Press freedom celebrations tempered with concerns

Yesterday, Tuesday, 3 May 2011, was the 20th anniversary of World Press Freedom Day, begun in Namibia as the Declaration of Windhoek, a statement of principles calling for a free, independent and pluralistic media throughout the world. Celebrations around the world were tempered with concerns about the erosion of press freedom and in South Africa, the SA National Editors' Forum (SANEF) called on Government to review its proposed legislations that has seen SA downgrade from 'free press' to 'partly free'.



International concerns

The World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA) and the World Editors Forum (WEF) participated in events in Washington, Istanbul and Windhoek.

WEF president, Erik Bjerager, spoke at a Press Freedom Congress organised by the Freedom for Journalists Platform, a coalition of 93 media organisations in Turkey, where a recent spate of jailing of journalists has raised concerns. He spoke of new threats to the press in Europe and of the essential role that freedom of expression plays in society.

"Freedom of expression is freedom to criticize, to disagree, to raise doubt and to question. This does not weaken a nation, it makes a nation stronger. Therefore journalists should not be harassed, detained, imprisoned or murdered. They should be thanked for their criticism, their disagreement, their doubts and their questions," he said.

In Washington DC, the annual World Press Freedom Day conference, organised by UNESCO, focused on the impact of digital media on press freedom worldwide and how the independent media's essential role in democracy can be safeguarded.

"There is a growing understanding in the developed, democratic world that a lack of press freedom is not only an issue in developing and non-democratic countries but, due to economic and technological realities, needs to be defended in mature democratic nations as well," said Larry Kilman, deputy CEO of WAN-IFRA and executive director of Communications and Public Affairs. "I believe we're talking about nothing less than this when we talk about the future of newspapers in the digital age."

Namibian celebrations

WAN-IFRA also partnered with the Media Institute of Southern Africa, UNESCO and the Namibian government in a conference marking the 20th anniversary of the Declaration of Windhoek. The conference in Windhoek included a session on the Declaration of Table Mountain, adopted by WAN-IFRA and the World Editors Forum in South Africa in 2007, that appeals to all Africans to recognise that political and economic progress flourishes in a climate where the press is free and independent of governmental, political or economic control.

South African apprehensions

According to SANEF, journalists in South Africa are facing an erosion of press freedom through the proposed Protection of Information Bill and other bills, which if enacted will also restrict press freedom.

In addition, the proposed ANC Media Appeals Tribunal, which journalists believe will result in a mechanism which could be used to exercise control over the press and the information it gathers and publishes, is directly related to the print media

and is not intended to apply to broadcasters, according to statements made by the ANC.

The unbridled criticism of the press by government politicians and officials is one of the factors that led the New York-based world freedom monitor, Freedom House, to downgrade South Africa from a country with a free press to one rated "partly free" - only one stage removed from a rating of "not free".

Press targeted as 'opposition'

During the run-up to the May 18 local government elections, the media in general has been identified as "the opposition" by leading figures in the ruling alliance. Making the media out to be the enemy contributes to creating the kind of hostile environment where journalists and photographers are seen as legitimate targets for harassment, assault or other repressive actions, and also creates fertile ground for self-censorship.

Freedom of expression is fundamental to the realisation of all the other rights enshrined in the South African constitution. It needs to be treasured, defended and exercised responsibly.

Hammerl still detained



SANEF would also like to draw attention to the fact that SA photographer Anton Hammerl remains in custody somewhere in Libya after his detention by forces loyal to Colonel Muammar Gaddafi 29 days ago. Candlelight vigils in London and Johannesburg were held last night to mark the 29th day of his captivity in Libya and call for his release.

During 2011, 16 journalists have been killed. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists records, four journalists were killed in Libya, three in Iraq, two in Bahrain, one in Egypt, one in Pakistan, one in Mexico, one in the Philippines, one in Yemen, one in Tunisia and one in Vietnam. SANEF urges the South African government to redouble its efforts to effect Hammerl's release.

For more:

- Bizcommunity Search: Anton Hammerl
- Free African Media: A vigil for Anton Hammerl and all the brave photographers of the world
- Facebook: Free Anton Hammerl
- Twitter: antonhammerl OR freeantonhammerl OR "Anton Hammerl"
- Google News Search: Anton Hammerl

For more, visit: https://www.bizcommunity.com