

International newspapers flag press freedom restrictions

The World Association of Newspapers (WAN) currently meeting in Cape Town has issued a number of resolutions highlighting restrictions to press freedom around the world and how this could be dealt with.

"WAN believes that though balancing the sometimes conflicting interests of security and freedom might be difficult, democracies have an absolute responsibility to use a rigorous set of standards to judge whether curbs on freedom can be justified by security concerns," the WAN Board said Tuesday, in a resolution issued during the World Newspaper Congress and World Editors Forum.

Addressing the gathering Monday, President Thabo Mbeki said: "Our continent has not escaped the effects of the tussle between media freedom and governance."

He added that efforts are under way between the African Union and the African Editors Forum to declare a year of African media freedom, in order to mobilise public opinion around the important role media plays in development.

"There are also plans," he said, "for an annual day for media freedom as well as opening lines of communications between the political leadership and editors."

He added: "There are some countries on our continent where journalists are in prison and this is worrying for all of us. African media workers and editors have been complaining about this, as has the African Union Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression in her reports."

WAN also issued five other resolutions to protest against:

- A recent UN Human Rights Council's resolution that attempts to justify censorship of free speech under the guise of protecting religious sensibilities
- The decade-long judicial harassment of Spanish journalist Jose Luis Gutierrez, who was convicted by Spanish courts of violating Moroccan King Hassan II's "right to maintain his honor" after Mr Gutierrez published an accurate report about the seizure of five tons of hashish inside a truck belonging to the Moroccan Royal Crown
- The almost complete lack of arrests and convictions in the cases of 21 journalists who have been killed in Russia since President Vladimir Putin came to power in March 2000
- The repressive government policy against a free press in Zimbabwe, including the recurrent violations of journalists' basic rights and the complete disregard for the rule of law and
- A raid on the offices of the independent daily Le Quotidien in Senegal by armed soldiers, the closure of its radio station Premiere FM and the seizure of broadcasting equipment.

In the resolution concerned with increasing surveillance measures, WAN called on democratic governments and their agencies to take seven specific steps to protect press freedom while tightening anti-terrorism measures:

- To guarantee public availability of officially held data, information and archives accessible under Freedom of Information laws or related legal provisions.
- To guarantee the right of journalists to protect their confidential sources of information, as a necessary requirement for a free press.
- To make electronic surveillance of communications dependent on judicial authorisation, control or review, to protect the imperative independence and confidentiality of newsgathering.
- To ensure that searches of journalist offices or homes are conducted uniquely by warrant issued only when there is proven ground for suspicion of lawbreaking.
- To guarantee journalists the right to cover all sides of a story, including that of alleged terrorists, and to restrain from any hasty and unjustified criminalisation of speech.
- To abstain from prosecuting journalists who published classified information. In free societies, courts have held that it is the job of governments, not journalists, to protect official secrets, subject to the common sense decisions that editors normally make against, for instance, endangering lives.
- To abstain from resorting to “black” propaganda – in other words, peacetime use of government services to plant false or misleading articles masquerading as normal journalism as well as the false use of journalistic identities by intelligence agents.

The Paris-based WAN, the global organisation for the newspaper industry, defends and promotes press freedom world-wide.

It represents 18,000 newspapers; its membership includes 77 national newspaper associations, newspaper companies and individual newspaper executives in 102 countries, 12 news agencies and 10 regional and world-wide press groups.

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