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Rights groups warn govt on Red Pepper closure

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KAMPALA. Media groups and other civil society organisations have asked government to re-open the *Red Pepper*, a local tabloid, and release its directors and editors or face collective action by the media and human rights community in the country.

Five *Red Pepper* directors and three editors have been in detention since November 21 on charges of publishing information prejudicial to security, libel and offensive communication, among others.

At a joint media briefing in Kampala yesterday, Mr Robert Ssempala, the National Coordinator of Human Rights Net-



Concerned. "Whether we like or agree with the content the *Red Pepper* publishes, this attack on press freedom undermines the freedom of all journalists to report freely on the facts. The government must stop using arrests and prosecutions as a means to intimidate journalists engaged in lawful and legitimate work," ROBERT SSEMPALA, NATIONAL COORDINATOR OF HUMAN RIGHTS NETWORK FOR JOURNALISTS IN UGANDA

work for Journalists in Uganda (HRNJ-U), who spoke on behalf of the activists, reminded

government that human rights are entitlements and not given by the State and so must be upheld.

Reminder to govt

"Government is reminded that continued persecution and oppression of journalists is a violation of press freedom. The government should amend laws that continue to criminalise the work of journalists," Mr Ssempala said.

He accused the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) for what he described as continued media witch-hunt.

"Every media house must be free to interview any public figure whatever their political stance and without reprimands. UCC must be seen to work for the promotion and growth of the media rather than control and curtail its freedoms," he said.

The call comes hardly a week after US Ambassador Deborah Malac described the media environment in Uganda as "increasingly threatening" and reminded government of its responsibility to "safeguard the constitutional right" to safeguard a free media.

Ambassador Malac said the raid on *Red Pepper* and the arrest of its senior editors "simply for publishing an article" was uncalled for. She added that if the "government believes that media stories contain falsehoods, there are legal ways to challenge them."