

## Statement on escalating media and human rights violations in Zimbabwe

We, the undersigned media organisations, note with concern the escalating media and human rights violations in Zimbabwe. This follows the arrest and detention of investigative journalist Hopewell Chin'ono, the harassment of Zimlive editor Mduduzi Mathuthu, the abduction and torture of Mathuthu's nephew Tawanda Muchehiwa and threats to other family members of the above-named journalists.

According to the mid-term Status of the Media Report by the Media Institute Southern Africa Zimbabwe chapter, violations against 25 journalists were recorded during the period covering first six months of the year. The attacks on both Chin'ono and Mathuthu included violent raids on their homes, confiscation of work equipment and harassment and torture of family members, which appears intended to send a message to independent media to intimidate them from reporting truthfully and critically on the situation in Zimbabwe.

We express concern that it took a court injunction for the detained Chin'ono to be allowed privacy on counsel with his lawyers, access to food and Covid-19 protective equipment while in prison. His lawyers have equally faced intimidation from the police.

We also note the rise in inflammatory rhetoric and hate speech against organisations that are speaking out on the socio-political situation in Zimbabwe, many of whom are labeled as proponents of regime change and others attacked based on their tribe and religious beliefs.

The cases noted above and the polarization in Zimbabwe makes it difficult for the media to operate freely, and for civic organisations and citizens to freely express themselves on the situation in Zimbabwe. This prevailing situation comes against the

background of high expectations that Zimbabwe's situation would improve for the better after years of political repression and stunted national growth.

Zimbabwe is ranked at 126 out of 180 countries in the Reporters Without Borders 2020 World Press Freedom Index. Given this data, it stands to reason that there is need for Zimbabwe to significantly improve on her press freedom level. Though we take note of the positive steps by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting Services to reform media laws, the process is now being undermined by the continued human rights violations.

We affirm the concerns and support the petition to His Excellency President Emmerson Mnangagwa by local media groups under the Media Alliance of Zimbabwe (MAZ) that:

- The Zimbabwe government respect the constitutional rights of media practitioners and freedom of expression as clearly stated in Sections 61 and 62 of the Zimbabwe constitution.
- That the Zimbabwe security agencies respect the journalism profession and that they desist from using violence against journalists in enforcing the national lockdown regulations and respect the rights of journalists to report critically and expose societal ills that include corruption.

We also remind the Zimbabwe government of its obligations under international and regional media and human rights declarations and protocols among such Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which emphasize on protection of the right to freedom of expression including the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of her choice or through any media whatsoever.

We implore the Zimbabwe government to respect the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to information in Africa and the SADC Protocol on Culture, Information and Sport 2001.

We also implore the Zimbabwe government to take steps to de-escalate the situation in Zimbabwe by ensuring the humane treatment of arrested journalists and human rights defenders, that legal processes are not abused to exert pressure and punish critics, and that the government stop the hate speech and messaging that targets critical journalists and civil society.

We share the concern of many Zimbabwean, regional and international groups that Zimbabwe will benefit from a freer media and a society in which holding different and critical views is not politicised and criminalized. We reaffirm the critical role played by the media in empowering society to better engage on its needs and aspirations more so as the world battles the Covid-19 pandemic.

Signed:

**Fojo Media Institute**

**International Media Support**