



25th October, 2024

Statement by the Guyana Press Association on threats of sedition and obstruction of justice charges

The Guyana Press Association has been paying close attention to Guyana Police Force's posture regarding members' reportage of the ongoing criminal investigation against Assistant Commissioner of Police, Calvin Brutus by the Special Organised Crime Unit. Our attention was particularly drawn to a press statement earlier this week by SOCU, an arm of the Guyana Police as it made threats of sedition charges as well as obstruction to justice charges against journalist Leroy Smith. The statement issued by Mark Ramotar, Head of the Corporate Communications Unit on behalf of Head of the Special Organised Crime Unit was issued after Smith published a report on October 23, 2024 on the news agency website, Big Smith News Watch. The police's statement disputed Smith's report but went on to describe the journalist as a "hired gun" with an indication that based on Smith's reporting, legal proceedings would be instituted and criminal investigation started. Smith lodged an official complaint with the Guyana Press Association where he has indicated that he stands by his reporting on this particular issue and his concern about the threats leveled against him as a journalist.

The Guyana Press Association is on the record providing training on sensitive issues and on journalism ethics at most of its sessions throughout the years. The GPA has also cautioned, guided and implored on our members to uphold the highest standards of journalism. Notwithstanding, the GPA finds it appalling and even egregious that SOCU would seek to revive the often scorned upon seditious libel law to go after a journalist, a threat we denounce and one which we will raise with our international press freedom advocates.

It must be noted that most developed countries including, United States and United Kingdom have abolished sedition laws and the European Union in its final report on the March 2, 2020 elections in Guyana observed that despite the Constitution guarantees freedom of expression, Guyana is at odds with international obligations regarding having on its law books seditious libel and criminal defamation. The EU said in addition to civil law, defamation is prosecuted also by

criminal laws with sentences up to two years of imprisonment. “While there were no ongoing criminal lawsuits or cases of journalists being detained or convicted, the mere existence of criminal liability for defamation constitutes a threat which may lead to possible self-censorship by media professionals,” the EU report stated. The Government of Guyana and the legal advisors to the police would do well to bring this report to the attention of the Guyana Police Force and SOCU, even other state agencies that often see the media as a threat rather than a partner in development.

The Guyana Police Force still has the ability to prove that it is an open and unbiased institution with its members fostering a better relationship with the media. In times of desperate acts to close cases, the Police Force is on the record reaching out to members of the media to provide unsolicited information on cases and alleged criminals, going as far as selecting journalists and media houses to share information that would build a case or its image to the public. In other matters, the Force has chosen to ignore media requests for information as well as interviews on critical issues. The GPA is on the record about these acts including the police silence on some matters of public interest. This latest threat of sedition and obstruction charges could be seen as part of a wider agenda to silence journalists from reporting on public interest issues and should be denounced by all.

At the same time, the GPA urges all journalists and media practitioners to uphold the highest ethical standards of the profession. Pandering to self-serving interests with reporting that is not based on fact and truth undoubtedly result in unethical conduct through skewed and unfair reporting. Ultimately, the public's interest matters rather than personal preferences and agenda.

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