

69th Session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights

**Statement under Item 5: Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and
Access to Assembly in Africa**

DefendDefenders (East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project)

Observer Status: No. 359

Speaker: Rebecca Kabagimu

Honourable Chairperson,

Honourable Commissioners,

State Delegates represented,

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen,

AfricanDefenders and DefendDefenders applaud and welcome the report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression and access to information. We emphasise the importance of freedom of opinion and expression, including access to information, as a vital tool for democratic engagement and monitoring of governance. However, undue and arbitrary restrictions continue to affect human rights defenders and journalists across the continent.

We have documented cases of suppression of the right to free opinion and expression in our networks throughout the continent. These include, but are not limited to, internet shutdowns, blocking of social media platforms and other communication services, and attacks on journalists. We bring to your attention some of the recent cases.

In South Sudan, Radio Jonglei was closed last August, and three staff members were arrested. This action is contrary to Article 9 of the ACHPR and Article 19 of the UDHR and ICCPR on the Right to receive information and free expression. The [2021 state of internet freedom in Africa](#), a report by the Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA) indicates that as African countries embrace digital technologies, there is growing concern that the rising state surveillance, which is partly being enabled by the same digital technologies, is

undermining African citizens' digital rights and hindering their willingness to meaningfully participate in democratic processes.

Honorable Commissioner, the excessive use of force on protesters has increased in the region, leading to deaths and injuries of protesters. The military coup in [Sudan](#) left at least twelve protesters killed and hundreds more injured. In [Eswatini](#), since May over 80 people have been killed by security forces and many others arrested on suspicion of involvement in protests calling for political reforms. Furthermore, there is a rise in torture and ill treatment of protesters in the region. In April and May in [Chad](#), security forces arrested more than 700 people who were peacefully demanding a transition to a civilian rule.

Honorable Commissioner,

As a pan-African network, we have witnessed that access to information, in particular digital freedom, has been unduly limited across the continent. Amid its 2021 general election, Uganda was disconnected from the internet entirely. The country experienced a widespread internet shutdown that lasted for four days. Freedom House, in their 2021 "Freedom Net" report, categorized Uganda, Rwanda, Ethiopia, and Sudan as countries that are "not free" due to obstacles to access and violations of internet user rights.

Honorable Commissioner,

In light of these alarming trends, we call on the Commission to urge states to adhere to the Commission's guidelines on freedom of assembly and association and international and African standards, including instruments to which they are parties.

I thank you.