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## **INFORMATION BRIEF ON HAITI**

April 5, 2024 - The following represents the findings of a team constituted by the Association of Caribbean MediaWorkers (ACM) to investigate the state of press freedom in Haiti in the face of ongoing violent conflict and instability.

It follows a series of consultations with key Haitian operatives and agencies with an interest in press freedom. There is a need for a far more comprehensive and detailed study, but we believe our findings have captured most of the main issues at this time.

We believe a combination of proactive and reactive measures is required – the proactive to ensure that the deepening of systemic weaknesses does not escalate to situations in which reactive measures are required to address the outcomes of violence and other instances in which press freedom comes under threat and attack.

We recognise that some of this relies heavily on the enlightened intervention of regional and international players in the process of addressing the current crisis but propose that the state of media in Haiti constitutes a key condition in the identifying of sustainable solutions.

### **Background**

Continuing violence resulting from growing political instability, brittle state institutions, and the dominance of organised criminal activity in Haiti has over recent months severely undermined the ability of independent media to function efficiently and effectively in that country.

Self-censorship, limitations on the mobility of journalists, the violent targeting of journalists, the collapse of the economy leading to conditions not conducive to the viability of commercial media, and a general environment of fear have served to severely inhibit independent media practice.

This has created space for surreptitious support for media operatives and enterprises along partisan lines, and the resulting skewing of the news and information agenda.

Misinformation and disinformation have thrived to the extent that negotiating a peaceful resolution of the numerous areas of conflict remains elusive as a function of decision-making based on facts.

Unresolved police investigations and judicial processes associated with attacks on the murder of journalists have also created a climate of impunity.

For instance, the assassination, on April 3, 2000, of the journalist and political commentator, Jean Léopold Dominique, remains unresolved within the court system. The killing of journalist Garry Tesse in November 2022 has also not been vigorously investigated, and there are numerous instances in which such inaction has contributed toward a climate of fear.

There have even been instances in which the bodies of murdered journalists have been mutilated as a direct negative signal to other media professionals.

On behalf of its network of Caribbean associations and other collaborators, the ACM has maintained consistent contact with key media practitioners in the country throughout the current period of violence and instability and is not satisfied that the required internal conditions exist to ensure that justice prevails in all instances where journalists and other media workers are stalked, threatened, attacked, and killed.

We have however also recognised that targeted violent attacks on journalists are not a sole basis for grave concern. Threats persist, there is self-censorship based on fear, and an inability to move freely to cover developments as they occur have achieved the objective of silencing journalism in key aspects.

Economic conditions have also not conduced to sustained commercial viability with attendant impacts on the financial status of media workers. Already, numerous jobs have been suspended or lost because of the closure of printing enterprises, broadcasting operations starved of power and fuel, and the non-payment of salaries and wages to media workers that have remained on the job.

The state of professional journalism in Haiti is in very grave danger and the environment is ripe for the collapse of reliable sources of news and information. Not only are journalists targeted by gangs for doing their job, but they also have fewer

places to work as many newsrooms in the capital Port-a-Prince have closed or barely operate.

There has also been a disproportionate impact on the livelihoods of women journalists whose declining visibility on the frontlines of media work has been widely noted, and in part results from the targeting of women for acts of sexual and other violence by criminal elements that now control substantial portions of the capital city.

We note efforts by the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and other international actors to bring an end to the underlying political conditions that contribute to the current state of disorder in Haiti. We, however, contend that the success of such interventions relies heavily on the existence of a media environment capable of delivering clear and truthful accounts of the realities on the ground.

We also note the efforts of hemispheric and international organisations focused on the restoration and maintenance of a vibrant media community through more stringent observance of press freedom as one function of a framework in which respect for human rights is observed.

### **Recommended Actions**

1. We propose that continued action persists to restore democratic institutions to acceptable levels in the country, and that greater attention be paid by all major regional and international players to the state of media in Haiti with a focus on measures to assure their continued viability. All official missions to assess country conditions should include specialists in this area of concern;
2. International NGOs focused on media development and press freedom should conduct an assessment of industry needs in the country and assist in assuring the financial sustainability of media enterprises, key professionals engaged in the practice of journalism, and representative organisations such as SOS Journalistes;
3. Numerous media professionals have fled the country and sought refuge in the USA, Canada, the Caribbean, and elsewhere. We call on all countries involved, and following due process, to facilitate their easy passage and settlement;
4. We urge Caribbean media professionals to provide assistance to Haitian colleagues through greater collaboration on stories of relevance to the country, and call on regional media houses to ensure due financial compensation is offered to collaborating Haitian colleagues;

5. There needs to be focused attention on the role of women journalists in Haiti through channels of direct financial and other support. Media development agencies should also conduct an assessment of the impact of the current conflict on such journalists and media workers;
6. Greater focus should also be placed on the situation with the numerous media enterprises that operate in areas outside of the capital city that currently rely heavily on dispatches from main operators in Port-au-Prince. It is not inconceivable that their role will grow in significance as the national crisis persists;
7. Mechanisms, involving regional and international agencies, for prompt responses to journalists and media workers in distress should be determined and include the provision of legal, medical, and financial assistance;
8. There should be urgent financial and psychological assistance to women journalists and other media workers who have been attacked and/or have lost their livelihoods as a result of the grave risks to the women of Haiti.

## **Conclusion**

The ongoing crisis in Haiti is inarguably the single most urgent Caribbean humanitarian concern. It is an issue of immediate, daily concern to the region as a whole and to adjoining Caribbean states through its contribution to irregular migration flows and the now widely acknowledged association of social and political disorder in Haiti with the trafficking in people, arms and illicit drugs.

Required assistance is urgent in all spheres of public activity. The region and the rest of the world should ensure that the role of the media in relating realities on the ground and in facilitating the free flow of information and ideas that may lead to a resolution, is recognised and more heavily supported.