

Malawi: Police summon three journos, one gets death threats

 By [Gregory Gondwe](#)

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The year 2011, while still not yet finished, could easily pass as the worst for the Malawi media which continue to suffer police persecution.

Malawi Police, on Tuesday 11 October 2011, summoned *Malawi News* deputy editor Innocent Chitosi and his reporter Archibald Kasakura as well as *Weekend Nation* newspaper George Kasakula, after the two weeklies carried a story on the weekend of 8 October 2011 that revealed details leading to the death a University of Malawi student, Robert Chasowa.

The front page story in the *Weekend Nation* had the headline, 'Chasowa dealt with police before death' while the *Malawi News* was also a lead story with the headline "Govt. used Chasowa". Both stories quoted, Duncan Nawoza Phiri, who claimed that his friend [Chasowa] was, after threatening to spill the beans after agreeing with the police to stop another civil society organised demonstration against bad governance, murdered because they were promised money which was never paid.

While the author of the *Malawi News* story has been summoned, the author of the *Weekend Nation* story has started getting death threats.

The two editors for Malawi's biggest weeklies and the reporter were summoned to the Southern region police headquarters where the police demanded recordings of the interview the newspapers had with Duncan Phiri. The recordings of interviews reveal details of Chasowa's dealings with senior police officers, including inspector general of police, Peter Mukhito before his death.

Initially, the police described the death as suicide and even claimed that a pathologist report had confirmed of the same. But the pathologist dismissed the police's claims as lies and when he released his report it indicated that the death resulted from assault in the head using blunt instruments. Chasowa, a fourth year engineering student was found dead on the university's Polytechnic Campus in Blantyre on 24 September 2011.

Police told they are unethical

Kasakula told the police it was unethical to resign to their demands.

"I told the police that it was unethical for us to give access to the recordings as Phiri said what he said to us in confidence," he was quoted in *The Nation* as saying.

Chitosi also confirmed that he was indeed summoned to the Southern region police headquarters by senior detective, Bob Mtekama, and four other senior detectives of the national police headquarters. The police are trying to open up a case against Duncan Phiri and indicated to Chitosi that they wanted him to be a state witness.

"But I told them that our ethics forbid us from testifying against our sources," said Chitosi.

The police officers were still adamant telling the journalist that the state has got powers to summon him and even arrest him if he refuses to testify.

"I told them that I was aware that there could be a subpoena for me but I just wanted to prepare them not to be shocked when I refuse to testify," Chitosi said in an interview with Zodiak online. The journalists said the interview they had with the police was done both on video camera and written documentation.

Police spokesperson, Willie Mwaluka has since confirmed the arrest of Duncan Nawaza Phiri was in connection with the story that appeared in the *Malawi News* and *Weekend Nation*.

"The interest of the police is to get the identities of four individuals who the newspapers quoted Phiri as having been at the campus hours before student was found dead," Mwaluka said.

Conflict between the media and police

The summoning of the three journalists is the latest conflict between the media and police.

It comes after one journalist was [arrested for taking pictures](#) of the President's palace, which comes months after police brutally assaulted journalists who covered a violent demonstration in July 2011, where 19 people were slain after the police fired shots all over the demonstration area to quell the situation.

MISA Malawi responds

The Malawi Chapter of the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA Malawi) said they are disturbed with reports that *Weekend Nation* journalist Phillip Pemba is receiving death threats.

"We are also disturbed with reports that the police summoned *Weekend Nation* editor George Kasakula and *Malawi News* deputy editor Innocent Chitosi of Blantyre Newspapers Limited - papers that carried detailed insights into Chasowa's death and dealings with the police - for questioning over recordings of the articles," said MISA Malawi chairperson Anthony Kasunda.

MISA-Malawi pointed out that Pemba's article gave an insight into what could have led to Chasowa's death and exposed his dealings with police to help stop the planned 17 August 2011 protests against government.

"One of the callers said they know where I stay and another one asked why I mentioned the name of inspector general of police (Peter Mukhito) in my story. He said I will die over the story. They said I would have been safe if I left out the names of the police officers involved," Pemba is quoted as saying in *The Nation* on Wednesday 12 October 2011.

"MISA Malawi considers these threats as well as the summoning of editors Kasakula and Chitosi as deliberate attempts to muzzle journalists and instil fear in the media sorority," said Kasunda.

Attempts to muzzle journalists

He said as always stated in MISA Malawi media statements, these acts instil fear and curtail meaningful dialogue and debate on pertinent issues that affect the country, the murder of student for example. Kasunda also said these

developments are barbaric, retrogressive and superfluous in an open and democratic Malawi and require collective condemnation.

"We therefore call upon the authorities to openly condemn and call for thorough investigations into such threats. We also call upon the police to support and work with media in uncovering the truth about Chasowa's death and not to intimidate and gag journalists," added Kasunda.

He said the media helps the country expose various ills that affect the country and summoning and intimidating them over the Chasowa article will only raise suspicions than answers.

"MISA Malawi is, however, calling on IG [Inspector General] Peter Mukhito to openly denounce such barbaric acts and for the law enforcers to protect journalists and indeed members of the public who are constantly receiving threats from unknown persons," he said.

MISA Malawi also observed that Mukhito and southern region police commissioner Rodney Jose, who were both mentioned in the article by Pemba and subjects of the death threats, have chosen not to comment on the threats levelled against Pemba.

"MISA Malawi is thus appealing to the IG and Commissioner Jose to openly denounce the death threats on Pemba and summoning of editors whose papers published the insightful articles," Kasunda pleaded.

He said Malawi Police is supposed to protect and ensure peace and security and should therefore condemn and distance itself from these death threats which are most likely tarnishing the image of the service and its top brass.

ABOUT GREGORY GONDWE

Gregory Gondwe is a Malawian journalist who started writing in 1993. He is also a media consultant assisting several international journalists pursuing assignments in Malawi. He holds a Diploma and an Intermediate Certificate in Journalism among other media-related certificates. He can be contacted on gregorygondwe@gmail.com. Follow him on Twitter at @Kalipochi.

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