

The Perennial Tragedy of Democracy: Attacks on Freedom of Expression in Liberia 2006-2007

*Published by: Center for Media Studies & Peace Building (CEMESP)
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ABOUT CEMESP

Center for Media Studies & Peace Building (CEMESP)

The Center for Media Studies and Peace Building (CEMESP) was founded in 2000 in appreciation of the practical problems that undermine unfettered media practice and free speech in conflict situations and peace processes, and the need to strengthen their work through the development of capacity to understand, anticipate, plan and forecast holistic solutions to conflicts. CEMESP is managed by an Executive Director and staff, which receive policy advice from a Board of Directors.

CEMESP's work targets institutions that are actively involved in the search for peace and helping to solve Liberia's development problems as a way of preventing a relapse into conflict.

CEMESP has supported the institutional development of the media (both traditional and modern) in the area of peace building and conflict resolution mechanisms. The center has developed a training manual and conducted training for nearly 500 journalists, traditional communicators and local leaders across the country in the areas of media, peace building, ICT and development.

With the support of UNESCO, CEMESP has recently launched an online media documentation center www.liberianmedia.org (now www.cemesp-liberia.org) for Liberia. Among other things, the center reports regularly on the attacks on free expression and press freedom in country.

Through the Executive Director, CEMESP coordinates the Working Group of the Liberia Media Law and Policy Reform Process.

Research and Advocacy

Following the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement for Liberia in Accra, Ghana, (August 2003), CEMESP undertook a survey to gauge the level of public perception about the participation of the Liberian media in the implementation of the peace accord by nominating a junior minister to the transitional government.

CEMESP has also developed a directory of Liberia's media practitioners and institutions, on behalf of PANOS Institute West Africa, and a detailed country report of community radios in Liberia, on behalf of the World Association of Community Radios (AMARC). CEMESP has also done a research on religious broadcasting, on behalf of PANOS.

Advocacy

Active in Media Development Clearing House (Liberia)

Membership with Press Union of Liberia, West African Journalists Association, International Freedom of Expression eXchange (IFEX) (2006)

Training

As part of its role in improving the capacity of the Liberian media, CEMESP has hosted a number of training workshops with support from and in collaboration with various organizations. These included:

Sports Writers Association of Liberia - Provision of peace building skills for sports reporters. (2003)

National Endowment for Democracy (2007) Six-week Training Course for Beginner journalists and Six-week Training Course for Media Mangers

UNESCO (2007): Leadership Workshop for Female Journalists

Norwegian Fund for Human Rights (2007): Media workshops on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

In addition, CEMESP has assisted a number of local journalists to benefit from media fellowships in Ghana, Senegal, South Africa, Ethiopia and Nigeria among others. The issues in which they trained have been ICT, peace building, HIV/AIDS, digital designing/ newspaper lay out, etc.

Partners/Consultancy

Secretariat, Liberia Media Law and Policy Reform Process

World Association of Community Radio (AMARC)

Institute of Applied Media Sciences(Zurich)

International Freedom of eXpression Exchange(IFEX); West African Civil Society Forum; Conference of NGOs in Consultative Status with United Nations(ONGO);

UNESCO, Article XIX & Panos Institute West Africa (Dakar)

Center for Media Studies & Peace Building (CEMESP)

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**Fofana Building
Benson Street, Off Lynch Street
Adjacent, Defense Ministry Annex
P.O. Box 3480
Monrovia, Liberia
Tel: +231-6-514357
E-mail: cemesp@cemesp-liberia.org
centerforpeacebuilding@yahoo.com**

Website: www.cemesp-liberia.org

Foreword

The publication this year of a catalogue of attacks on the media and free expression in Liberia by the Center for Media Studies & Peace Building (CEMESP) is a turning point in the increase in advocacy against the right of freely express oneself. This provides the public an idea of the troubles the media is confronted with in ensuring that factual and situational effects upon news and information gathering and dissemination. Too often sentiments, opinions, innuendoes and sheer ignorance have impacted upon the news we hear.

The disappointment of the media in all of these is that years after hordes of press freedom and human rights activists insisted upon the right to freely express oneself, and even after much effort have been made towards establishing a government premised on human rights and democracy, the media and free expression remains under threat. On an average of one incident every two weeks, government officials, more frequently than private citizens and corporate actors, are threatening, assaulting and attempting to stop media personnel from performing their responsibilities.

While more arguments would be proffered against the threats, censorship and violent actions from government actors, it has been a lot more frustrating when civil society actors also make themselves instruments for molesting the press. What this has taught is the sad reality that the populace in general remains largely intolerant and ignorant of the law and the universally guaranteed right to freedom of expression.

This publication is thus an opportunity to provide the facts, issues and statistics about the fight to ensure that Liberians take advantage of the right to fully participate in the national dialogue to keep our country on track. It is also meant to provoke better public understanding in the concept of free expression.

