

Bid to Stifle Foreign Press

Author: [Chipo Sithole](#)

International media angered by huge hike in accreditation fees.

Foreign correspondents and local journalists filing for international media have expressed anger over the introduction this week of hefty accreditation fees, apparently aimed at stifling their work.

Journalists say the move is blatant discrimination against foreign media and a further salvo in an ongoing campaign to silence critical reporting.

“[The authorities] should just come clean and say we are banning reporting for foreign media,” said one foreign correspondent based in Harare.

“I don’t even earn this sort of money. Who is going to comply with such punitive regulations?”

The journalist said he would not seek accreditation, and instead work “underground”, steering clear of official functions, where press cards are usually required.

The changes mean that journalists based in Zimbabwe who work for foreign media will have to pay an annual accreditation fee of 4,000 US dollars – four times more than last year.

Foreign journalists wishing to work temporarily in the country will have to pay around 1,500 US dollars. While international news agencies running bureaus in Harare, or those wishing to establish offices there, will be required to fork out combined fees of around 32,000 US dollars.

The hike in accreditation charges has come just weeks after President Robert Mugabe's press secretary George Charamba threatened to ban foreign news organisations from Zimbabwe.

In an interview broadcast on state television on December 12, Charamba accused them of distorting news developments.

Charamba was apparently piqued by the international outrage that followed news reports that Mugabe had said his administration had halted a cholera epidemic, which broke out in the summer of 2008, and is estimated to have killed some 1,700 people.

He also suggested that international wire agencies were working for western intelligence services. “The line between these journalistic misdeeds and espionage grows thinner and thinner by the day,” he said.

Mugabe's government has long been accused of harassing the independent media, in a bid to silence all voices of dissent. Four newspapers have been closed down in the past few years and more than 100 journalists have been arrested for allegedly flouting the country's tough media laws.

Through the draconian Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act, AIPPA, of 2002 – which passed into law last year – the Zimbabwean authorities have extensive powers to control media and suppress free speech.

Takura Zhangazha, national director of the Media Institute of Southern Africa, MISA, Zimbabwe chapter, said the accreditation fees were “designed to shut down the foreign media”.

“Statutory regulation of the media is undemocratic. No one was consulted about these prohibitive fees,” he said.

Zimbabwe Union of Journalists president Matthew Takaona said that the charges were “punitive and a hindrance to the free flow of information”.

“The government should not always look at the foreign media as enemies,” he said, adding that his organisation would lobby for a revision of the fees.

Takaona encouraged journalists not to seek accreditation, pointing out that no regulatory body was yet in place to accept the payments.

The fees are required to be paid to the government-appointed Media and Information Commission, MIC. However, media watchdogs say the MIC ceased to exist after the AIPPA became law in January 2008.

It is reportedly being replaced by a new body, the Zimbabwe Media Commission, ZMC, which will comprise nine members appointed by the president from a list of not fewer than 12 nominees, submitted by a parliamentary committee.

But parliament, which is set to reconvene on January 20, has not yet constituted the committee which will handpick the nominees.

“We are surprised these fees have been put in place in the absence of a regulatory body,” Takaona told IWPR. “We don't encourage journalists to seek accreditation from an illegal entity.”

Some media lawyers suggested that journalists would have to comply with the law before they could challenge it. “You cannot approach the courts with dirty hands,” said lawyer Selby Hwacha.

To illustrate his point, he cited the banning of what was the country's largest circulation independent daily newspaper, The Daily News.

The title was shut down after it refused to comply with licensing regulations, which it planned to appeal against. The Supreme Court upheld the ban, ruling the newspaper should have complied first before mounting a challenge.

While foreign correspondents and news agencies are currently considering their position, many say they will not seek accreditation and, instead, are prepared to play a cat and mouse game with the authorities.

“This [move by the government] simply encourages guerrilla journalism,” said one foreign correspondent, who spoke under condition of anonymity.

Chipo Sithole is the pseudonym of an IWPR-trained reporter in Zimbabwe.

Location: Africa

Focus: Zimbabwe Crisis Reports

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/bid-stifle-foreign-press>