



Fighting Internet Shutdowns around the World

October 29, 2020

#KeepItOn: Open letter on keeping the internet open and secure elections in the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire

Re: Internet access will ensure increased participation and transparency in Côte d'Ivoire presidential elections

Your Excellency Alassane Ouattara, President of the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire

CC:

M. Sidi Tiémoko Touré, Minister of Communication and Media;

Mamado Sanogo, Minister of Digital Economy and Post

Euloge Soro Kipeya, Director General of National Agency for Universal Telecom Services

Bile Diemeleou Gabriel, Directeur General, Autorité de Regulation des Telecommunications

Djibril Ouattara, Chief Executive Officer, MTN Côte d'Ivoire

Ambroise Boni, Director, MOOV Ivory Coast

Mamadou Bamba, Chief Executive Officer, Orange Côte d'Ivoire

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 Alassane Ouattara, to ensure stable and open access to the internet and all other digital communication channels before, during, and after the presidential elections in the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire**, scheduled for October 31, 2020.

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 Côte d'Ivoire the potential 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.

There are reports of incidents of violence and ethnic conflict in the lead up to the elections, notably, of attacks on opposition candidates, and of ethnic clashes and violence during protests among political parties' supporters.

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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Mr President, given the current climate, this exceptional moment in Côte d'Ivoire reinforces the need for your government to ensure the safety and security of the Ivorian people. An internet shutdown or digital communication blackout during these crucial times is likely to endanger more lives, and prevent people from accessing safe havens.

Moreover, the already contested nature of the election, enhanced by the recent announcement by the oppositional candidates of their intention of boycotting the electoral process, highlights the volatility of the political situation in Côte d'Ivoire. There is a need for transparency and accountability during this important national event, and citizens' access to the internet and social media platforms has the potential to contribute significantly to achieving this.

Finally, internet shutdowns during the pandemic will help to spread the virus as people will not be able to access accurate information about the virus and the various precautionary measures being rolled out by the government to keep safe.

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 the concealment of 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 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.

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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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.”

Internet shutdowns contravene national and international laws

Internet shutdowns violate provisions of the national constitution of Côte d'Ivoire 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 Côte d'Ivoire has ratified.

The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights Resolution, ACHPR/Res. 362 (LIX) 2016, recognizes the “importance of the internet in advancing human and people’s rights in Africa, particularly the right to freedom of information and expression.” The ACHPR/Res. 362 (LIX) 2016 also condemns the “emerging practice of State Parties interrupting or limiting access to telecommunication services such as the internet, social media, and messaging services.”⁴ 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.

Telecom companies must respect human rights

Telecom companies and businesses have a responsibility under the *UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights* and the *OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises* to respect human rights, prevent or mitigate potential harms, and provide remedy for harms they cause or contribute to.⁵

Telecom service providers operating in the country have a responsibility to uphold and respect human rights by ensuring that the people of Côte d'Ivoire have access to quality, open and secure internet and digital communication tools throughout the elections and beyond. Internet shutdowns — whether in Côte d'Ivoire or beyond — must never set a precedent, or be allowed to become the new normal, and we encourage you to integrate these practices for responding to censorship and network disruption requests in all markets where you operate.

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 Côte d'Ivoire throughout the elections and beyond. We respectfully request that you use the important positions of your offices to:

⁴ African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, (November 2016) ‘362: Resolution on the Right to Freedom of Information and Expression on the Internet in Africa – ACHPR/Res. 362(LIX) 2016’
<<http://www.achpr.org/sessions/59th/resolutions/362/>>

⁵ See “OECD Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights”,
https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/GuidingPrinciplesBusinessHR_EN.pdf



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- Ensure that the internet, including social media and other digital communication platforms, remains open, accessible, and secure across the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire throughout the elections;
- Order the various internet service providers (ISPs) operating in the country to provide quality, secure, free, and open internet throughout the elections, 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
- Publicly assure the people of the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire that the internet and all social media platforms will be on throughout the election period.

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

Sincerely,

Access Now

Advocacy Initiative for Development (AID)

African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms Coalition (AfDec)

African Freedom of Expression Exchange (AFEX)

Africa Open Data and Internet Research Foundation

Africtivistes

Alliance for Affordable Internet

Bareedo Platform Somalia

Bloggers Association of Kenya (BAKE)

Bloggers of Zambia

Center for Media Studies and Peacebuilding (CEMESP)

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

International Press Centre (IPC)

Iraqi Network for Social Media - INSMnetwork

Liberia Information Technology Student Union (LITSU)

Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA)

Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA)

Namibia Media Trust (NMT)

Organization of the Justice Campaign

OpenNet Africa

Paradigm Initiative (PIN)

Pen Iraq

Reporters without Borders (RSF)

The Tor Project

UBUNTEAM

World Wide Web Foundation

YODET