

*"We are writing on behalf of the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA) and the World Editors Forum, which represent 18,000 publications, 15,000 online sites and over 3,000 companies in more than 120 countries, to express our serious concern at two recent moves by the ruling ANC that seriously threaten press freedom in South Africa.*

*"The Protection of Information Bill currently before parliament seeks to replace apartheid-era legislation with far-reaching provisions that would virtually shield the government from press scrutiny and criminalize activities essential to investigative journalism.*

*"Under the bill, officials would be empowered to classify any public or commercial data as confidential on vaguely defined "national interest" grounds without having to give any explanation. Such powers could be used to outlaw coverage of such issues as public law enforcement and judicial matters, with political appointees having the final say over which information should be classified.*

*"One of the serious deficiencies in the legislation is that there is no provision for a "public interest" defence by journalists and others to support the disclosure of classified information. Anyone found guilty of unauthorized disclosure of official or classified information could face heavy penalties.*

*"We are also seriously concerned at an ANC proposal that parliament appoint a Media Appeals Tribunal to adjudicate on complaints against the press. Such a government-appointed agency could be used as an instrument of political censorship, as has happened many times across Africa, and members would inevitably face an inherent conflict of interest. We respectfully remind you that an effective self-regulatory system, including a Press Ombudsman and an Appeals Panel, is already in place and has repeatedly been shown to act with neutrality.*

*"We bring to your attention the Declaration of Table Mountain, endorsed at the 60th World Newspaper Congress and 14th Editors Forum in Cape Town in June 2007 and recently signed by Archbishop Desmond Tutu in July 2010. The Declaration of Table Mountain, among other things, calls on African states to promote the highest standards of press freedom in furtherance of the principles proclaimed in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other protocols and to provide constitutional guarantees of freedom of the press.*

*"We respectfully call on you to ensure that the Protection of Information Bill and the Media Appeals Tribunals proposal are either amended in line with constitutional safeguards for freedom of the press or withdrawn altogether. We ask that you ensure that any future media reform in South Africa fully respects international standards of press freedom."*

*For more information on the Declaration of Table Mountain, WAN-IFRA's campaign to end insult and criminal defamation laws in Africa, visit <http://www.declarationoftablemountain.org/home.php>*

*More WAN-IFRA press freedom protests can be found at <http://www.wan-press.org/pfreedom/rubriques.php?id=304>*