Further to this, and to provide an opportunity for others to appreciate the right that each person has to freely express themselves, CEMESP proposes to launch a new campaign aimed at garnering popular understanding of freedom of expression. In this arrangement, there would be lesser attacks on the media and other forms of expressions, merely on grounds of disagreements. It is thus our hope that the issues raised here will stimulate increased public understanding, and promote their resolution to stand against those who resent free expression.

K. Abdullai Kamara
Chairman,
Center for Media Studies & Peace Building
December 27, 2007

INTRODUCTION

For the last two years, the Center for Media Studies & Peace Building (CEMESP) has been seeking to promote issues in the Liberian media, including those that impact the freedom of the media and ordinary citizens to express themselves as they see fit. This has involved a variety of activities, including improved training services, increased professionalism, as well as improvement of the regulatory environment within which the media operates. Such attempts to make the public much more aware of circumstances in the media have culminated in the introduction of daily reports about popular appreciation and disaffection for the media.

With the support of the International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX), the United Nations Educational Scientific & Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), CEMESP assumed the responsibility of alerting the world about attacks on the media. We have furthered this by posting the alerts on the IFEX and CEMESP internet sites. For the majority of Liberians, who may not be in the best position to read these alerts by way of the internet or in one location, the publication of this catalogue will provide a deeper understanding of the issues.

That violent and unlawful attacks on the media have persisted, even under a regime said to have come to power upon democratic credentials is a tragedy that needs to be stopped before it gets worse. This is the situation that we intend to correct at CEMESP.

Aside from the direct actions against the media, whether as threats, censorship and sheer brutality, we have also included in this catalogue observations from select media practitioners on the state of free expression in Liberia. It is our further anticipation that these discussions will provide further clarifications to readers and other interested parties about the extent to which the media has come under opposition.

This catalogue begins from April 2006 and basically includes alerts initially issued by CEMESP. Those issued from other sources are accordingly cited.

While we see the catalogue as a guide about attacks on the media, we also anticipate engaging a more physical campaign on public understanding of this fundamental right. We believe that such situations would only be corrected if the public understand and appreciate freedom of expression as a right that should not and cannot be enjoined.

Malcolm W. Joseph
Executive Director
Center for Media Studies & Peace Building (CEMESP)
December 22, 2007

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27 April 2006

Oil Company Director Sues “The Telegraph” For Defamation

(CEMESP/IFEX) - The sixth judicial Circuit court in Monrovia has summoned the management of one of Liberia’s weekly newspapers, “The Telegraph”.

The Court’s summons follows a libel lawsuit filed against the newspaper by the Managing Director of the Liberia Petroleum Refinery Company (LPRC), Harry Greaves. Director Greaves is a member of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf’s inner circle.

According to the writ of summons issued on 26 April 2006, the Court ordered the newspaper’s Managing Editor Adolphus Karnuah to appear before it to answer to the petition of plaintiff Greaves. The writ further indicates that upon failure of “The Telegraph” to make its appearance, judgment by default will be rendered.

The lawsuit comes in the wake of what Greaves referred to as defamatory statements published by “The Telegraph” on 13 April, in an article entitled, “Greaves, LPRC, Telegraph Draw Battle Lines -A case of Witch hunt”.

The newspaper reported quoting Director Greaves as threatening not to interact or do business with the paper.

Greaves is claiming \$US 1 million in compensation in his claim that the publication injured his reputation, integrity and exposed him to public scandal and embarrassment; this amount, if rewarded, will obviously cost the newspaper its survival, thereby limiting free _expression in Liberia.

“The Telegraph” is to be represented by Adolphus Karnuah and is scheduled to appear before the courts before 6 May.

Counselor John Caranda of the Caranda and Sons Law firm is representing the legal interest of the LPRC Managing Director, while Adolphus Karnuah, who graduated from law school two months ago, is quoted, as saying his entity, The Telegraph”, cannot afford to pay for legal representation.

1 June 2006

State-owned Broadcaster Suppresses Journalists’ Independence

SOURCE: Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA), Accra

(MFWA/IFEX) - On 17 May 2006, the Liberian Broadcasting System (LBS), the state-owned broadcaster, ordered its journalists to seek clearance prior to broadcasting “corruption allegations” against government officials and other top personalities.

A memorandum signed by Benjamin N.Tangay, Assistant Director General for News and Public Affairs (ADG), warned that editorial staff had to channel all such stories through his office for clearance.

The statement further cautioned that, “Any reporter or newscaster’s failure to adhere to this reminder will leave the office of the ADG with no alternative but to institute stern administrative measure(s) against violator(s).” The memorandum, copied to the station’s Director General and the Deputy Director General for Broadcasting, noted that “LBS news bulletins are Not [a] courtroom for prosecuting government officials and other Personalities in society.”

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"Hence, all controversial stories of corruption allegations leveled against such persons will, hereafter, not be allowed to form part of our news, unless such stories pass through the clearing house and must also meet my expressed approval," the statement noted.

