

US-based OMN TV explores opportunities in Ethiopia

A team of two senior members of the US-based Oromia Media Network (OMN) are en route to Ethiopia in what the media company said was a mission of "exploring logistics and opportunities" to open its branch offices in Ethiopia.



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A management team of two led by Mohammed Abdosh, deputy director for operations, are "on the way to Ethiopia as of now", according to Jawar Mohammed, executive director of OMN. "While we are aware of the potential challenges of operating from the ground by opening up branch offices, we want to explore opportunities based on the recent encouraging developments," Jawar told *Addis Standard* in an email interview.

In a speech delivered to a public gathering in Hawassa, the capital of the southern regional state, on April 26, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed said Ethiopian media organisations based abroad can relocate their offices and operate from within Ethiopia.

The Prime Minister made the remark as part of his administration's efforts to loosen up the current restrictive space for independent and critical media organisations. In a recent separate remark, the Prime Minister also said media plurality was an essential element of improving professionalism.

OMN board of directors responded to the Prime Minister's speech in Hawassa, stating three conditions that would make it impossible for the media organisation to relocate and operate from within Ethiopia. One of which was the pending terrorism

charges against OMN and the criminal charges against Jawar Mohammed. Both have since been discontinued.

The second was the six months state of emergency. But in its regular meeting yesterday, the Council of Ministers has approved a draft law that lifts the current state of emergency pending the parliament's approval.

Draconian media laws

In a statement released on May 31, OMN board of directors said, "We are encouraged that charges of violating the Anti-Terrorism Law of 2009 brought against the OMN and its executive director, Jawar Mohammed, were dropped on May 29, 2018. While we await the lifting of this unconstitutional and unnecessary law, we interpret this legal action as meaning one of our conditions were met."

The statement also said, "The Press Law currently in effect in Ethiopia does not allow freedom of speech and the unencumbered flow of ideas", and called for "a swift parliamentary action to repeal the current law and replace it with one that allows for free press and free expression."

Jawar Mohammed said despite no change to that end, OMN was "hopeful that the current administration will take the call to heart and consider to repeal such a draconian media law that made the progress of independent media in Ethiopia nearly impossible."

Asked if OMN has set a date to open its branch offices and begin operations from Ethiopia anytime soon, Jawar said they were taking "one step at a time".

Established in 2012, OMN is licensed under the US Federal Communications Commission. It is "governed by a Board of Trustees, an Executive Council, and an independent editorial team made up of professional journalists", according to a statement on its website.

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