

Zimbabwe hikes media fees under draconian media law

NEW YORK: Zimbabwe's power-sharing government should repeal the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA), the Committee to Protect Journalists said late last week after a late 2010 amendment to the legislation hiked mandatory registration and accreditation fees for the press working in the country by as much as 400%.



Since 2002, AIPPA, a draconian piece of media-licensing legislation, has forced news organisations and journalists operating in Zimbabwe to annually register with the government and pay accreditation fees under penalty of prosecution and jail time. Following the September 2008 power-sharing Global Political Agreement between the ruling ZANU-PF and the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, in April 2010, the Zimbabwe Media Commission lowered the fees, which once peaked at a total of US\$30,000 in 2009 for foreign news outlets.

Targeting international media outlets

The hikes under an AIPPA amendment published in the Zimbabwe government gazette on 31 December 2010, and effective 1 January 2011, appeared to target international news media outlets operating in Zimbabwe and their local correspondents. Under the new fee structure, obtained by CPJ, an international news outlet must pay US\$6,000 for permission to operate a bureau in Zimbabwe (triple the old rate of US\$2,000) in addition to a US\$1,000 application fee for such permission (double the old rate of US\$500). Renewal of this permission went from being free to US\$5,000.

Zimbabwean journalists working for foreign media are required to pay US\$100 to apply for accreditation (five times the old rate of US\$20) while the accreditation fee quadrupled from US\$100 to US\$400. The fee for renewal of accreditation went from being free to US\$300.

Fees for regional southern African news organisations doubled, while increases remained modest for local journalists and news outlets. Authorities have imposed a US\$1 fine for each day of delay starting Monday, 17 January 2011, according to local journalists.

Moving backwards on press reform

"Zimbabwe's unity government is slowly moving backwards on press reform, using legal and administrative constraints to hamper the media," said CPJ Africa advocacy coordinator Mohamed Keita. "We call on the government to repeal the repressive Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act, which would be in line with media reform pledges made under the power-sharing government."

In a press statement this week, the Media Institute of Southern Africa called the rate increase "invalid" bas

on the gazetted amendment notation that Information Minister Webster Shamu initiated the hike, according to news reports. Only the Zimbabwe Media Commission has the authority to set registration and accreditation fees. Shamu denied any involvement in the hike, asserting the independence of the commission, according to news reports.

The government has failed so far to deliver on a March 2010 promise by Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai to repeal AIPPA and amend contentious media and security legislation by the end of 2011. AIPAA, considered one of the most repressive media laws in the region, also gives officials sweeping discretion to withhold public information they deem not to be of "public interest," according to a study by the Media Institute of Southern Africa.

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