The MFWA is concerned that the memorandum may lead to censorship, considering the vagueness of the words ". . . all controversial stories of corruption . . ." in it, which could easily be abused by the authorities. As well, the MFWA notes that the memo has been issued at a time when major legislative reforms are underway to transform the state-owned broadcaster into a public service entity that is independent of government control.

This implies that the most important criterion for determining whether or not a story should go on air or not is the public interest and not the image of any official or personality.

In April, a consultative forum proposed legislative reforms to the State media, to transform it into an independent, non-partisan national Public broadcaster.

12 June 2006

Journalist Injured By Bodyguards, Prevented From Interviewing President

(CEMESP/IFEX) - On 8 June 2006, officers of the Special Security Service (SSS) and a United States Secret Service Agent assigned to protect Liberia's President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf manhandled some journalists, leaving one with a neck injury and the loss of his mobile phone.

The incident occurred at Liberia's International Airport following the arrival of President Sirleaf from a visit to Switzerland, when a staff member of President Sirleaf's Public Affairs office, Mr. Pacify Raffel, informed the journalists that the President would only talk to three of the eight media institutions represented at the airport.

Mr. Raffel named SKY FM Radio, government-run Liberia Broadcasting System and the pro-government "Daily Observer" newspaper as the media institutions the president wanted to talk to.

This prompted the rest of the journalists to insist on their right to interview the president.

In the midst of their insistence, one of President Sirleaf's US Secret Service bodyguards arrived at the scene and violently pushed the journalists away.

During the scuffle, according to journalist Jallah Grafiefield, he sustained a neck injury and lost his mobile phone.

14 June 2006

Presidential Bodyguards Detain And Harass Four Journalists

(CEMESP/IFEX) - On 13 June 2006, four local journalists were harassed and briefly detained at Liberia's State House, the Executive Mansion, by security personnel.

Journalists Abas Dulleh of the "New Democrat" newspaper, Patrick Honnah of Truth FM radio, Orlando Zeongar of "Heritage" Newspaper and Jallah Grayfield of the Catholic Radio Veritas were ordered detained by Deputy Special Security Service (SSS) Director Ashford Peal for attempting to authenticate reports of alleged dismissal of five senior SSS personnel.

The presidential bodyguards claimed that the journalists went beyond their limit by photographing a notice board at the Executive Mansion. The notice board had on it a memorandum dismissing five senior personnel of the SSS.

Though the Chief of Office staff in the Office of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Morris Dukuly, was quoted later as apologizing to the journalists, the management of the Catholic-run Radio Veritas has threatened a news block-out on the Government of Liberia if security personnel continue to harass and intimidate its reporters.

Radio Veritas says security personnel at the Executive Mansion and at Liberia's International Airport have subjected two of its reporters, George Watkins and Jallah Grayfield, to abuses, respectively, within the last two weeks.

23 August 2006

Presidency Threatens To Exclude Media Outlets From Coverage

(CEMESP/IFEX) -The Executive Mansion, the seat of Liberia 's presidency, has announced that it is considering the option of selecting specific media institutions to provide media coverage.

Presidential Press Secretary Cyrus Badio made the disclosure on 21 August 2006 at a news briefing in Monrovia.

He said he is also contemplating limiting press briefings from President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf to the issuance of press statements to avoid what he called "distortions."

Mr. Badio claimed that the level of distortions was diverting the public's attention from the primary messages coming from the president's office.

He then threatened to take remedial action if media outlets continue, in his estimation, misinterpreting the office of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.

The presidential spokesman however fell short of naming the media institutions involved in his allegations of misquotations.

Mr. Badio some time ago threatened to revoke the accreditation of representatives of some media institutions assigned to the office of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.

28 August 2006

Journalist Beaten By Rioting University Students

(CEMESP/IFEX) - On 25 August 2006, students at the University of Liberia assaulted a Liberian journalist who attempted to photograph scenes of rioting on the university's main campus in Monrovia.

Journalist Robert Jadeo of the "New Vision" newspaper also had his Digital camera damaged by the students, who were angered that he took a photograph of a student injured in the riot.

Angry students chased several other journalists who had gone to the scene to cover the riot off the campus.

To protest a new registration procedure, University of Liberia students had blocked the entrances to the campus to prevent the institution's Administration from entering.

Meanwhile, the umbrella organization representing journalists and media Institutions, the Press Union of Liberia (PUL), has expressed outrage over the beating of Jadoe by the students.

In a complaint addressed to Martin Kolar, Acting President of the University of Liberia Student Union, the PUL called for an immediate investigation into the attack on the journalist.

The PUL says it will institute measures that will guarantee Journalists' safety if the student union fails to address the issue.

4 September 2006

Minister Threatens Libel Suit Against Newspaper

(CEMESP/IFEX) -"The News" newspaper, one of Liberia's leading dailies, has been threatened with a lawsuit by Liberia's Assistant Finance Minister, Aletha Browne.

