

Mr William Bird
On behalf of:
Media Monitoring Africa
South African National Editors Forum
Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)
Freedom of Expression Institute (FXI)
Southern African Editors Forum (SAEF)
SOS Support Public Broadcasting Coalition
Civicus
Institute for the Advancement of Journalism
Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard
University

By email: williamb@mma.org.za

His Excellency, President Matamela Cyril Ramaphosa

President of the Republic of South Africa

Union Buildings
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23 July 2020

Dear Mr President

RE Urgent Action Required on Arrest of Journalist Hopewell Chin'ono

We the undersigned press freedom and human rights organizations call on you as Chair of the African Union, and as the President of the Republic of South Africa to use all available mechanisms to help secure the immediate release of jailed Zimbabwean investigative journalist Hopewell Chin'ono, and to ensure that journalists across the continent are respected as essential workers throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and are not jailed for their work.

On the 20th of July Mr Chin'ono was arrested and taken from his home in Harare. Reports from his lawyer, Ms Beatrice Mtetwa indicate that Mr Chin'ono was abducted without a warrant. According to a statement by the [Committee to Protect Journalists](#), Mr Chin'ono has been charged with "incitement to commit public violence" and "inciting the public to commit public violence". It would appear however, that Mr Chin'ono was arrested for his reporting on corruption and wrongdoing. Such appalling behaviour by the Zimbabwean authorities cannot be countenanced.

In the midst of the COVID19 crisis, the importance of media being allowed to do their jobs cannot be underestimated. Media fulfil an essential role both in terms of ensuring accurate

fair news and information is communicated to the public, but they also have to report on wrong-doing and those who seek to use the chaos of the health crisis for their own evil ends. At least two journalists have died after exposure to COVID-19 in custody, including the Egyptian journalist [Mohamed Monir](#) and the Honduran journalist [David Romero](#). We repeat our earlier [call](#) to African heads of state to release jailed journalists amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mr President, we applaud you for recognising the media as an essential service at the start of the strict lockdown in South Africa. The media were one of the few who were allowed to continue with their work. This was a critical step and has ensured that the public has been able to rely on news media for accurate and credible information. We ask that in the spirit of this recognition you work with the AU to ensure that media across the continent are recognised as an essential service and that they play a vital role in efforts to help combat the COVID-19 crisis and to maintain democracy.

More than that Mr President, we draw your attention to the [Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa](#) recently adopted by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, and in particular, principles 19 and 20 which deal with the safety of journalists.

“Principle 19. Protection of journalists and other media practitioners

1. The right to express oneself through the media by practising journalism shall not be subject to undue legal restrictions.

Principle 20. Safety of journalists and other media practitioners

1. States shall guarantee the safety of journalists and other media practitioners.
2. States shall take measures to prevent attacks on journalists and other media practitioners, including murder, extra-judicial killing, torture and other forms of ill-treatment, arbitrary arrest and detention, enforced disappearance, kidnapping, intimidation, threats and unlawful surveillance undertaken by State and non-State actors.
3. States shall take measures to raise the awareness and build the capacities of journalists and other media practitioners, policy makers and other stakeholders on laws and standards for ensuring the safety of journalists and other media practitioners.
4. States shall take effective legal and other measures to investigate, prosecute and punish perpetrators of attacks against journalists and other media practitioners, and ensure that victims have access to effective remedies.
5. States shall be liable for the conduct of law enforcement, security, intelligence, military and other personnel which threatens, undermines or violates the safety of journalists and other media practitioners. “

It is our view that the arrest of Mr Chin'ono constitutes an egregious breach of these principles and cannot go unchallenged. We also draw your attention to your [Acceptance statement](#) as African Union chairman, where you quoted our own, Pixley ka Isaka Seme:

“Let us build the Africa we Want. Let the Guns be Silenced. Let our swords be beaten to ploughshares, and our spears turned into pruning hooks. It is the actions that we take from this day onwards that will determine our continent’s destiny. If we pursue our objectives with diligence and determination, and mobilize our people to support them, I am certain that ours can be a meaningful, effective and impactful Union.”

We therefore call on you to give meaning and action to these words ,Mr President. We ask you to call for the immediate release of Mr Chin’ono, as well as other jailed journalists throughout the continent, and to ensure that journalists are treated as the essential workers that you yourself have already identified them as.

We will not and cannot realise our continent’s potential if we allow the voices of its citizens to be silenced. We will never be able to say we are free as a continent if we allow our journalists to be subjected to arbitrary arrest, and we will never gain the trust and credibility of the people of the continent if we don’t ensure that we adhere to our own policies and declarations with diligence and determination.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'W. Bird', written over a horizontal line.

William Bird
Director

Supported by the following organisations:

Media Monitoring Africa (MMA)

South African National Editors Forum (SANEF)

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