

# Burundi's new media law keeps Dutch ambassador vigilant

Burundi's new media law continues to cause unrest among the international community. It certainly doesn't please the Dutch ambassador to Burundi, Jolke Oppewal. Once a journalist himself and someone who remains passionate about his past profession, Oppewal recently spoke with principal Burundian newspaper IWACU.

Being a good diplomat, Oppewal begins by talking about the good relations between his country and Burundi.

"We have an engagement, a partnership, with Burundi. We are funding projects to help the country develop and become more stable. Our partnership has already produced good results in terms of security and economic development," he explains.

The adoption of the new media law doesn't call into question his country's engagement, he says. But the Dutch have a reputation for being direct and, addressing the media law, the ambassador is frank.

"The Netherlands regrets this law. It's obvious. Burundi needs open platforms. Reporters should have the freedom to express themselves regarding what's happening in the country," he says.

Oppewal notes that the law has "several vague articles", which he also finds regrettable.

"Because of this vagueness, it's very difficult for Burundian journalists to know when they are violating the law," he says

## Journalists not perfect

The diplomat also emphasizes that journalists are not perfect.

"They have to continue to improve, to train to become high-quality journalists," Oppewal says.

Burundi's media law is now in effect, but he believes that legal redress is still possible.

"If an appeal is made, the constitutional court will have to rule whether the law is constitutional," he points out.

Meanwhile, according to the diplomat: "The Netherlands will remain vigilant as to how it is enforced."

The ambassador's advice to journalists is simple: work professionally, according to journalistic ethics. And if the democratic

space closes as a result of this law?

Oppewal thinks for a moment and then responds in a soft but firm voice: "The Netherlands has had an excellent partnership with Burundi for the past few years. If this law leads to a closure of the democratic space, the nature of our partnership could change."

*Read this article as originally published in French on the IWACU website*

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