Assistant Minister Browne, in her communications to the management of "The News", threatened to file a legal action against the newspaper for Defamation.

The Assistant Minister's threat followed an article published in the 30 August 2006 edition of "The News", entitled "Checks Scam at Finance Ministry".

The newspaper reported the disappearance of almost one hundred cheques at the Ministry of Finance. The cheques were intended to pay the Salaries of some employees in the Liberian Government.

The assistant minister, who admitted that the Newspaper prior to the publication of the story contacted her described the article as "trash" and maintained that she would sue the newspaper because her version on the alleged cheques scan was not published in detail.

The management of the newspaper, represented by Managing Editor Sheriff Adams says it stands by the story.

11 September 2006

Government Cancels Radio Talk Show; Programme Host Receives Death Threat

(CEMESP/IFEX) - On 10 September 2006, local government authorities of Margibi County in rural Liberia ordered the cancellation of a talk show on local community radio station Radio Kakata in Kakata, Margibi County.

According to the local government authorities, the show was called off because of the tension that is brewing between supporters of the Congress for Democratic Change (CDC) party of George Weah and the ruling Unity party of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.

The two parties are featuring two candidates in a run-off by-election in Margibi County scheduled for 12 September.

The CDC had booked airtime on the local radio station, but wanted an extension of the airtime, which would have run into the time booked by the Unity party.

This led to the cancellation of the radio talk show and the deployment of police officers by Margibi County authorities to the radio station, to prevent the host from proceeding with the show.

The programme host, who is also station manager of Radio Kakata, Cris Karjou, said a group of men later walked into the radio station and issued threats against his life.

11 September 2006

Opposition Politician Threatens Legal Action Against Newspaper

(CEMESP/IFEX) - An opposition politician of the Liberia Action Party, Counselor Varney Sherman, has threatened to take "The Analyst" Newspaper, one of Liberia's dailies, to court.

Sherman says he will sue the newspaper for publishing his photograph in a story captioned "Opposition Parties Sponsor Isakaba."

"Isakaba" is the term used to refer to groups of armed gangs who have, in recent times, carried out a series of armed robberies on peaceful Citizens in Liberia.

The story, published in the 8 September 2006 edition of "The Analyst", Quoted a 6 September press statement from the organization Youth for The Promotion of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf Administration (YOPMEJOSA) as Claiming that the 20 defeated political parties in the 2005 presidential elections in Liberia were using their supporters to sabotage the Sirleaf Administration.

Sherman, who served as standard bearer for the Coalition for the Transformation of Liberia (COTOL in the 2005 Presidential elections, told Reporters, following a program on the main campus of the University of Liberia, that he would sue "The Analyst", saying: "Just know that we will meet in court; my men will meet you in court soon; I am not joking about this."

The Managing Editor of "The Analyst", Stanley Seakor, says he was taken aback by the threat from Sherman.

Seakor says it is unfortunate that the politician would resolve to take the whistleblowers, and not the challenger, to court.

"The Analyst" says that, while it had some doubts about the veracity of the allegation leveled against the opposition politicians by YOPMEJOSA, it was compelled by its social responsibility to publish the Information.

12 September 2006

Journalists Reject Committee Report On Beating Of Journalists By State Security Personnel

****Updates CEMESP/IFEX alert of 14 June 2006;**

(CEMESP/IFEX) - The Special Presidential Committee set-up to investigate the allegations of beatings of several journalists by officers of the Special Security Service at Executive Mansion, the seat of Liberia's presidency, has released its report.

The five-member committee, which was chaired by Deputy Information Minister Elizabeth Hoff, was constituted in June 2006 by President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, following a protest letter from the Press Union of Liberia to the Liberian government complaining of constant attacks by Security personnel on journalists performing their official duties.

According to the report, the affected journalists met with the Committee to provide their testimony on the allegations. However, four of the journalists involved - Patrick Honnah of Truth FM, Abbas Dulley of the

“New Democrat” newspaper, Jallah Grayfields of Radio Veritas, and Olando Zeongar of “The Heritage” newspaper - described the report as bogus.

They argued, in a 5 September interview that the committee failed to invite them to its hearings.

According to the committee’s report, the security personnel involved were approached individually for testimony, due to the nature of their Work.

The committee further made several recommendations, including regular interaction between journalists and security personnel, toward ensuring a cordial relationship between members of the two professions, and the replacement of journalists’ equipment damaged by state security personnel among others.

29 September 2006

Ruling Party Threatens Action Against “Opposition” Journalists

(CEMESP/IFEX) - The chairman of the ruling Unity Party of Liberia, Dr. Charles Clarke, has threatened to take actions against journalists who he claims are “card carrying member of opposition political parties”.

Clarke made the comments during a radio talk show on the local radio Station, Star Radio, on 26 September 2006.

However, he fell short of stating what actions he intends to take against the journalists.

The government of Liberia and journalists, especially the Press Union Of Liberia, have had uneasy relations recently.

