of the head of state".

The interview in question was aired on the BBC French service last week. In the interview, an activist based in Brussels made several allegations against President Pierre Nkurunziza.

"The Burundi government took issue with the fact that the journalist did not ask the interviewee for evidence of the allegations or get a response from the government," a source told *The EastAfrican*.

The BBC is reported to have later tried to reach the Burundi government but was referred to the spokesperson of the judiciary, who said the matter was with the presidency.

In a statement released on Friday, the British broadcaster said it had thoroughly reviewed the interview in light of the government's concerns and would provide the government with a full response. Should the broadcast be found to have fallen short of editorial guidelines, it would take appropriate measures.

The US-government funded VOA, was also suspended for partnering with and using online websites of some local media houses that were shut down in 2015. Burundi said VOA, "not only partnered" with the alleged online websites, but also recently hired a Swahili journalist who has an arrest warrant issued against him. VOA risks losing two FM transmitters that it currently runs in the country.

Meanwhile, the CNC has welcomed legal appeals from the broadcasters against the decision saying, "Whoever thinks that the decision made is not rightful is allowed to lodge a complaint through our legal system."

In 2014, the BBC also had its Kinyarwanda broadcasts suspended indefinitely for airing a documentary that questioned the official accounts of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi.

The Rwanda Utilities Regulatory Agency, the national body mandated with regulating the media, said the programme, *The Untold Story*, constituted abuse of press freedom and free speech, violated its own editorial guidelines, transgressed journalistic standards and violated Rwandan laws.

In 2016, DR Congo also blocked the signal of a popular French radio station Radio France Internationale for 10 months over what the government said was the station's sympathy for opposition rallies.

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