Groups welcome journalist's release, call for compensation

The Human Rights Network for Journalists-Uganda (HRNJ-Uganda) and Media Legal Defence Initiative (MLDI) welcome the acquittal of Mega FM journalist, Patrick Otim and 14 others, by the High Court of Uganda of charges of treason and concealment of treason.

Otim had been held since 2009 and it had taken almost three years for the case to be brought to court. Now, having heard the prosecution, High Court Judge David Wangutusi acquitted Otim holding that there was not a shred of evidence to sustain the charges. Otim was kidnapped in 2009 from his home in Pader district in Northern Uganda by plain clothes security operatives, held incommunicado for one month and brought to court only after HRNJ-Uganda and MLDI brought a habeas corpus petition.

...."We welcome the acquittal of Patrick Otim and his colleagues. He was innocent from the beginning and the court has proved this. His crime was being a journalist whose primary concern was to give people a voice, which the authorities never wanted him to do," said Geoffrey Wokulira Ssebaggala, Programmes Coordinator at HRNJ-Uganda.

...HRNJ-Uganda and MLDI remain extremely concerned at the abuse of the law to intimidate and silence journalists.

Similar treason charges have also been brought against Augustine Okello, a journalist with Rhino FM who is being held on remand in Luzira Maximum prison, and criminal libel laws also remain in active use against journalists with several cases pending.

Press freedom exists as a theoretical concept only for many journalists in Uganda as the space for public debate continues to shrink. HRNJ-Uganda's Press Freedom Index report of 2011 documented more than 107 cases of violence against journalists, up from 58 cases in 2010 and 39 in 2009. In 2012, HRNJ-Uganda has so far documented 38 cases against journalists by different actors, most especially police.

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