



Fighting Internet Shutdowns around the World

October 21, 2020

#KeepItOn: Joint letter on keeping the internet open and accessible in the Federal Republic of Nigeria

Re: Internet access will ensure the safety of Nigerian citizens during protests

Your Excellency Muhammadu Buhari, President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria

CC:

Yemi Osibanjo (SAN), Vice President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria;

Isa Ali Ibrahim Pantami (PhD), Minister of Communications and Digital Economy;

Adeolu Akande, Chairman, Nigerian Communications Commission;

Tony Ojukwu, Chairman, National Human Rights Commission;

Gbenga Adebayo, President, Association of Licensed Telecommunications Operators of Nigeria, ALTON;

Olusola Teniola, President, Association of Telecommunications Companies of Nigeria

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 Muhammadu Buhari, to ensure an open, stable and open internet and all other digital communication channels in the Republic of Nigeria**, especially during this period of ongoing demonstrations.

The internet plays a crucial role in enabling people to access information that will help ensure their safety, especially under rapidly changing circumstances, as is the current scenario in Nigeria. An internet shutdown or digital communication blackout during the ongoing protests against brutalities perpetrated by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) is likely to endanger more lives, and prevent people from accessing safe havens.

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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This exceptional moment in Nigeria reinforces the need for the government to ensure the security of the protesters, notably given recent [reports of attacks from security forces and armed militia](#). The government should respectfully engage the protesters, protect their rights to peaceful assembly and free expression, and warrant that there will be no profiling of demonstrators.

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 these critical moments in Nigeria 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 serving to conceal any violence and human rights violations perpetrated either by state or non-state actors. Also, without access to communications tools, [journalists and the media would be unable to report](#) freely and safely.

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.

According to United Nations Special Rapporteurs in a [statement made at RightsCon 2020](#), with the closing of civic space and restrictions on offline media, access to universal, open, affordable, secure, and stable Internet is vital to save lives, to prevent abuses, to continue to promote and protect human rights and urgently increase access to information.”

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 24 March 2017.

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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We draw your attention to a [statement](#) made by Clément Voule, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and of Association, that clearly states that in this time when physical assemblies are restricted, it is all the more necessary that access to, and use of, the internet be ensured. States should also actively take measures to ensure affordable access to the internet extends to the entirety of the global population.

Internet shutdowns contravene national and international laws

Internet shutdowns violate provisions of the national constitution of Nigeria, 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 Nigeria has ratified. In terms of Principle 38(2) of the [Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa](#), states shall not engage in or condone any disruption of access to the internet and other digital technologies for segments of the public or an entire population.

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 ensure an open, accessible, and secure internet across Nigeria throughout this period and beyond. We respectfully request that you use the important position of your offices to:

- Ensure that the internet, including social media and other digital communication platforms, remains open, accessible, inclusive, and secure across the Federal Republic of Nigeria;
- Publicly assure the people of the Federal Republic of Nigeria that the internet and all social media platforms will be on, and to notify the public of any disruptions;

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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- Order the various ISPs operating in the country to provide quality, secure, freely open internet and inform internet users of any disruptions and work around the clock to fix any identified disruptions likely to impact the quality of service they receive; and
- Ensure the security of protesters and that they will not be surveilled and profiled for retribution.

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

Sincerely,

Access Now

Advocacy Initiative for Development (AID)

African Freedom of Expression Exchange (AFEX)

AfricTivistes

AfroLeadership

Africa Open Data and Internet Research Foundation

AI for the People

African Academic Network on Internet Policy

Alliance for Affordable Internet - A4AI

ASUTIC Senegal

Bloggers of Zambia

BudgIT FoundationBudgIT Foundation

Internet Society, Nigeria Chapter

Center for Advancement of Rights and Democracy (CARD Ethiopia)

Centre for Information Technology and Development

Centre for Legal Support (CLS)

Center for Media Studies and Peacebuilding (CEMESP-Liberia)

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

Common Cause Zambia

Dangerous Speech Project

DefendDefenders

Gambia Cyber Security Alliance

Internet Freedom Foundation

Internet Sans Frontieres (Internet Without Borders)

International Press Centre (IPC)

Jokkolabs Banjul



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Jonction Senegal

L'Association Francophone pour les Droits de l'Homme

Internet Protection Society (Russia)

Equip Africa Integrated Development Initiative

Equip Africa Integrated Development Initiative

Freedom of Expression Hub

Liberia Information Technology Student Union (LITSU)

Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA)

Media Rights Agenda (MRA)

Namibia Media Trust (NMT)

OpenNet Africa

Organization of the Justice Campaign

Paradigm Initiative (PIN)

PEN America

Public and Private Development Centre

Reporters Without Borders (RSF)

RNW Media

SilverChipFoxC

Small Media Foundation

Social Media Exchange (SMEX)

Southeast Asia Freedom of Expression Network (SAFEnet)

TechHerNG

Tierra Común

Ubunteam

Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET)

World Wide Web Foundation

Zaina Foundation