

Freedom House
Oral Intervention
Human Rights Council 14th Session
Agenda Item no. 4
June 4, 2010



Thank you Mr. President and to Mr. La Rue for his excellent report to the Council on issues related to freedom of expression.

Freedom House places such a high value on the importance of freedom of expression that it evaluates levels of freedom of expression both in its annual survey of political rights and civil liberties and in a separate survey dedicated to Freedom of the Press. It is with deep concern that I must note that we have seen levels of press freedom decline for eight straight years in every region of the world and in a range of countries from dictatorships to democracies alike.

According to our survey released just last month on World Press Freedom Day, only one in six people in the world today live in countries with a fully free press. In particular, declines in important emerging democracies demonstrate the fragility of press freedom in such environments.

I have come to Geneva with a delegation of human rights defenders from throughout the African continent so with my limited time available I wish to raise attention to the Special Rapporteur and to the Council that in this past year, Sub-Saharan Africa experienced the largest overall drop of any region in Freedom House's 30-year-old global press freedom survey.

With declines in ratings for both Namibia and South Africa, for the first time in two decades we rate no countries in southern Africa as fully Free.

These findings are particularly disturbing because these countries have served as models around the world and because declines in freedom of expression and the press have such a detrimental impact on so many other fundamental human rights. The right to free expression underpins the right to freedom of association, freedom of religion, and freedom of conscience and is thus fundamental to the protection and promotion of all human rights.

As we all know, governments are obligated to protect free expression under international law. The right to impart and receive information is protected under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the African Charter.

Mr. La Rue has spoken about legitimate restrictions to freedom of expression in his report, but all too often governments abrogate free expression under the pretense of national security and through the use of and blasphemy, defamation and criminal libel laws, in addition to outright censorship—all areas which fall outside the realm of legitimate restrictions.

Yet setbacks in freedom of the press have by no means been limited to some of the continent's strongest democracies. Madagascar shifted into the Not Free category. Uganda, a country ranked

Partly Free, is considering enacting laws that would further restrict the ability of journalists and media outlets to do their jobs.

These worrying declines in freedom of expression are propelled by growing intolerance on the part of governments to criticism, increased political interference in editorial independence, and the use of legal and administrative mechanisms to restrict reporting, ownership, and independence. Hostile government rhetoric towards the media along with retaliation for perceived “abuses” have created an environment in which self-censorship thrives and in which attacks on journalists are becoming more common.

Further, elections have become an excuse to clamp down on media freedom, yet elections are a time when the need for a free press is often most evident.

It is important to point out that Sub-Saharan Africa is by no means the only region in the world facing strong challenges to press freedom. The Americas saw the second largest set of declines in press freedom in this year’s survey and the Middle East continues to rank as the least free region in the world both on overall political rights and civil liberties and in terms of press freedom.

I call on members of the Human Rights Council to play a constructive role in helping all of us reverse this negative tide in the fundamental freedoms of the press and expression. Positive steps, such as the decriminalization of libel laws and the introduction of access to information laws can happen if they are encouraged by the leadership of multilateral bodies, as well as by the advocacy and activism of human rights defenders.

We hope the Human Rights Council will consider the ramifications that a worldwide decline in press freedom on all human rights and that it will both continue to support the work of the mandate of the Special Rapporteur and use this important venue as a mechanism for reaffirming and supporting this fundamental right.