

## IFJ Africa welcomes Ethiopia's “fresh start” for press freedom

The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and its African Regional Organisation yesterday 24 January 2010, welcomed pledges from Ethiopia to support efforts to strengthen independent journalism as well as a promise to provide a safe return for journalists currently in exile.



The IFJ says a meeting with Prime Minister Meles Zenawi in Addis Ababa on Saturday provided signals of “fresh start” for press freedom in the country.

“The message is clear - it's time for a fresh start and time to move from confrontation to dialogue,” said Omar Faruk Osman, President of the Federation of African Journalists (FAJ). “Ethiopia is ready to work with its journalists to build a strong, well-informed and confident media community. This is good for the country and good for Africa.”

In the talks the prime minister said the government welcomed IFJ proposals to strengthen ethical journalism. It was ready to support discussions on how to create a viable form of self-regulation to build public trust in media. He also said that more than 100 journalists currently in exile had nothing to fear from coming home. Legal actions had been dropped and there would be no action taken against them.

The meeting took place on the initiative of leaders of the Federation of African Journalists (FAJ) who were joined by the IFJ President Jim Boumelha and the federation's General Secretary Aidan White.

Omar Faruk Osman told the prime minister that African journalists were engaged in a historic process of building regional solidarity. He highlighted a FAJ report on violations of journalists' rights in African states issued a day earlier. Some 13 African journalists were killed in 2009 and there were numerous violations of press freedom across the continent.

“African journalists are finding their voice and demanding change,” he said. “We need to criticise, but we also seek co-operation and partnership in efforts to find solutions to this crisis.”

IFJ leaders asked Ethiopia to use its influence within the African Union to engage with journalists' unions and in particular to support a United Nations resolution calling on governments to protect journalists in conflict zones. They also set out proposals for programmes of training on ethical journalism and urged more action to improve the social and professional conditions of journalists.

In his response the prime minister said governments could no longer play the game of democracy without acting responsibly. At the same time press freedom groups undermined their own credibility and were increasingly ignored because of their “holier than thou” attitudes. He said dialogue and co-operation based upon mutual respect were needed to tackle the problems faced in Ethiopia and other countries of Africa.

The FAJ delegation included journalists' leaders from Ethiopia, Nigeria, Sudan, Somalia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda, South Africa, Morocco, Tunisia and Zimbabwe.

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