July 19, 2021

Rt. Hon. Alban Sumana Kingsford Bagbin
Thru’ the Clerk of Parliament
Parliament House
Accra

Dear Rt. Hon. Speaker of Parliament,

Petition on deteriorating press freedom situation in Ghana

The Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) and the 642 undersigned journalists and supporters of press freedom are hereby petitioning your office to request a frank debate by the House about the deteriorating press freedom situation in Ghana in order to make appropriate recommendations towards reversing the trend.

This request has been prompted by the recent verbal attack on Erastus Asare Donkor, a journalist with Luv FM, by the Member of Parliament for Assin Central, Honourable Kennedy Ohene Agyapong, who also called for the journalist to be beaten.

Erastus Asare Donkor was invited by the three-member Committee inquiring into the recent killing of two people during protests in Ejura in the Ashanti Region. His invitation by the Committee was apparently due to his extensive coverage of the killing of social media activist Mohammed Ibrahim Anyass, and the protests that followed.

Commenting on Asare Donkor’s reports and subsequent submissions before the Committee, the Member of Parliament subjected the journalist to insults and called for him to be beaten.

“That boy should be beaten seriously. He is so annoying. For the foolish submissions he made before the Committee, we have to beat the hell out of him. If I were the President, I would have ordered this boy to be whipped”, the lawmaker said in an interview on July 9, 2021, on Net2 TV, which is owned by him. A video of the said interview has been widely circulated on social media. A copy of the video is attached for your attention.

We consider the MP’s open call for the journalist to be beaten as deeply worrying and dangerous. This concern is born out of Hon. Kennedy Agyapong’s similar attacks on the late under-cover journalist Ahmed Hussein-Suale. It would be recalled that the lawmaker published pictures of Hussein-Suale and urged his supporters to attack him wherever they found him. As you must be aware, the journalist was killed by as yet unknown assailants a few months later.
The latest act of hostility against the media from Honourable Kennedy Agyapong adds to a recent trend of violations against the media, mostly by security officers, that threaten to tarnish Ghana’s image as a bastion of democracy and respect for press freedom.

On April 1, 2021, the police stormed the offices of the Accra-based online newspaper Whatsup News and arrested the Editor David Tamakloe. A Police statement said Tamakloe was arrested for alleged extortion and publication of false news. Meanwhile, Tamakloe was arrested in the midst of his investigation into a scandal involving the wife of a senior police officer and had made no publication on the matter.

On May 7, 2021, some National Security operatives brutalised Peter Tabiri, a correspondent for Accra-based Pent TV in the Western and Western North Regions. They smashed the journalist’s phone and proceeded to slap, hit and kick him several times before drenching him with water as he lay supine.

The security officers had disabled all CCTV cameras and were ransacking a Chinese-owned casino when they overhead Tabiri reporting their suspicious operation to the Amenfi Divisional Police Commander.

The journalist has since lodged a complaint with the Asankragua Police and his statement has been taken. He was treated at the Thomas Allan Rooney Memorial Hospital at Asankragua for ear problems as a result of the slaps he received from the security agents. He was subsequently referred to the Tarkwa Government Hospital from where he has been recommended for further specialist treatment.

On May 11, 2021, some National Security officers detained and brutalised Caleb Kudah, a journalist with Omni Media Limited (OML), operators of Accra-based Citi FM and Citi TV. Kaleb had covertly accessed a facility under the National Security Ministry and filmed a fleet of vehicles allegedly falling into despair as a result of neglect. The security officers however apprehended, beat and tortured him amidst intense interrogation.

On the same day, a group of heavily-armed police officers from the National Security stormed the offices of OML in a bid to arrest Zoe Abu-Baido, Kudah’s colleague. The police alleged that Caleb Kudah sent video files to Ms Abu-Baidoo immediately after he was accosted. The commando-style invasion threw the entire media house into panic and disarray, disrupting work momentarily and leaving the targeted journalist traumatised.
Following public outrage and condemnation, the National Security Ministry announced an internal probe into the incident subsequent to which it disengaged the officers involved in abusing Caleb Kudah. The Ministry explained that the officers were on secondment from the Ghana Armed Forces and the Ghana Police Service, and had been released to their mother institutions for appropriate sanctions.

However, to the dismay of the Ghanaian media and the public, Lt-Colonel Acheampong, who was identified as the commander who led in the assault on Caleb Kudah, was assigned a commanding officer position by the Armed Forces barely a week after he was welcomed back from what was obviously a disgraceful stint.

The invasion of the Citi TV/FM premises brought back dismal memories of the Rambo-style raid on the premises of the online media outlet ModernGhana.com by National Security operatives on June 27, 2019. The operatives seized computers and mobile phones belonging to two journalists, Emmanuel Britwum and Emmanuel Ajarfor. The latter later alleged that he was tortured during their three days’ detention.

The relentless cycle of attacks on journalists and the media by security agents in recent years, coupled with the unresolved killing on January 16, 2019, of Ahmed Hussein-Suale of the Tiger Eye investigative team, underline a growing culture of impunity for crimes against journalists in this country.

We find it scandalous that security officers, who must be in the frontline of efforts to protect the safety of all including journalists and punish crimes against the media, have themselves become chronic perpetrators of violence against journalists.

It is our view that the conduct of the officers involved in the foregoing incidents reflects negatively on the image of the security services. This sad trend challenges Ghana’s commitment to the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of journalists under which Ghana has an obligation to protect the safety of journalists and punish crimes against journalists.

The siege on media freedom by security forces is also a breach of the 1992 Constitution which guarantees press freedom, in recognition of the vital role of the media as an anti-corruption institution, source of civic education and information as well as a central pillar of our democratic architecture. Consequently, we consider these attacks on the media as an assault on Ghana’s democracy and citizens’ right to information and accountability.
Ghana has lost ground in the RSF Press Freedom Ranking since it emerged the top country in Africa in 2018. The country has placed third on the continent in the subsequent three rankings. This slump is due in large measure to the frequent assaults on journalists that almost always go uninvestigated, much less punished. The effect of this siege on press freedom is a culture of self-censorship that is growing by the day.

We, therefore, humbly implore the intervention of the Honourable House to ensure that;

a. Honourable Kennedy Agyapong is appropriately sanctioned to deter him from similar conduct in the future and to also prevent him from acting in ways that undermine the integrity of the high office of a Member of Parliament and by extension the Honourable House.
b. Adequate security is provided to Erastus Asare Donkor by the Ghana Police Service.
c. The officers involved in the brutal assault on Caleb Kudah, particularly Lt-Colonel Acheampong, are appropriately sanctioned.
d. The Inspector-General of Police and the Attorney-General are summoned to brief the House on the status of investigations into the murder of Ahmed Suale and status of investigations into other violations.

We are confident, Rt. Hon. Speaker, that you will give this petition the urgent attention it deserves.

Yours sincerely,

[Signature]

Sulemana Braimah
Executive Director

Endorsed by:

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