Ugandan editor charged with criminal libel

Authorities in Uganda should end the criminal proceedings against Pidson Kareire, managing editor of privately-owned news website, The Drone Media, the Committee to Protect Journalists said last week.



The Uganda High Court is in Kampala on May 14, 2018. CPJ today called for Ugandan authorities to intervene and end the criminal case against editor Pidson Kareire. Credit: CPJ/AFP/Isaac Kasamani.

On June 12, police in the capital, Kampala, arrested Kareire on charges, filed on April 30, of four counts of criminal libel and four counts of "offensive communication," according to the journalist's lawyer, Daniel Walyemera, who spoke to CPJ, and a charge sheet seen by CPJ.

The charges stem from *The Drone Media*'s reporting on a local recruitment firm, Middle East Consultants Limited, according to Walyemera and the charge sheet.

Today, Kareire pled not guilty to the charges, was released on a noncash bail of 10 million Uganda shillings ($2,670), which he would only be required to pay if he failed to appear at his next scheduled court appearance, on July 2, Walyemera told CPJ.

"These criminal libel charges have the potential to silence not just *The Drone Media,* but to intimidate any other journalist investigating the practices of this firm and other businesses," said CPJ Sub-Saharan Africa Representative Muthoki Mumo. "We call on authorities to immediately terminate these proceedings, and to ultimately scrap Uganda's criminal libel laws once and for all."

The libel charges, part of Uganda's penal code, carry a potential two-year jail term, and the "offensive communication" charges, filed under Uganda's Computer Misuse Act, are punishable with imprisonment of up to one year or a fine of 480,000 Uganda Shillings ($130), according to the charge sheet and CPJ's review of the laws.

The charges were brought against Kareire in a private criminal prosecution by Middle East Consultants Limited, as allowed for by Ugandan law, which the government could terminate if the public prosecutor decided to do so, according to the charge sheet and Walyemire.

CPJ sought comment from the director of public prosecutions, Mike Chibita, via messaging app but did not receive a reply.

The recruitment firm alleges that articles published by *The Drone Media* between March 26 and March 29, 2019, were untrue, defamatory, and intended to "disturb the peace" and the company's right to privacy, according to the charge sheet and a report by the nongovernmental organization Human Rights Network for Journalists-Uganda.

In the series of articles, which CPJ reviewed, *The Drone Media* alleged that Middle East Consultants was "cheating" Ugandan job seekers with false promises of jobs abroad and that the company's managing director had threatened Kareire in connection to this coverage.

In April, Middle East Consultants filed a complaint with the country's electronic media regulator, the Uganda Communications Commission, alleging defamation by *The Drone Media,* according to Walyemera and a copy of the letter posted on Facebook. At the time, *The Drone Media* replied with a letter, which CPJ has reviewed, saying that it stood by its reporting.

Middle East Consultants Managing Director Mugyenyi responded to CPJ's request for comment by sending a copy of the April letter and sharing a link to a 2018 social media post alleging that Kareire had extorted a businessperson. When CPJ asked him to elaborate, Mugyenyi did not respond.

Walyemera told CPJ that the extortion allegation was "propaganda" and noted that his client was being sued for libel and offensive communication, not fraud or extortion.

Middle East Consultants' lawyer, Kevin Charles Nsubuga, told CPJ that he was uncomfortable discussing the case while it is still in court, but that it was about "someone trying to malign and/or tarnish an image of a company for his personal gain/benefit."

Fred Otunnu, director of corporate affairs at the Uganda Communications Commission, did not answer two phone calls this evening or immediately respond to a text message from CPJ.

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