

Controversy as *Kenya Today* newspaper closes shop

The weekly government newspaper *Kenya Today*, which was jointly published by the departments of Information and Communications, ceased operations on Friday, 16 December 2011, three years after it was launched.

The more than 60 employees who are owed salary arrears were sent home indefinitely without pay.

A memo signed by acting director of Information, Olewe Owiti, addressed to the employees said the paper had been closed with immediate effect following termination of a contract with Times Media Group (TMG), the company that published the now defunct Kanu-owned *Kenya Times* newspaper. Owiti said the contract with TMG was terminated on November 4.

The paper's offices at Postbank's eight floor were shut by a team from the ministry of Information as the employees waited anxiously for Owiti to address them in vain. The paper has been embroiled in controversy after the former director of Information, Ezekiel Mutua, hired a private firm to offer management services.

Wrangles and tension

The closure of the paper, which was launched to articulate the government's development policies, marked yet another chapter in the wrangles and tension that have plagued the department since Mutua's interdiction three months ago following an audit query on the awarding of the contract to TMG, a company owned by Andrew Sunkuli.

The company had won a tender to offer editorial services for the publication. Employees were asked to hand over government property in their possession and await payment of their dues "in due course".

TMG presided over the death of the *Kenya Times* newspaper over alleged mismanagement and non-payment of salaries. (Read: [Court now winds up 'Kenya Times' publisher](#))

The contract had raised eyebrows because it was not sanctioned by the ministry's permanent secretary, Dr Bitange Ndemo, and the attorney-general as is the requirement for all government contracts. The contract became the subject of an investigation when the firm failed to pay salaries in June despite cash being remitted by the government.

Apart from editorial services, TMG was also mandated to offer marketing and distribution services besides managing the payroll of the 60 employees, most of whom were recommended for employment by Mutua. It is now alleged that some "ghost" employees were being paid while genuine staff went without pay and employment contracts in contravention of labour laws.

With time, TMG defaulted on its obligations, marking the beginning of a long dispute with employees. The employees have

been on a go-slow in the past two months as they demanded salary arrears.

The closure came as a shock to them as they had held on to their jobs in the hope the ministry would sort out their pay arrears as promised by Owiti recently.

Contacted, the information minister, Samuel Poghiso, said he had ordered a probe into the issue, adding that a lot of things had gone wrong since the award of the contract.

"I have ordered investigations into the contract and an audit on the operations of Kenya Today. It was so messy and we could not let the situation continue as it involved taxpayers' money," he said.

The minister said the move to cease operations would allow proper and thorough investigations into the matter and subsequent reorganisation of the paper's management to meet its intended objectives.

He said that Mutua's suspension was partly linked to *Kenya Today's* operations and sought to assure Kenyans that the paper will not wind up. The minister said staff will be paid their dues after investigations. In an internal audit ordered by Mr Poghiso, the ministry seeks to establish who the beneficiaries of funds generated through the paper were.

Defended awarding

On his part, Mutua defended the awarding of the TMG contract, saying everything was done above board.

"The PS is the accounting officer and whatever the rest of the ministry's officers do is a delegated duty," he said.

He added that he was not to blame for the non-payment of staff salaries as he does not have authority to incur expenditure. Curiously, last Wednesday, Mutua was among speakers at a Media Council breakfast at the Hilton Hotel despite his being on suspension.

Poghiso maintains that Mutua is under interdiction and cannot conduct the ministry's official affairs. Mutua is a former secretary-general of the Kenya Union of Journalists.

Source: allAfrica.com

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