

Journalists call for sanctions

By David Lush

The Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) is demanding that sanctions be imposed on southern African governments who abuse media freedom.

Three countries, Angola, Zambia and Swaziland, were singled out at the annual meeting of the Institute, held near Mbabane, Swaziland, recently.

A resolution adopted at the close of the meeting demands that members of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) sanction fellow SADC governments which do not abide by the 1991 Windhoek Declaration. The Declaration, which has been adopted by SADC governments, recognises that media freedom and diversity are essential ingredients of social and economic development.

In its resolutions, MISA further called on the international community to "pressurise" countries which continue to violate press freedom in southern Africa. Swaziland, Angola and Zambia were identified as having the worst media freedom records in the region.

The meeting also saw the presentation of the Institute's annual Press Freedom Award, which this year went to Zimbabwean journalist Basildon Peta. The award is given in recognition of outstanding contributions made by southern African journalists to the promotion of media freedom in the region.

In March this year, Peta, a 24-year-old reporter with the Harare-based Daily Gazette, was repeatedly detained, interrogated and finally charged by police in terms of the country's Official Secrets Act, after he exposed massive tax evasion by companies owned by the ruling ZANU-PF party.

During the five days of incessant questioning, police tried to make Peta reveal who had given him information about the fraud. However, Peta remained true to his professional ethics and refused to reveal his sources, and it was for this that he was honoured by MISA.

Presenting the award at a gala ceremony was Kenyan journalist and human rights lawyer Gitobu Imanyara, who in recent years has been jailed and harassed by the Kenyan authorities for his ardent pro-democracy campaigning.

"Basildon Peta refused to be intimidated to," Imanyara said. "He showed no sign of fear and behaved in the best traditions of a journalist."

Although Zimbabwean authorities have since dropped the case against Peta for lack of evidence, the charge could be reactivated any time during

the next two years. "I will maintain my stance and I will do exactly what I have been accorded this prize for — that is to maintain professionalism and excellence in the profession," Peta said.

MISA delegates passed a number of resolutions, most importantly the one demanding that SADC countries impose sanctions on member states who do not abide by the terms of the Windhoek Declaration on Promoting an Independent and Pluralistic African Press. There is provision in the SADC treaty for such sanctions.

The Institute also took the Swazi Government to task, delegates noting that they were appalled that Swaziland, a Windhoek signatory, did not have constitutional guarantees on press freedom. The Angolans, in the light of the war and subsequent censorship and manipulation of state-run media, were asked to promote national reconciliation through the media. Zambia, where The Post newspaper has experienced on-going harassment, was asked to scrap those clauses in the Leadership Code of Ethics Bill that require journal-

ists writing about political leaders to appear before a tribunal to justify stories and to disclose the sources of information.

MISA has decided to set up a "hotline" to advise media in the region. This will run in tandem with a legal trust fund, to be used to defend journalists against infringements of their fundamental rights.

David Lush is information coordinator for MISA.

A PUBLISHER FOR ALL PEOPLE

That is Nasionale Pers. Because it has the will and capacity to do so.

Through its wide range of newspapers, magazines and books it is able to supply the total population with information, education and entertainment.

But it does not stop there. For Nasionale Pers is much more than a service provider. It is a South African company which cares for all South Africans.

Its vision for the new South Africa is an inclusive one. It will play a full and meaningful role in our country's future.

YOU CAN COUNT ON THAT

Nasionale Pers

