

World press groups call for media freedom in Zimbabwe

The World Association of Newspapers and World Editors Forum have asked the President of Zimbabwe to repeal the country's repressive media laws and to allow the country's only independent daily to begin publishing again following its forced closure last week.

In a letter to President Robert Mugabe, WAN and the WEF, the global associations of the world's press, said the closure of The Daily News violated the right to freedom of expression. The letter asked him "to ensure that the Daily News is immediately permitted to publish without state interference."

The Daily News, which is the country's largest circulating newspaper, was closed by police on Friday for refusing to register with the Media and Information Commission as required under Zimbabwe's draconian media laws. It was the first time since the 1960s that a newspaper in Zimbabwe has been shut down by the authorities.

The newspaper, a fierce critic of President Mugabe, had unsuccessfully challenged the constitutionality of the mandatory registration procedure and will now have to register before continuing its legal action, a process which could take months.

The letter to the President said:

"We are writing on behalf of the World Association of Newspapers and the World Editors Forum, which represent 18,000 publications in 100 countries, to express our serious concern at the closure of the Daily News, Zimbabwe's only independent daily newspaper.

According to reports, the Daily News, the country's highest circulating paper, failed to appear on 13 September, a day after police raided the newspaper's offices for operating illegally. The paper's Sunday edition, the Daily News on Sunday, will also be temporarily closed. It is the first time since the 1960s that a newspaper in Zimbabwe has been shut down by the authorities.

"The police raid came a day after the Supreme Court ruled that the paper, which is highly critical of your government, was operating in 'defiance of the law' for refusing to register with the Media and Information Commission. The Daily News had unsuccessfully challenged the constitutionality of the mandatory registration procedure and will now have to register with the Commission before reinstituting its legal action. It is thought that the registration process could take several months.

"We respectfully remind you that the closure of the Daily News is a clear breach of the right to freedom of expression, which is guaranteed by numerous international agreements, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 19 of the Declaration states: 'Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes the freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media, regardless of frontiers.'

"We respectfully call on you to do everything possible to ensure that the Daily News is immediately permitted to publish without state interference. We urge you to ensure that the mandatory registration procedure and all other repressive media laws are repealed and that in future your government fully respects international standards of press freedom."

The Paris-based WAN, the global organisation for the newspaper industry, defends and promotes press freedom worldwide. It represents 18,000 newspapers; its membership includes 72 national newspaper associations, individual newspaper executives in 100 countries, 13 news agencies and nine regional and world-wide press groups.

The WEF is the division of WAN that represents senior news executives.

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