COMMITTEE TO PROTECT JOURNALISTS

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April 5, 2010

Edward Ssekandi Kiwanuka
Speaker of the House
Kampala, Uganda.

Dear Mr. Speaker,

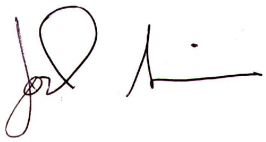
The Committee to Protect Journalists is deeply concerned about the proposed amendment to the 1995 Ugandan Press and Journalist Act, which is expected to be presented before parliament soon. We believe the bill would severely hamper the operations of newspapers and damage the country's press freedom credentials.
The bill would impose a new requirement that newspapers apply annually to the Media Council for operating licenses. It broadly empowers the council to deny licenses to outlets deemed to adversely affect "national security, stability, or unity," foreign relations, or the country's economy. Information Minister Kabakumba Masiko said in a recent *Daily Monitor* interview that the council would be able to deny a license for publishing anything the government vaguely terms a "hindrance to the country's economy."

The council may also deny licenses based on factors such as "social, cultural, and economic values of the newspaper," and "proof of existence of adequate technical facilities." Such requirements would ensure that only well-funded media houses that share the values of government officials would be allowed to publish. As you know, the majority of the Media Council membership is already government appointed, but the bill goes further in empowering the information minister to nominate its chairman.

In all, the bill provides authorities with sweeping powers to restrict the flow of information and limit public debate at a crucial juncture—as the country prepares for 2011 elections and meets the economic opportunities afforded by the discovery of oil reserves. The substantive restrictions placed on newspapers through new licensing rules contravene Uganda's commitments to the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights and as a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

A free press, which is enshrined in the Ugandan Constitution, has thrived under the current government, encouraging robust debate, exposing corruption, and scrutinizing public affairs. The bill would undermine Uganda's achievements as a free and open society. We urge you to remove this deeply flawed legislation from the national gazette and consideration by parliament.

Sincerely,



Joel Simon
Executive Director

Cc
H.E. Yoweri Museveni
President, Republic of Uganda

Kabakumba L. Masiko
Minister of Information & National Guidance

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Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression
African Union

Stephen Ouma
General Secretary, Ugandan Journalists Union

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