President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf had accused the Liberian media of being Irresponsible and unprofessional, and the Press Union of Liberia had responded that the president was frustrated that news reports were not Supportive of her policies (see alert of 4 September 2006).

19 October 2006

Journalist Badly Beaten By Police While Covering The Abuse Of Detained Rioters

(CEMESP/IFEX) - On 13 October 2006, a senior radio producer at a Community radio station in Grand Gedeh County, southeastern Liberia, was badly beaten by four officers of the Liberia National Police on assignment with the county’s police detachment. The policemen beat journalist Edmond Garley of Smile FM while covering the 13 October riot that resulted from the death of a cyclist in the county’s administrative headquarters in Zwedru. Garley had gone to the local police station to cover the arrest of several rioters, but was ordered by Detachment Commander Anthony Wilson to vacate the premises.

According to Garley, as he was walking out of the station, four police officers, allegedly acting orders of their commander, followed him and attacked him.

Garley said the policemen punched him in the jaw while shoving him to the ground, then kicked him and hit him twice on the chest with a heavy stick. According to reports, the incident took place in the presence of the Acting Superintendent of Grand Gedeh County, Tally Dweh.

When contacted, Dweh confirmed that the journalist had been beaten. Garley told CEMESP’s contact in Grand Gedeh County that he was beaten because the police did not want him to report on the inhumane treatment that was being meted out against the rioters taken to the police station.

He further stated that another police officer, identified only as “Beh”, called his radio station by mobile phone the next night, claiming that Garley was beaten because of what the caller referred to as “negative reports” about the police broadcast by the radio station.

Wilson, who denied that his men beat the broadcaster, did confirm that he ordered the journalist to vacate the police station because, according to Wilson, on numerous occasions Smile FM covered stories involving the police in a “one-sided” fashion.

Meanwhile, Dweh has confirmed that the journalist filed a formal complaint with his office. He promises that a full investigation will be conducted into the matter.

OBSERVATIONS ABOUT PRESS FREEDOM IN LIBERIA

3 May 2007

In Observance Of World Press Freedom Day, CEMESP Urges Government To Improve Relations With Media

(CEMESP/IFEX) - The following is a 2 May 2007 CEMESP statement in Observance of Press Freedom Day:

CEMESP NUDGES GOVT TO IMPROVE RELATIONS WITH MEDIA

Monrovia, May 2, 2007 - The Center for Media Studies & Peace Building (CEMESP) has called upon the Government of Liberia to make more efforts towards respecting the rights of journalists to freely report in line with their conscience.

In a statement issued in commemoration of World Press Freedom Day, CEMESP expressed its belief that now ought to be the best time for the people of Liberia to benefit from the fullest extent of freedom of the press, considering the democratic mandate upon which the current government came to power.

CEMESP, which is the only Liberian member of the International Freedom of Expression exchange (IFEX), regretted that the latest monitoring of press freedom around the world shows a declining standard in Liberia in respect for press freedom and free expression.

CEMESP noted that since the last press freedom day, there have been more than 20 attacks on the press through various means, including an increasing number of threats of lawsuits by public officials, censorship and suspensions at the state-owned Liberia Broadcasting System and numerous assaults on journalists. Also reported over the year were cases of illegal detention and harassment, threats of exclusion from public functions, death threats from anonymous sources and the now controversial closure of the Independent Newspaper.

CEMESP regrets that these attacks were meted out against the press by several groups and actors, especially and including government functionaries, ruling party fanatics, opposition politicians, security personnel, as well as sports personalities and student protesters, and regards all of these vices as a betrayal of the Liberian people's quest for democracy, which must necessarily be corrected.

CEMESP then challenged the government to stand up for its belief in freedom of expression, and to take appropriate actions against officials who have been found culpable of threatening, abusing and assaulting journalists in the line of duty.

On efforts being made for the improvement of press freedom in Liberia, CEMESP is also calling for increased participation and efforts by the government to enhance the media law reform process, especially with regard to the passage of the freedom of information act and the transformation of the Liberia Broadcasting System into a public service broadcaster.

On the international scene, CEMESP has joined calls for the immediate release of BBC Reporter Alan Johnston, who has been in secret captivity for more than 50 days. CEMESP sees the unlawful detention of Mr. Johnston as an attack on the civilized world's plan to expose the problems in Palestine in order for people of goodwill to help bring peace to that part of the world.

Meanwhile, CEMESP has challenged journalists, other media personnel and believers in democracy to see the observance of World Press Freedom Day as an opportunity to renew their belief in freedom of expression and to stand up for democracy in Liberia.

Malcolm W. Joseph
Executive Director

WAN, WEF PROTEST INTIMIDATION OF JOURNALIST

15 March 2007

**Madam Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
President, The Republic of Liberia
The Executive Mansion
Monrovia, Liberia**

Your Excellency,

We are writing on behalf of the World Association of Newspapers and the World Editors Forum, which represent 18,000 publications in 102 Countries, to express our serious concern at the closure of The Independent newspaper and intimidation of its publisher Sam Dean.

