

STATEMENT DELIVERED BY THE MISA ACCESS TO INFORMATION (ATI) AMBASSADOR AT THE EARLY WARNING NOTIFICATION SYSTEM (EWNS) PRESS BRIEFING HELD ON FRIDAY, JULY 8th, 2016, MISA HOUSE, LUSAKA.

Good morning to you all.

Ladies and gentlemen, members of the Press

MISA Zambia is delighted to host you this morning at such a crucial time as this when the country is about to go to the polls under a new political system with some challenges and threats to fundamental freedoms observed.

One such threat is against the freedom of expression, and consequently media freedom, without which it becomes difficult to classify elections as having been free fair and truly participatory.

We have noted with concern an increase in political violence against journalists, characterised by brutal, unprecedented attacks on media houses such as the mysterious gunshots at the Post and Zambia Daily Mail Newspapers.

We have also continued to receive reports of cadres storming media houses in attempts to stop sponsored programmes which they deem to be critical of their preferred candidates or interests.

Further, we have witnessed near fatal attacks on journalists such as the attack on one Peter Sukwa of the Post Newspaper's Chipata Bureau and Kelvin Phiri of Feel Free Radio who were nearly burnt alive and urinated into the mouth.

The entire media fraternity found this attack to be inhumane and unacceptable and as a MISA Ambassador I wish to categorically express disappointment with the fine of K12, 000 slapped on Patriotic Front Vubwi district Chairperson Micheal Tembo who was found guilty of assaulting the two journalists.

The fine meted out by the court does little to emphasise the importance of the need to safeguard individual rights and media freedom as it will not deter would-be offenders-especially those with political connections-from carrying out similar acts.

MISA is against all forms of political violence especially against media practitioners and as ATI Ambassador I wish to categorically warn all perpetrators of violence to desist from this undemocratic and unpatriotic trend.

The case of Peter Sukwa and Kelvin Phiri is just one of the many attacks we can mention that several media practitioners from the print and broadcast have been subjected to and it is at such a time that we all need to rise up and condemn these attacks and find a lasting solution.

From most of the reports received by MISA, it is clear that the attacks are politically motivated and have been perpetuated by political party cadres even in full view of the Police as well as political party leaders, a situation which is disheartening as the Police are charged with the responsibility of protecting all citizens, regardless of whether a particular media house is deemed to be critical of the government or not.

May I therefore call on the Zambia Police Service to rise to the occasion and insure that this trend of political violence not only against journalists but other citizens and political players alike is brought to a stop.

This can only be achieved through professionalism by the Police and the will to operate courageously in order to safeguard the fundamental freedoms we currently enjoy, without which our democracy will be rendered meaningless.

The attacks on media houses and media practitioners have perpetuated a chilling effect on the operations of journalists as they can not operate independently in fear of such political violence resulting from a high level of intolerance.

In addition to the high level of intolerance and political violence currently obtaining, there is a myriad of laws in our statute books that unreasonably limit the freedom of the press to operate independently. Some of these laws include the Defamation of the President in section 69 of the Penal Code, Seditious Practices in Section 60 of the Penal code, the State Security Act, Chapter 111 of the laws of Zambia and the Public Order act among many others.

As the situation stands, the press in Zambia is at the mercy of the government and it will only take an authoritarian regime to clamp down on the press as a way of stifling dissent and criticism.

With this type of operating environment, it is no wonder the country is ranked 'not free' in the Freedom of the Press Reports and rated 136th in the world on the World Press Freedom Index, well below other African countries such as *Malawi, Republic of the Congo, Liberia, Kenya, Togo and Lesotho*, among others.

May I reiterate that for an election to be deemed free, fair and participatory, there must be freedom of the media, equitable access to media platforms by all the political contestants and the respect of the fundamental freedom of expression which allows for open debate and exchange of alternative ideas for informed decision making.

This is not currently obtaining even as evidenced by the 2016 MISA Zambia pre-election media monitoring report which found that there is coverage of

non-issues, single sourcing of stories, biased coverage towards certain political parties and abuse of the public media.

Some of these observations, such as the non-coverage of issues are caused by the high level of intolerance and political violence which may undermine the outcome of the August 11 elections.

In response to the increase in political violence against journalists, MISA Zambia has set up an Early Warning Notification System (EWNS) as a systematic way of collecting information in good time to avert the increasing violations against media houses and journalists especially in the build up to the August 11 polls and thereafter.

The system template aims to gather information every time there is a violation or threat of violation against a media house or journalist by collecting specific information such as the Reporting Entity, Details of the Person, Reporting Date, Nature of Incident and the basic details of the incident.

As part of the system, a Whatsapp and email group for all media houses and one dedicated mobile hotline, **0979 580451**, have been put in place to capture all data sent out on a 24/7 basis.

We have also put in place a provisional national media contact list covering media houses in all the provinces for easy monitoring.

At a higher level, the system will involve relevant bodies for quick resolution or prevention of the incidents and these bodies have since been engaged which include the Zambia Police, Electoral Commission of Zambia (ECZ) and the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) to mention a few.

It is hoped that this initiative will contribute to effective response to attacks against media practitioners which ultimately have the potential of restricting the ordinary citizen's access to information which is important if freedom of expression is to be enjoyed.

I must hasten to state that the Early Warning System is not the solution alone but is being implemented in addition to other interventions by MISA Zambia such as legal defence for journalists, lobbying, policy analysis, research and advocacy as well as several sensitisation efforts.

Finally, ladies and gentlemen,

May I appeal to all well-meaning Zambians to denounce this scourge of intolerance and political violence. Specifically I call on all political party leaders to not only condemn but take decisive action against the lawlessness exhibited as most of the cadres perpetrating these acts are known functionaries of identified political parties.

The republican president, H.E President Edgar Lungu stated at his press briefing on May 13th, 2016 that he would ensure media operate independently and without any interference or censorship from the state, further directing law enforcement agencies to ensure media practitioners are protected.

If indeed the President, various state agencies and other actors believe in the ideals of freedom of the press, as stated at the press briefing, then we need to see a change.

I also call on journalists to rise and stand as a united force to defeat the many infringements we witness against the press especially at such a time when the media play a very critical role. I call on all media houses to put aside their differences and focus on the common cause of media freedom, which is fast deteriorating.

Today it may be another media house or journalist under attack but there it is only a matter of time before you are attacked or your media house is besieged or persecuted.

We will continue to fight for the guarantee of media freedom and access to information as a facilitator of freedom of expression, which is why I have been appointed as MISA Zambia Access to Information (ATI) Ambassador.

I thank you all.