



Fighting Internet Shutdowns around the World

October 15, 2020

#KeepItOn: Joint letter on keeping the internet open and secure during elections in the Republic of Guinea

Re: Internet access will ensure increased participation and transparency in Guinea presidential elections

Your Excellency Alpha Condé, President of the Republic of Guinea

CC:

M. Said Oumar Koulibaly, Minister of Posts, Telecommunications and Digital Economy;

M. Mohamed Diané, Ministre de la Défense nationale;

M. Mory Doumboya, Minister of Justice;

M. Yagouba Cissé, Directeur-Général d'Autorité de Régulation des Postes et Télécommunications (ARPT);

M. Atigou Chérif, Directeur-Général de Guinéenne de large bande (Guilab);

We, the undersigned organizations and members of the #KeepItOn coalition — a global network that unites over 220 organizations from 99 countries working to end internet shutdowns¹ — urgently appeal to **you, President Alpha Condé, to ensure stable and open internet access and access to all other digital communication channels before, during, and after the presidential elections in the Republic of Guinea**, scheduled for October 18, 2020, and beyond.

The internet plays a crucial role in enabling people to access information and remain informed about the election process. Access to the internet and social media platforms provides people in Guinea with the capacity to actively participate in the voting process, engage in public discourse, and hold their elected leaders accountable, which are all important tenets of every democratic society.

The #KeepItOn coalition [recorded](#) incidents of network disruptions on March 21 and 22, 2020 in Guinea during the referendum on constitutional reforms. Worryingly, these shutdowns happened after Guinéenne de Large Bande (GUILAB), the telecommunications infrastructure operator, had assured the people of Guinea that maintenance works which were scheduled around the referendum and could potentially affect people's access to the internet [had been postponed](#).

¹ An internet shutdown is defined as an intentional disruption of internet or electronic communications, rendering them inaccessible or effectively unusable, for a specific population or within a location, often to exert control over the flow of information. See more at: <https://accessnow.org/keepiton>.



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There is a need for transparency and accountability during this important national event, and citizens' access to the internet and social media platforms can contribute significantly to achieving this. There have been recent reports of election-related [violence](#), and disturbing accounts of people [dying](#) as a result of excessive use of force by law enforcement agents during protests in Guinea, carried out with impunity. These developments are of particular concern throughout the lead-up to your country's elections.

Internet shutdowns harm human rights, disrupt emergency services, and cripple economies

Mr. President, research shows that internet shutdowns and violence go hand in hand.² Shutting down the internet during a [deadly pandemic](#) would add fuel to the fire. Internet shutdowns violate fundamental human rights such as freedom of expression and opinion, access to information, press freedom and freedom of assembly. By disrupting the free flow of information, shutdowns exacerbate any existing tensions in the society and increase the likelihood of protests, as well as concealing potential violence and human rights violations perpetrated by both state and non-state actors. Without access to communications tools, [journalists and the media are unable to report](#) on the election process and outcomes.

Free and open internet has fostered unprecedented creativity and innovation, provided access to information, and opened other kinds of social, economic, cultural, and political opportunities across the globe. We have only seen this underscored throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The technical means used to block access to information online often dangerously undermines the stability and resilience of the internet. Network disruptions also destabilize the internet's power to support small business livelihoods and to drive economic development.³

Although governments attempt to justify network disruptions for various reasons, in reality, internet shutdowns deny people access to vital and life-saving information, and emergency services, plunging whole communities into fear and confusion.

Internet shutdowns contravene national and international laws

Internet shutdowns violate provisions of the national constitution of Guinea as well as regional and international frameworks, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR), which Guinea has ratified.

² Anita R. Gohdes, 'Pulling the Plug: Network Disruptions and Violence in the Syrian Conflict' (Journal of Peace Research: 31 January 2014)

http://www.anitagohdes.net/uploads/2/7/2/3/27235401/gohdes_synetworkaug14.pdf accessed 02 October 2020.

³ Darrell West, (Brookings Institution, October 2016) "Internet shutdowns cost countries \$2.4 billion last year" <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/intenet-shutdowns-v-3.pdf>



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The UN Human Rights Committee, the official interpreter of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, emphasizes in its General Comment no. 34 that restrictions on speech online must be strictly necessary and proportionate to achieve a legitimate purpose.⁴ Shutdowns, by contrast, disproportionately impact all users, and unnecessarily restrict access to information and emergency services communications during crucial moments. Shutdowns are neither necessary nor effective at achieving a legitimate aim, as they block the spread of information, contribute to confusion and disorder, and obstruct public safety.

As a coalition that believes in the internet as an enabler of all other human rights, we call on you to undertake the necessary measures to ensure that the internet service providers and relevant actors maintain an open, accessible, and secure internet across Guinea throughout the elections and beyond.

We respectfully request that you use the important position of your office to:

- Ensure that the internet, including social media and other digital communication platforms, remains open, accessible, and secure across the Republic of Guinea throughout the elections;
- Publicly assure the people of the Republic of Guinea that the internet and all social media platforms will remain available, and to notify the public of any disruptions;
- Order the various ISPs operating in the country to provide quality, secure, and freely open internet throughout the elections, to inform internet users of any disruptions, and to work around the clock to fix any identified disruptions likely to impact the quality of service they receive.

We are happy to assist you in any of these matters.

Sincerely,

Access Now
ADISI-Cameroun
Advocacy Initiative for Development (AID)
African Freedom of Expression Exchange (AFEX)
Africa Freedom of Information Centre
Africa Open Data and Internet Research Foundation
AfricTivistes
Association des Blogueurs de Guinée (ABLOGUI)
Bareedo Platform Somalia
Bloggers of Zambia

⁴ UN Human Rights Committee (UN, July 2011) “General Comment No. 34”
<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrc/docs/GC34.pdf>



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Business & Human Rights Resource Centre

Campaign for Human Rights and Development International (CHRDI)

Center for Media Studies and Peacebuilding (CEMESP)

Centre for Multilateral Affairs (CfMA)

Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA)

Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)

DefendDefenders

Free Expression Myanmar (FEM)

Gambia Press Union (GPU)

International Press Centre (IPC) Lagos-Nigeria

Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF)

Internet Protection Society (Russia)

Kenya ICT Action Network (KICTAnet)

Liberia Information Technology Student Union

Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA)

Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA)

Organization of the Justice Campaign

OpenNet Africa

Open Net Korea

Paradigm Initiative

PEN America

Rudi International

Southeast Asia Freedom of Expression Network (SAFEnet)

Ubunteam

Unwanted Witness

YODET