According to reports, on 20 February The Independent published explicit photographs of Presidential Affairs Minister Willis Knuckles engaged in sexual acts with two women. Following publication of the photographs,

Mr. Knuckles resigned and apologized. Solicitor-General Tiawan Gongloe and Colonel Stephen

Zoegazor, however, declared Mr. Dean a “wanted man and fugitive” and the government began what appears to be a campaign of harassment against the newspaper and Mr. Dean.

On 27 February the government revoked the newspaper’s publishing License for one year and the police closed its offices. At a press conference the Information Minister also told the business community not to do business with the paper. According to reports, after being harassed by police and receiving death threats, Mr. Dean has gone into hiding.

While the publication of sexually explicit photos is controversial, the investigation of public officials is a legitimate and essential responsibility of newspapers. We respectfully remind you that closing the Independent and harassing Mr. Dean constitutes a clear breach of the Right of expression, which is guaranteed by numerous international conventions, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Article 19 of the Declaration states: “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes the freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media, regardless of frontiers.”

We respectfully call on you to lift the arbitrary ban on The Independent and end the harassment of Mr. Dean. We urge you to ensure that in future your country fully respects international standards of freedom of expression.

We look forward to hearing from you at your earliest convenience.

Yours sincerely,

**Gavin O’Reilly
President
World Association of Newspapers**

**George Brock
President, World Editors Forum**

LIBERIA'S MEDIA & THE CHALLENGES IN UPHOLDING PRESS FREEDOM

By Frank B. Sainworla, Jr.
Asst. Station Manager/RADIO VERITAS
& Former Sec. General

June 17, 2007

In this era of change, democratization and the thirst for peace in our region of the world, press freedom is indispensable. Freedom of the press and expression are in-separable ingredients to propel national development.

Although they are our rights, freedom of the press and expression cannot be achieved on a silver platter. In our country, Liberia and yea other countries in Africa and the larger world, experiences have shown that press freedom has a high price tag. Even when it is won, its preservation has a price tag that is even more astronomical. Indeed, there is a serious need not only to make gains in obtaining press freedom, but to jealously guard it and nurture it at all times.

A Western diplomat in Monrovia said sometime ago when the Liberian press was battling clamp down by government, "the ultimate price of press freedom is eternal vigilance." If we (Liberian and Africa's media practitioners) are to actualize and sustain press freedom, we must be prepared to face up to the numerous challenges that lie ahead. Certainly but sadly, some great West African Journalists like Liberia's own Charles Gbenyon, Nigeria's Dele Giwa, Nibert Zongo of Burkina Faso and others had to pay the ultimate price for this freedom and they are no longer around today.

They are more, but the cause to which they so firmly stood will continue to serve as an inspiration to all African Journalists as the most secure way for the political leaderships to give freedom of the press and expression a chance. And the time to do so is now, not tomorrow or the day after.

Political, security and socio-economic realities in this 21st century epitomizes the need to intensify our peaceful struggle for press freedom and free speech. To be a Journalist, one must have the gust to withstand all forms of persecution in the discharge of one's noble duty to serve the interest of the people by giving voice to the voiceless—to inform and educate them.

Journalists become targets of physical and mental assaults, intimidation and even torture and threats to their lives not only from political actors and state security agents, but from anti-press elements outside the corridors of power. For example in Liberia, even though the Taylor regime took its exit few years back, Journalists tasted some of these experiences just months ago. Statistics media watch groups catalogue more than a dozen cases of attacks on the press during this post-elections era.

This explains the truism of the expression, "the ultimate price of press freedom is eternal vigilance."

The question then arises, is the struggle for press freedom worth the immense risk and fatal end as was the fate of Journalists like Nibert Zongo? I say the answer is yes, the battle for press freedom has just begun and the struggle for free speech has got to continue. In spite of the threats, intimidation and harassment, we (media practitioners) have a moral and professional obligation to perform our media roles consciously in defense of press freedom.

Threading this press freedom path means anything is possible and that the worst should be expected. What matters is not the risk or challenges, but our ability to surmount these challenges. To successfully do this, we must pool our resources together and be our brothers' keepers. A threat to press freedom in one media

outlet, one county or one sub-regional state should be a threat to press freedom at all media houses and all states.

Let it be known that as the mirror of society, the press is not the sole stakeholder in the serious business of press freedom and free expression. The civil society (the people) too have a responsibility to ensure the realization of and sustenance of press freedom in our society. They are expected to show solidarity and not exhibit apathy in the unending quest for a free and democratic society.

In many instances, the press/Journalists are left alone when they are clamped down upon by governments. Most often than not, it's only one or two groups or individuals that come up in defense of the press when press freedom is bound and gagged. As the press is the conduit for channeling the people's views/opinions, there can logically be no freedom of expression without press freedom. As often said: "We are in this boat together."

