



For immediate release – 5 March 2010

PRESS RELEASE

Rwanda: ARTICLE 19 Calls on Authorities to Uphold Free Expression Ahead of Presidential Elections

ARTICLE 19 expresses grave concerns that press freedom in Rwanda is deteriorating and that criminal charges being brought against journalists in Rwanda will contribute to the silencing of independent media voices ahead of the presidential elections later this year.

The concern comes in the wake of tough prison sentences and fines handed to three members of the independent weekly *Umuseso*, by a court in the Kigali district of Nyarugenge on 22 February 2010.

The court sentenced Charles Kabonero, the publisher of *Umuseso*, to one year, and editor Didas Gasana and reporter Richard Kayigamba to six months' imprisonment respectively. The case was brought by the public prosecutor's office, which charged them with libel and invasion of privacy for reporting that a government minister was having an extra-marital affair.

This is the third time that this independent weekly and its associates have been targeted by the authorities. In August 2006, Rwanda's High Court upheld a one-year ruling imposing a suspended prison sentence for Kabonero and a US\$2,000 fine for damages for defamation allegations against the Parliamentary Deputy Speaker in 2004. In March 2009, Kabonero fled the country following threats on his life.

"ARTICLE 19 is concerned that attacks on opposition leaders and independent journalists threaten the democratic process in Rwanda, especially in an election year," comments Dr Agnès Callamard, ARTICLE 19 Executive Director. *"The Rwandan authorities must allow the media to operate freely and must accept that critical or opposition voices have a right to be heard in a democratic and pluralistic society. This is especially important in a society where the media has previously played such a destructive role, in the context of the 1994 genocide, and now must be a key part of helping to build a united and solid democracy."*

ARTICLE 19 calls on President Paul Kagame to uphold the principles of freedom of expression and the right of the media to report on events in the public interest, and to ensure that journalists, editors and publishers are free to practise their professions without harassment.

NOTES TO EDITORS:

- For more information please contact: Victor Bwire, Programme Officer, ARTICLE 19, Eastern Africa, victor@article19.org, +254 20 3862230/2.
- ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees free speech.