

## Moving on from the Police Siege of AA Uganda Offices

*Reflections, Learnings and Actions after the police raid of AAU*

**September 25<sup>th</sup> 2017**

### **Prelude**

1. AA Uganda Offices, that of the Great Lakes Institute for Strategic Studies as well Solidarity Uganda/Act Alliance in Lira were raided by the police on Wednesday 20<sup>th</sup> and Thursday 21<sup>st</sup> September ostensibly to collect evidence about the three organisations involved in illicit financial transactions and supporting efforts to destabilize the country.
2. While the situation is slowly getting to normal and the police have since vacated the premises of the three civil society organisations, there is anxiety and inertia that remains from the siege last week. This short note and scenario matrix is a reflection on the unfortunate events last week and actions.

### **What could be the motives of the siege?**

3. From the questions asked and interrogation by the police the cordon and search operation is connected to civil society's strong position to defend the constitution and defend Article 102 b on age-limit and Article 26 on compulsory acquisition of land. The regime believes civil society organisations have a lot of money to support citizen protest and resistance movements.
4. Focus has been on resource inflows and outflows to establish who funds us, how we use the money and who else we support financially or associate with, in the understanding that under the Public Order Management Act, several civic protest actions are considered unlawful activities. From our preliminary analysis, the possible motives are:
  - a) **Delegitimize AA Uganda and Civil Society:** to accuse civil society of being involved in activities that destabilize the country or in illicit transactions goes a long way to cast such organisations in bad light - whether it is proved or not. Our donors may also be targeted to create an impression that we fundraise for certain activities and do something else.
  - b) **Compromise our Systems:** there is every intention from the focus on IT on the first day of the siege and the confiscation<sup>1</sup> of some equipment as well as documents, that our systems may be a target for further surveillance.
  - c) **Disrupt our work and derail us from our mission:** as mentioned in point (3) above, with a clear mission to oppose the retrogressive constitutional amendments and our attempt to organize citizens to resist the attempts to remove the age-limit, compromise our tools of work, and demoralize staff.
  - d) **Threaten other civil society organisations:** the actions on civil society organisations that are considered key in the citizen actions to defend the Constitution is expected to demoralize the rest and lead to self-censorship by many, thus weakening the movement.
  - e) **Provide a justification for further actions:** the accusations against AA Uganda and other CSOs are quite serious and as investigations go on, the police, like they already did to one of our activities (mobile legal aid clinic in Kawempe on Saturday 23<sup>rd</sup> Sept), will continue to disrupt our scheduled activities and force us on the defensive. It is possible that we shall see more draconian actions like arrest of some staff happening.

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<sup>1</sup>So far we know of the following items taken from our offices: a) **key organisational documents** [2016/17 Work Plan/Budget, record of financial transactions from January to September 2017, finance policy manual, half-year finance performance report, list of all our bank accounts, SUN System backup files from our server, Annual Reports for 2016 and Strategy Document 2012-2017, partnerships and capacity building half-year reports, facilitation notes from the Country Director's Office; b) **key organisational and personal gadgets** [2 laptops and 3 phones of staff]; c) **extensive documentation of our IT infrastructure** and system.

## Actions Taken and Planned<sup>2</sup>

5. Since the siege, the management and staff of ActionAid has undertaken several actions divided into three road strands: legal response; public relations and engagement; and internal response as below:

a) **Legal response actions:** since the police raid was backed by a legal search warrant from the courts, we, from the onset sought the presence of a legal team and this was provided by Chapter 4 (a legal service and support organisation for NGOs) and an independent lawyer.

- The legal team has been deployed all through the search process and were present as staff testified and police took possession of some equipment. The presence of the legal team helped shape the nature of the search. A legal documentation will be available should it be necessary.
- *Looking forward, we believe it is essential to strengthen the legal support function in at least two ways: first is to secure the services of re-known law firms to represent the organisation and other CSOs would the police investigations lead us to court; and secondly, building on the work of Chapter 4, we must strengthen a fast-response legal team for the broader struggle to ensure that expeditious support is provided. Chapter 4 could convene other actors such as LASPNET, ULS, Legal Brains Trust and others to make this happen.*

b) **PR and Engagement:** the **search warrant** from court and the **police statement** on the raid at our offices raise quite serious allegations that could be damaging to the credibility of the organisation and civil society if not effectively responded to. Therefore, engaging the public to continuously explain our understanding of this development and our response specifically and more broadly what we do is essential to mitigate any potential delegitimization of the organisation. The following actions have been done or are planned:

