

Govt goes after NGOs, suspends nine

According to the National Bureau for NGOs, the suspensions happened because of intelligence information that the organisations are engaged in activities prejudicial to national security.

BY FRANKLIN DRAKU

The government has suspended operations of nine Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) working in human rights, governance and accountability sectors.

The suspended civil society organisations include, African Centre for Media Excellence (ACME), National Coalition of Human Rights Defenders, Alliance for Finance Monitoring (ACFIM), Centre for Constitutional Governance, Human Rights Network for Journalists (HRNJ)-Uganda, National NGO Forum, Network of Public Interest Lawyers, Chapter Four Uganda, and African Centre for Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture Victims.

The National Bureau for NGOs, a department in the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which is charged with registering and monitoring operations

of NGOs in the country, effected the suspensions citing intelligence information that the organisations are engaged in activities prejudicial to national security.

The Bureau wrote to the heads of the respective NGOs, but did not delve into specifics of the alleged illicit activities. It also directed banks and other entities to freeze activities of the affected NGOs until they are cleared.

In a letter dated January 9 to Chapter Four-Uganda, the NGO Bureau Secretary, Mr Stephen Okello, wrote that: "The NGO Bureau has thus instituted investigations in the matter. Due to the sensitivity of the matter and the nature of the allegations that relate to national security, the organisation should cease operations until these investigations are concluded."

He added: "By copy of this letter; (i) The Inspector General of Police is hereby requested to ensure that Chapter Four Uganda does not continue to operate until this case is concluded; (ii) The Registrar General, Uganda Registration Services Bureau, is equally notified about the matter; and (iii) The Executive Director Uganda Bankers Association is also advised to take note of the above issues and notify the banks of these developments."

Mr Okello separately told this publication that the suspensions are "precautionary" pending investigations.

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are engaged in activities that are prejudicial to the security and laws of the country. So far, we've instituted investigations into that matter. But of course, since these security related issues are also due to the nature and the sensitivity of these allegations, it became clear that we could not allow them to continue operating as we were investigating. The investigations will be concluded within reasonable time, and you will be given an opportunity to be heard during the said investigations," he said.

In an interview with this newspaper, the Executive Director of Chapter Four-Uganda, Mr Anthony Masake, described the suspension as "troubling" and an exhibition of the country sliding in terms of democracy.

"The ongoing wave of indefinite suspensions of several NGO permits is a deeply troubling decline for

fundamental freedoms enshrined in our Constitution. NGOs play an indispensable role in advancing fairer and more just societies," he said.

He urged the NGO Bureau to reconsider its decision and invite them for a fair hearing so that they can either refute the evidences against them or present counter evidences.

"We call on the authorities to immediately review and withdraw these suspensions to allow civil society to continue its vital work as provided for under the law," he added.

In a post on the microblogging site, X, Dr Peter Mwesige (PhD), the founding Executive Director of ACME, which supports media in capacity building and trains journalists, described the suspension as a direct attack on the independent media for which the institution has been consistently known to support.

"ACME, the organisation that I co-founded 15 years ago to champion media excellence, has joined the growing list of Ugandan NGOs suspended by the National Bureau for NGOs over engaging in "activities which are prejudicial to the security and the laws of Uganda...", " he said.

Mr Robert Sempala, the Executive Director of HRNJ-Uganda, said the suspension is vague but they will wait to hear more from the Bureau.

"It's very hard for us to answer, and to comment, since we have not known the basis of the investigation. So all we are doing is to wait for the investigating

team. We shall cooperate with them, but we can only confirm that we have the directive from the NGO Bureau and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which suspended our work to such a time when they have done the investigation," he said.

Likewise Mr Henry Muguzi, the Executive Director of ACFIM, said the suspension spells doom and clearly shows that the civic space has finally been shut down. He said this also shows that government doesn't take demand for accountability as a duty, but as a threat for its own survival.

"So for some of us, the space is not there because when operations are closed and accusations you cannot understand are levelled and told to close operations effective immediately without anything on when the case is going to be heard, investigations you don't understand what time they take, what form, and what date," he said.

The suspension of the NGOs is reminiscent of a similar episode in the run up to the 2021 General Election that saw some 54 NGOs accused of operating without licence or had delayed to file returns suspended or closed.

The government also suspended the Democratic Governance Facility supported by the European Union, which the government accused of funnelling money to Opposition actors to "sow instability."