

Botswana: Publishers to ignore interim committee

GABORONE: News media publishers in Botswana gathered on 10 March, 2009 and resolved not to respond to the current invitations from the government regarding the formation of the Interim Committee of the Media Council as dictated by the newly enacted Media Practitioners Act.

MISA Botswana, which was in attendance and facilitated the meeting has sympathised with publishers. The publishers indicated that the executive committee of the media council would be the driving force behind the contested law, which compromises freedom of expression.

The media stakeholders, who included all the major mainstream news publishers, and MISA Botswana further resolved to seek redress from the courts should government insist on their registration with the council. MISA Botswana plans to support any court action initiated by the media stakeholders regarding the law.

MISA Botswana's position is that registration of media practitioners is unlawful, in terms of the national constitution as well as international agreements that the country recognises. There are other areas in the law, which are contrary to the expectations of the constitution regarding the freedom of expression, but registration remains the most explicit violation.

The public has been asked to understand the media stakeholders' position regarding not participating in the current process. It is the view of publishers and MISA Botswana that giving legitimacy to the wrong, albeit legal, process may set a bad precedence and inflicts pain on existing civil liberties and constitutional rights.

Both institutions believe government must recognise the dangers obvious in the Media Practitioners Act while international opinion seems to support their view that the law is detrimental to the freedom of expression and others such as freedom of association.

MISA Botswana has encouraged Botswana, the publishers and media practitioners in general to tread carefully when dealing with the new Act as the public is basing their hopes on the media stakeholders to protect its (public) interest and guard against infringements of rights.