

South African National Editors' Forum Press Statement released after February 08, 2009 Council Meeting

The SA National Editors' Forum is to liaise closely with the Independent Electoral Commission to report threats of violence and intimidation to journalists. A council meeting of Sanef in Cape Town, on Sunday Feb 8, expressed concerns that the 2009 elections may not be free of intimidation of the media.

The editors underlined their obligation to ensure balanced, informed coverage and decided to hold workshops to deepen the understanding in newsrooms of how to interpret elections results and trends. Sanef also plans to set up an alert system for journalists under threat; convene a conference with political stakeholders on the role of the media in the forthcoming elections; develop guidelines aimed at helping journalists to deal with threatening situations and set up, in conjunction with the IEC, an elections barometer on violations of the electoral code. The IEC is still to be approached on the latter step.

Editors also discussed the new economic pressures on the media industry generally and resolved to engage constructively with media owners. The objective is to safeguard the vital responsibilities of the media in terms of the public's right of access to information while at the same time acknowledging commercial imperatives.

The difficulties of sustaining quality public interest journalism in the face of further cost cutbacks and production rationalisation in South African newsrooms -- a consequence of the current economic downturn, the global economic crisis and perceptions on the future for especially print media journalism -- was noted with deep concern.

"We need to work on the question of how we sustain quality journalism in a turbulent world," was how Sanef Chairperson Jovial Rantao summed up the forum's approach.

Press Council Ombudsman Joe Thloloe informed editors that he hoped to have a deputy ombudsman appointed soon, to help deal with election-related complaints against newspapers. Having received 126 serious complaints against newspapers in the whole of 2008, he noted that he had already received 16 complaints in January this year. This indicated 2009 was going to be a busy year and the extra resources are needed to reinforce the self-regulation processes of the Press Council.

Sanef also noted with concern the growing trend among sporting bodies' administrators to control and restrict media coverage of major tournaments, ostensibly in order to protect what they felt was intellectual copyright over the events. Sanef regards these moves as counter to freedom of expression rights. Sporting bodies had made some welcome concessions but Sanef will continue to engage constructively with, among others, Cricket South Africa and the international soccer body, Fifa.