

MISA warns on journos death threats

 By Gregory Gondwe: @Kalipochi

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The Malawi Chapter of the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA Malawi) has warned that the image of the government of Malawi risks being extensively tarnished if journalists continue to receive death threats from unknown government agents.

Since September this year, three journalists have received death threats through mobile phone text messages for doing stories that mention top government officials or issues critical of the state.

MISA Malawi disturbed

Anthony Kasunda, MISA Malawi chairperson, issued a statement on Monday 24 October 2011 where he said the media fraternity is disturbed with increasing reports of death threats on reporters deemed to be critical of top government officials.

Branzio Chingwalu, a journalist working for Catholic station, Radio Maria, and Brian Banda, host of a talk show on Capital Radio, are the latest recipients of such threats.

Chingwalu received threats for following up a story on remarks first lady Callista Mutharika made on scarcity of fuel and forex, when she recently opened a health centre in Mzimba. It was reported that she indicated that rural people need not worry about fuel and forex shortage because the two have no direct bearing on their lives.

The threat Chingwalu received read, "Choose life or death. You wrote a story that castigated the first lady because of the fuel shortage. You will die because of your job, we are monitoring you and our network is stronger than you think."

Increasing reports of death threats

Radio talk show host, Brian Banda received a threat for allegedly being critical of the state. The threat partly reads, "Brian love life not work. I feel sorry for you. You will be the next victim and you are close to be with Chasowa. Government is government." Robert Chasowa is the University of Malawi student who was murdered for allegedly threatening to reveal government secrets.

Nation Publications Limited (NPL) journalist, Phillip Pemba received threats over an article that revealed that Chasowa had dealings with the police before he was murdered.

Kasunda says as a media body, MISA-Malawi considers these threats as very serious attempts to muzzle the media and curtail meaningful dialogue.

"We are forced to believe that these threats have the blessings of top government officials who have opted to stay silent despite the fact that these threats are being made in their names," said Kasunda.

He said proof of this is on the threats on NPL journalist Pemba, which were made because inspector general Peter Mukhito and Southern Region police commissioner Rodney Jose were mentioned in the article.

Former Malawi Institute of Journalism (MIJ) sub-editor, [Joseph Mwale](#) also received threats after allegedly publicising a recording of a private conversation between foreign affairs minister, Peter Mutharika and former deputy minister of sports and culture, Charles Mchacha.

"None of the top government officials mentioned has openly commented or denounced these threats," said Kasunda.

These acts are barbaric

In the statements the body has been issuing ever since these threats started coming out, Kasunda described such acts as barbaric, retrogressive and unnecessary in an open and democratic Malawi and require collective condemnation.

"These developments instil fear and curtail meaningful dialogue and debate on pertinent issues that affect our country, scarcity of fuel and its impact on rural lives or the murder of Robert Chasowa for example," he said.

MISA Malawi has since asked, specifically government officials and personalities involved, to openly condemn and call for thorough investigations into such threats.

"We also call upon the police to update Malawians on progress being made in investigating these threats," he said.

Kasunda reiterated that the police chief and his regional subordinate, and other top government officials associated with these threats should come clean and disassociate themselves from these barbaric acts for fear of tarnishing the image of government and the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP).

MISA Malawi appealed to journalists to be professional and thorough in pursuing their stories and above all to be alert and to openly report threats of any nature to relevant authorities.

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