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Press Release

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GPU REACTION TO PRESIDENT JAMMEH'S STATEMENT ON DEYDA HYDARA, FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

The Gambia Press Union wishes to express its shock and disappointment over the inappropriateness of the provocative statement of the head of state, President Jammeh, on GRTS, Tuesday night in relation to the death of veteran Gambian journalist, the late Deyda Hydera.

It is rather unfortunate and the Union is indeed saddened that the second time the head of state has so chosen to discuss the death of Deyda Hydera; he again, has dwelt on the issue of character assassination and ridicule.

We find it most unfortunate that the champion for the promotion of Gambian and African culture, traditional norms and values, and someone, who claims to have total respect for religion in particular, Islam, President Jammeh finds it appropriate to ridicule and to speak ill of the dead. Such behavior and countenance is most unreligious, un-cultural and certainly discredits traditional African norms and values!

The Union need not remind President Jammeh that it is difficult to presume that the Gambia Government is concerned over the death of Deyda Hydera unless and until the Gambia Government and its relevant security institutions are seen to be determined and resolved to seriously commit themselves in a professional manner to embark on investigating the events that led to the death of our dear colleague and brother.

We also wish to bring to the attention of the head of state that the Government of The Gambia and its relevant Security Apparatus' have the primary responsibility to ensure the protection of each and every Gambian life and therefore the murder of any Gambian should be an issue of

paramount concern and curbing such a menace a priority. Mere statements and or speculations and ridicule re: the events leading to the death of Deyda Hydera cannot and will not be accepted as exoneration of the Gambia Government, neither by the Union, international journalist associations, the Hydera family or other interested parties. The death of any Gambian, more so one who was most vocal on issues of human rights, freedom of expression and the development of the country in general, even if it meant clashing with the powers that be, can only be deemed suspicious until such a time that the state can logically, reasonably, factually and forensically, and within the shortest possible period prove otherwise.

We demand an investigation of fact and forensics spearheaded by the Gambia Government. Should the relevant government institutions not have the resources or wherewithal to carry on with the investigations, we at the Gambia Press Union think it is time that you publicly admit that and invite other states and international policing and security institutions such as Interpol, who already have a desk at the Police Headquarters to take over the investigations.

It is almost certain that the trail has gone cold in the past Four and a half years but the main pieces of the puzzle being the bullets which were or should have been retrieved during post mortem and the post mortem report will certainly go a long way in aiding the continuation and or recommencement of the investigations. Motives and related issues can wait for a later date! Right now our preoccupation is that the perpetrators of this murder most foul be brought to book.

Mr. President the venom with which you spoke about the websites with a picture of the slain journalist and the slogan “Who Killed Deyda Hydera” is alarming. We are very much aware that the issue be kept alive and until such a time that his killers are brought to book, this slogan and its accompanying image will remain on the website of the Union and that even then, we will coin a statement fitting to forever haunt the perpetrators of this heinous crime!

The killing of Deyda Hydera, if nothing else, has only strengthened the resolve of true journalists to remain steadfast, truthful and committed to speaking in defense of the weak and the vulnerable.

On a second note, we are quite surprised that you claim there is Freedom of Expression in The Gambia. Mr. President, we beg to differ, the legal environment in particular the Newspaper Amendment Act 2004, the Criminal Code Amendment Act 2004, the Newspaper Registration

Act and the recently passed Communications Bill 2009 make it practically impossible to practice efficiently as a journalist and yet remain within the ambits of the law.

The laws notwithstanding, the disappearance of Chief Ebrima Manneh, the continued prolonging of unnecessary court cases of journalists and media practitioners, arbitrary arrests and detention, harassment of Gambian journalists especially the episodes of 2006 leave a lot to be desired re: the state of freedom of expression in The Gambia.

We therefore call on the Gambia Government to respect, promote and defend the rights of journalists, notably by bringing an immediate end to the unnecessary and continued embarrassment and harassment of journalists; to create the enabling environment for the development and full participation of the independent media, the fourth estate, by repealing the current media laws which criminalize media offences amongst a host of other detrimental issues and to pass new and progressive media related laws such as Freedom of Information and Access to Information Acts which amongst other provisions guarantee freedom of the media as stipulated in the regional and international treaties such as Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 9 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights to which your Government is signatory.

We also propose, in good faith that your Government seriously look at strategies geared towards engaging and collaborating with the independent media to enhance and strengthen independent media participation and to enable the expansion of the space for divergent views and healthy debate.