

WAN-IFRA Board Press Freedom Resolution – Nigeria

The Board of the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA), meeting in Estoril, Cascais, Portugal on 6th June 2017, on the occasion of the 70th World News Media Congress, calls for renewed global solidarity with the Nigerian press in the wake of attacks and the hardening government stance against independent, free media.

The Board of WAN-IFRA denounces a systematic campaign by the Nigerian state to attack and intimidate the press as a means of silencing criticism and marginalising opposition voices. The Board notes the pattern of assault against journalists by the Nigerian security services, which has taken place with impunity, and recognizes with increasing alarm the on-going use of cybercrime legislation against the press.

The Board is outraged by the almost two-year detention without charge of Jones Abiri, the publisher of the Weekly Source tabloid newspaper, by Nigeria's state security service (SSS or DSS) following allegations that in 2016 he headed a separatist group planning attacks in Abuja. It notes with compounding concern how Jones Abiri's family has been unable to see him since his arrest and has been given no information about his whereabouts or health. The Board denounces the classification of critical journalists as threats to national security.

The Board of WAN-IFRA was further alarmed by the arrest and week-long detention of Tony Ezimakor, the Abuja bureau chief of the privately owned *Daily Independent* newspaper, by SSS in February and March 2018. The Board noted with concern how the SSS threatened him with terrorism charges in an effort to have him reveal his sources.

The Board of WAN-IFRA recognizes how the SSS operates under Nigeria's co-ordinator of national security, which reports directly to president Muhammadu Buhari, and correspondingly supports calls made by the Committee to Protect Journalists for president Buhari to improve accountability and transparency within the SSS, including by appointing a spokesperson to respond to journalists' questions.

The Board of WAN-IFRA is alarmed by the pervasive culture of fear that has emerged within the Nigerian press as a result of the impunity with which security services operate. Repeated instances of physical assault against reporters, combined with other acts of intimidation like the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) raid on *The Sun* newspaper in July 2017, are inconsistent with basic conditions of media freedom. The Board additionally acknowledges how mistrust between journalists and Nigerian security services is deepened by increased

government investment in surveillance technology, as indicated in successive federal budget proposals.

The Board of WAN-IFRA regrets to acknowledge the cybercrime case against online outlet Elombah.com, and notes with concern how Nigeria's cybercrime legislation contains vaguely worded offenses and heavy financial and jail term penalties. The Board was alarmed that Timothy Elombah, editor of Elombah.com, was arrested and held for 25 days in January 2018 before being charged. The cybercrime law has been used to target at least five other bloggers since 2015. Nigerian authorities should reform the cybercrime law and repeal criminal defamation legislation to ensure journalism is not criminalized.

The Board acknowledges the passing of the Digital Rights and Freedom Bill, which would guarantee expression and information online and limit censorship, through Nigeria's National Assembly and Senate and urges president Buhari to act swiftly and sign it into law. Nigeria should seize this opportunity to act as a leader in protecting journalism online.

The Board of WAN-IFRA reminds Nigeria of its obligations as a signatory to international conventions regarding freedom of expression, and it unequivocally calls on Nigeria's international partners to do more to pressure President Buhari's government into guaranteeing an environment that better protects media freedom and the independence of journalists.