

Media Freedom Challenges in the Caribbean

**Remarks by Kay Osborne, General Manager, Television
Jamaica (TVJ)**

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Earlier this year, members of the Association of Caribbean Media Workers have expressed concern that despite democratic reforms in most countries in the region, the rights to freedom of expression and access to information are regularly violated through various means:

1. Governmental use of illegitimate mechanisms to control media or to exercise undue political interference.
2. Criminal laws against defamation, such as laws that criminalize libel and slander, that are used to restrict freedom of expression.
3. Violence against journalists who cover major social issues, such as organized crime, drug trafficking, or corruption, and journalists who criticize government officials or others in positions of power.

4. Discrimination in the exercise of the right to freedom of expression against historically disadvantaged groups, such as, women and indigenous people, and vulnerable groups who struggle to get their views considered and to access information that is relevant to them.
5. Economic pressures that threaten the media's capacity to cover matters of public interest.
6. Governmental control of Internet use through the blocking of websites; and restricted access to new information and communication technologies.

With respect to these issues, the Association of Caribbean Media Workers called on States to take concrete actions to guarantee the right to freedom of expression.

Other threats to media freedom in the region include emerging threats in Jamaica:

- Jamaica has traditionally enjoyed robust freedom of expression. **Reporters Without Borders**, in a recent ranking, placed Jamaica at Number 24 out of 167. Yet, despite the implementation of an Access to Information Act, restrictions that the libel laws of Jamaica and the Official Secrets Act have on the practice of investigative journalism are harmful to the exercise of

real freedom. Promised reform of the libel laws have stalled for more than two years.

1. For decades, broadcasters in Jamaica have aired a half hour Government programme each day as required by their licenses. This is about to change: The Jamaican government is about to direct broadcasters to broadcast government news headlines 10 times a day. This change will destroy some station formats, will reduce commercial stations' ability to earn advertising revenues, and could have the effect of transforming broadcasters into becoming government propaganda entities. In response to this imminent threat to media freedom, The Media Association of Jamaica is planning to publicize this matter on World Press Freedom Day, May 3rd, 2010.
2. Relations between the governments of the United States of America and Jamaica have become strained as a result of the Jamaican government's refusal to extradite an alleged crime boss to face charges of drugs trafficking and gun running in the USA. Subsequent to reporting stories on this development, the two largest media entities in Jamaica, RJR Communications Group and The Gleaner Company, were advised by the police that they were under imminent threat of violence from elements close to the alleged crime boss for reporting stories that were

deemed unfavorable to the subject's interests. The police established a presence at RJR's corporate offices and instructed both companies to increase security measures to protect staff and property. Despite these verifiable facts, the government issued a statement that challenged the validity of the media houses' claim that they were threatened.

Taken together, these government actions signal a more challenging, potentially dangerous time ahead for media freedom in Jamaica. This changed environment requires vigilance and collective action.