By the way realizing the enormous challenges, the press in post-war Liberia have therefore been tirelessly trying to maintain their vigilance in the face of threats and harassment, often being branded as either "opposition friends," dissident journalists/newspapers, "etc.

Let me restate that press freedom cannot be gained on a silver platter. For example in post-war Liberia although the constitution guarantees press freedom and free speech, yet there are from time to time attempts by some government functionaries to tamper with this provision. Article 15 of the Liberian constitution states: "Every person shall have the right to freedom of expression, being fully responsible for the abuse thereof. This right shall not be curtailed, restricted or enjoined by government save during an emergency declared in accordance with the constitution."

A point to note here is that despite the existence of the constitutional/legal guarantee for press freedom, the whole process can be defeated when there isn't the political will to make such provision work. Many, many governments on the continent and around the world tend to give lip service to allowing press freedom to reign. But it will only be realized through the fortitude of the press.

CEMESP/LMC Want Banning Order of the "Independent" Reversed

(February 27, 2007, Monrovia) The Center for Media Studies & Peace Building (CEMESP) and the Liberia Media Center have observed with grave regrets and deplores in the fiercest terms the action of the acting Minister of Information, revoking the accreditation of the Independent Newspaper, and is calling for the decision to be promptly overturned.

This action violates three portions of the Liberian constitution, including The Independent's right to free expression; Article 15 sections a, b and e of the Liberian Constitution which decries any withdrawal of rights and privileges unless as a outcome of a hearing before a court of competent jurisdiction; and has effectively trounced due process of law.

In separate letters addressed to the Acting Minister of Information and the Minister of Justice, CEMESP/LMC said why they would not condone prurient display of pornography, they however recognize the right of individuals to freely express themselves on issues, as they see fit. Furthermore, the circumstance that gave rise to the publication was of a grievous national nature, and there needed to be some ways of getting the public to understand its gravity.

Until a court of law makes a determination, CEMESP/LMC would see this position by the government as a means of avenging the "defeat" the government received in the court of public opinion, by the compulsion to see Knuckles resigned.

The government must be keen of the requirements of democracy and due process, and refrain from such actions of harassing and intimidating journalists, who have simply been messengers of the public.

The statement by CEMESP and the LMC called on the President to unconditionally reverse the decision, noting that the action undermines freedom of the press and poses a direct threat to freedom of expression.

It is worth reminding the government and the public that past leaders, who became known as predators of the press, earned their terror stripes, one day at a time, and we do not think; neither do we believe that this module should be relived.

We are also reminded that at the end of 2006, international media watchdogs noted Liberia among unfriendly places for the press. This was in the wake of democratic elections, where people are expected to enjoy such fundamental freedoms as free expression, free association, due process of law, among others.

CEMESP/LMC said in the event government fails to reverse the ban, it will consider possible legal action to compel compliance.

At the same time both media institutions have renewed their call on government to promptly investigate and prosecute the perpetrator of the indecent, amoral and lascivious act, former Presidential Affairs Minister Willie Knuckles.

Signed: _____
Lawrence Randall
Executive Director
Liberia Media Center
2316400206

Malcolm Joseph
Executive Director
Center for Media Studies and Peace Building
2316514357

THE IMPERATIVES OF FREE EXPRESSIONS IN DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE MEDIA IN A DEMOCRATIC LIBERIA

Perhaps I should begin my input into this process by extending gratitude to the organizers of this for emphasizing the necessity for freedom of speech and the press in this quest to build media relations in the democracy building process of our country. Before going ahead, let me hasten to clarify that the opinions being expressed here are personal, and should in no way be linked to International Alert and the Liberia Media Project, who are my employers. I would further note that both International Alert and the local member organizations of the Liberia Media Project hold firm beliefs in the universality of human rights, including the now contested freedoms of speech and press. Their positions on this matter may be quite general and could be somehow different from mine. On the other hand, my opinions, guided by reference, are in respect to my long participation in the cause for human rights and democracy, along with my vested interests in the institution of these lofty ideals in our dear country.

My dear colleagues, this forum could not have been organized at a time better than this, when our long cherished ideals of democracy and the rule of law, and especially those pertaining to the inevitable freedom of expression, do not seem to have any more virtues.

These freedoms, despite their being fundamental to democracy anywhere, are often overlooked and ignored by those in authority. This regrettably applies to the current regime in Liberia, irrespective of the democracy building credentials that brought it to office. This is quite paradoxical, given that the current regime relied on lots of democratic prepositions to eventually gain power. But the tragedy in this is really because those who were iron fisted in challenging previous regimes on account of their disrespect and ignorance of these fundamental rights are today the stalwarts in the disregard for the rights of others, including flagrant flouting of the rule of law. Imagine Liberia's ranking on the world press freedom index reducing from encouraging to bad.

