

International Steering Committee



The Nongovernmental Process of the Community of Democracies

Paul Graham, Chairman
South Africa

Vo Van Ai
Vietnam

Hoda Chalak
Lebanon

Soon Juan Chee
Singapore

Yuri Dzhiladze
Russia

João Carlos Espada
Portugal

Hannah Forster
The Gambia

David French
United Kingdom

Morton Halperin
United States

Sameer Jarrah
Jordan

Michael Kau
Taiwan

Robert LaGamma
United States

Mohsen Marzouk
Tunisia

Oumar Makalou
Mali

George Mathew
India

Matteo Mecacci
Italy

Gus Miclat
Philippines

Ilona Mihaies
Romania

Andrea Sanhueza
Chile

Roel von Meijenfeldt
Netherlands

Dieudonné Zognong
Cameroon

**ISC/CD Secretariat:
Council for a Community
of Democracies**

1801 F Street NW
Washington, DC 20006
USA

Tel +1-202-789-9771

Fax +1-202-789-9764

Email: info@ccd21.org

www.ccd21.org

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

12 August 2009

Conviction of Journalists in The Gambia Denounced by International NGO Leaders

The nongovernmental International Steering Committee of the Community of Democracies (ISC/CD) condemns the August 6 sentencing of six journalists in The Gambia who were arrested following a June 2009 statement by the Gambian Press Union (GPU) that questioned the hasty conclusions made by the government in the investigation of the death of journalist Deyda Hydera. The arrests of these journalists were in direct contravention of the Gambian constitution of 1997 and the African Charter on Human Rights and People's Rights, and the trial that produced their conviction was marred by judicial actions inconsistent with the impartial application of the rule of law.

The 2004 murder of Deyda Hydera, founder and lead editor of the independent Gambian newspaper, *The Point*, remains unsolved. Mr. Hydera's death came at a time when he was leading a major campaign against recent laws enacted to restrict media freedom. On June 9, The Gambia's President Yahya Jammeh made public statements insulting Mr. Hydera and claiming that the government had no role in his death. Those statements prompted the GPU to issue a June 12 press release expressing regret that President Jammeh found it "appropriate to ridicule and speak ill of the dead." Following the release of this statement, seven journalists were arrested, six of whom were brought to trial under charges of sedition, including three members of the GPU Executive. Throughout the trial of the journalists, the court excluded the public from observing the proceedings, while President Jammeh made direct threats to journalists "hiding behind freedom of expression." On August 6, all six journalists were sentenced to two years in prison.

The Gambian constitution guarantees "freedom of speech and expression, which shall include freedom of the press and other media," and the actions of the convicted journalists in no way threatened "interests of the sovereignty and integrity of The Gambia, national security, public order, decency or morality, or in relation to contempt of court," the only conditions under which these freedoms may be constitutionally restricted. The recurring violation of this fundamental right, as exhibited in the case of these six journalists, has prompted Reporters Without Borders to declare that press freedom in The Gambia is the worst in West Africa. "President Jammeh has managed to nail the coffin shut for press freedom in the Gambia by arresting some of the last remaining independent journalists in the country," said Tom Rhodes, Africa Program Coordinator of the Committee to Protect Journalists in New York.

The ISC/CD calls for the immediate release of the six convicted journalists. We urge members of the international community, including the African Union and the global Community of Democracies, to join with the European Union, the government of the United States, Reporters Without Borders, and Amnesty International, among others, in opposition to the actions of the Gambian government.

Contact: Robert R. LaGamma

President, Council for a Community of Democracies

Secretariat of the nongovernmental International Steering Committee of the CD

Phone: +1 202 789 9771 | Fax: +1 202 789 9764

Email: bob@ccd21.org

The ISC/CD is a global network of civil society organizations committed to democracy and human rights, related to the Community of Democracies.