- Public statement to tell our own story - given all the allegations, ActionAid has released its statement about the events that unfolded in the organisation since the police siege and regularly share information and updates to the rest of civil society.
- Given our dual identity and the potential effects of such a raid in one country to the entire federation, we have kept the Global Secretariat updated and hosted the Secretary General who made a courtesy visit to Uganda.
- We have continued to undertake solidarity actions with other civil society organisations to keep our collective mission about our opposition to the retrogressive amendments to Article 102 b and Article 26, as well as express solidarity with the other two organisations<sup>3</sup> raided.
- Meet the National NGO Registrations Bureau at the Ministry of Internal Affair, the Uganda Human Rights Commission, upon their request and other agencies of government, including the Uganda Police Force to whom we have written a letter expressing our concern about confiscated equipment and interferences in our programme work.
- Update our donors and supporters because the allegations against the organisation are quite grave and could create unnecessary tension with our most valued development partners and supporters around the world.
- As the owners and custodians of our business, we are regularly updating our National Governing Board who have been very supportive so far, with some members paying courtesy visits to the office. Through the weekly, we have also updated the AA Uganda Assembly as our Ambassadors across the country.

<sup>2</sup> These are defined in greater detail in a scenario matrix developed by staff and that Management (CMT) and a specially constituted Quick Response Team regularly update and work with as a guide. The scenario matrix outlines four possible scenarios: a) **present scenario of continued uncertainty**; b) **best case scenario of expeditious vindication** of ActionAid; c) **worst case scenario of delegitimization** of ActionAid in the eyes of the public; and finally, d) **a scenario of possible deregistration** of ActionAid. It then defines specific actions in response to the scenarios.

<sup>3</sup> The Great Lakes Institute for Strategic Studies (GLISS) with its head office in Ntinda in Kampala and Solidarity Uganda with its Head Office in Lira District, Northern Uganda

- c) **Internally oriented response actions:** while our spirit is unshaken and we are determined to continue with our legally mandated work as an organisation and constitutionally protected duties as citizens, we are not taking for granted, the potential anxiety that the siege has caused amongst many staff and the obvious disruption of our work at the head office or in the field. The following actions have been done or are planned:
- Effective communication to staff: this is and remains essential to minimize the negative effects of the developments as well as re-affirm our stand in the struggle for social justice.
  - Set up a Quick Response Team<sup>4</sup>: this was agreed by management so that a dedicated cross-functional team keeps following events as they unfold to avoid major disruptions in our work.
  - Staff security and safety: remind staff of personal security measures and consider strict adherence to our staff security protocol, as well as expeditiously respond to any incidences.
  - Reduce and minimize the disruptions to our work: as mentioned in section 4, one of the motives of the siege could be to derail us from our work. All obligations to communities, donors and other actors must remain undeterred.
  - Secure our IT System to protect our information and avoid major disruption or hacks that would compromise the integrity of our mission.

## Emerging Lessons for ActionAid and Civil Society

6. **Keep ‘your house in order’ always:** this incidence proved once again the importance of having all institutional information and documentation updated. The siege was impromptu and the documents sought for had to be provided without delay. Any failure to do so may have caused unnecessary suspicion. We must maintain this level of readiness as part of our character as an organisation.
7. **Staff and board must understand all processes in the organisation:** the interrogation by the police of different staff in separate locations needed a level of consistency about how we are organised and our business processes to avoid contradictions. It is therefore incumbent for all staff to know all our procedures and policies as they relate to planning, financing and relations with external actors.
8. **Rapid legal response:** as the civic and political space continues to shrink in the country and globally, we must strengthen our legal response capability. The presence of competent lawyers as part of our staff compliment and external legal reinforcements was very timely and helpful as the search was conducted.
9. **A positive relationship with the media is essential:** the media was very helpful in reporting and reaching out widely about the siege. Because of our continuous work with the media in our programming, most media had a decent understanding of our work and were thus able to report a lot more objectively. Connected to this is the growing importance of social media platforms and our staff engagement with new media to update but also respond to emerging queries. This is an area for internal improvement.
10. **Being relevant to civil society and wider citizens’ struggles:** the immense show of solidarity from other civil society organisations and the public at the time of need was a demonstration of our value and relevance to civil society and the wider causes and struggles in the country. This must be maintained, as will be the importance of us showing solidarity to others in times of need.
11. **Be aware of potential informers in the midst:** finally, we have learnt that the forces that seek to undermine our work are present in our midst and it is therefore important to better understand our

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<sup>4</sup> This cross-functional team comprises 7 staff, will meet a minimum of twice a week physically or virtually and charged with leading on: a) gathering, synthesising and corroborating intelligence information, including from various media; b) ensuring that the scenario matrix is regularly updated and kept alive to the changing dynamics; c) keep a close focus on staff security and safety; and d) make recommendations to CMT for action.

internal environment and partners we work with. We must always be transparent about what we do and have the confidence to defend what we stand for and support to reduce on the need to spy on us.