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Burundi: Freedom of expression under attack once more

Amnesty International is concerned at reports of the arbitrary arrest and detention of Mathias Manirakiza, the Director of Isanganiro, a private radio station in Burundi, on 29 November. He is currently detained in Mpimba Central Prison in Bujumbura.

Mathias Manirakiza has been charged with disturbing public order after broadcasting on 29 August 2006 information about alleged plans to attack the Office of the President, Pierre Nkurunziza, and the home of Hussein Radjabu, the President of the National Council for the Defence of Democracy – Forces for the Defence of Democracy (*Conseil national pour la Défense de la Démocratie - Forces pour la Défense de la Démocratie*, CNDD-FDD).

Amnesty International believes that the charges against Mathias Manirakiza are an unwarranted restriction on his freedom of expression. As there has been no disturbance of public order since Radio Isanganiro made its broadcast in August 2006, the charges against Mathias Manirakiza do not seem necessary for the protection of public order.

Amnesty International is also concerned that the arrest and detention of Mathias Manirakiza may be the latest move in an ongoing strategy by the government to repress freedom of expression in Burundi.

The government has repeatedly harassed and intimidated journalists throughout 2006, with an escalation in attacks on freedom of expression in the past week. Serge Nibizi and Domitile Kiramvu, journalists for Radio Publique Africaine, were arrested on 22 November 2006 and charged with threatening state security and violating judicial secrecy. The two journalists commented on a story published in a pro-government newspaper about a plot to overthrow the government in August 2006. Two other journalists, Christelle Ruviri and Bob Rugurika also received a summons for questioning about the same story on 27 November 2006. They were not, however, detained.

Article 19(2) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Burundi acceded in 1990, provides:

'Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice.'

While Article 19(3) of the ICCPR allows for certain restrictions on the freedom of expression including for the protection of public order, any such restrictions must be 'provided by law' and 'necessary' for the protection of public order'.

According to the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, arrests and detention are considered arbitrary when the facts giving rise to them concern the exercise of freedom of opinion and expression.

Amnesty International urges the Burundian authorities to stop harassing journalists in Burundi. International law obliges Burundi to respect and ensure freedom of expression, allowing reporters to work independently.

The organization also urges the international community and the global journalist community to publicly condemn the recent arbitrary arrests and detention of journalists in Burundi.