Interestingly, these are among the reasons for which I have elected to point out "The Imperatives of Free Expression in developing effective media in a democratic Liberia."

Freedom of expression, whether one chooses to limit it as press freedom/freedom of speech or maintain that wide explanation, grew out of the concerns of Europeans, who left the Old World for the American frontiers. According to Milton R. Konvitz, writing for Microsoft Encyclopedia Encarta, when the first Congress of the United States met in 1789, its main order of business was the adoption of the Bill of Rights, the first ten amendments to the Constitution of the United States. The 1st Amendment provides that "Congress shall make no law...abridging the freedom of speech, or the press." This concept today finds wider connotations in a variety of domestic and international laws, regulations and conventions. For the purpose of this forum, I would rather restrict our interests to three important instruments, namely Article XIX of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; Article XIII of the African Charter on Human and People's Rights and

Article XV of the Liberian constitution. All of these instruments give form and effect to the God given right to express oneself, whether in academia, as a journalist, as an activist, in belief and generally as a human being. This right should not be enjoined, except as to prevent one from abusing the rights of another. Of course, including in present day Liberia, governments are always working out means of restraining this right/freedom. This I strongly frown upon, and this I challenge all persons, irrespective of their callings, to equally challenge. Lest we forget, we run the risk of getting a lot of other freedoms/rights tampered with, and then could be quite late. The damage would already have been done.

We all recall that upon the bases of these articles, we have welcomed activists calling our leaders idiots in Liberia; we have challenged our leaders for not being fools; and indeed we agree that our leaders are

frustrated by growing dissent. All of these are outgrowths of the American political system, which provides a deep cycle of freedom under the canopy of the First Amendment.

This freedom has also been further amplified by the late Indian sage Mahatma Gandhi, when he posits the objects of the media as “to understand the popular feeling and give expression to it, ...to arouse among the people certain desirable sentiments; (and) fearlessly ... expose popular defects” within the society.

As I asserted earlier, Gandhi remains a saint in these areas, until the activists find work in government and they too become the subject of scrutiny by the media, and even society.

Paradox in Government Media Relations

Unless otherwise stated, government’s expectation of cordial relations with the media means government should be reported according to Information Minister Laurence Bropleh. The government does not expect the media to follow up issues put forth by the Auditor General or Liberty Party, so long as they do not applaud the “Ellen led government.”

Meanwhile, issues that the media relied upon to ensure this democracy no longer have any bearing. As a comrade would say, “they are not relevant to the times.”

The Liberian Constitution provides that privileges granted by government cannot be withdrawn except by authority of the court. Relying upon this, the celebrated newspaper publisher Kenneth Best reopened the Daily Observer in 1986 upon the inauguration of the Samuel Doe Government. That measure was hailed by human rights, students and civil society activists as being appropriate. Regrettably, the Observer was thereafter closed down by fire.

Upon that same premise, we have argued that Laurence Bropleh cannot close down the Independent out side of the court. In today’s Liberia, Bropleh kept the Independent shut down, even after the court insisted that he had no power to act as he did. Until he was satisfied, as we would say in Liberian parlance, the paper remained closed.

I do not see how the government would expect cordiality in its relations with the media, when it is yet to work in accordance with these internationally sanctioned concepts.

However the misrepresented notion that the press needs to be on terms with the government, I would again argue that there is no space for that in a democracy, and especially within the context of freedom of expression. The government could provide whatever information it chooses, but the media has a professional obligation to present the facts to the public. I am sure we are all aware that the facts are not necessarily what the government thinks, or want projected. Interestingly nowadays, government press releases are also transmitted electronically, and the media “cuts and pastes” them, just as the budget bureau cuts and pastes budgetary appropriations from various agencies, without further scrutiny. As a consequence, issues projected by the government, even if they can be verified contrarily, eventually come forth as is.

On this matter, I would posit that the media’s role first and foremost is to keep the people informed so that they can make appropriate choices in the interest of the state. Unless this means that the interest of the state is ultimately the interest of the government, I would say that there is no need for any particular partnership whatsoever.

The gentleman occupying the wrongly carved position of Minister of Information understand these.

General Abuse of Freedom of Expression

Considering all of the experiences we have gathered in this field over the years, I would be foolhardy to restrict abuse of this fundamental right to government and its functionaries. While attention is drawn mostly to governmental abuse of these fundamental rights, it is also fair to note that limited public understanding of these rights often lead to the abuse. In other words, government gets the blame because the very constitution requires that it be taught on a large scale. Because this has not happened, people both within government and private circles often infringe upon the freedom of expression of others, without reference to the law. The following examples would suffice here:

- **The Director of Police threatens to stop the wearing of veils in the streets of Monrovia;**
- **Ministry of Defense threatens to arrest people for wearing camouflaged colored clothes;**
- **The National Security Advisor threatens to deal with people who make utterances that threaten national security;**
- **Public call on radio shows to stop young ladies from wearing fashionable attires, blaming it for incidents of rape**
- **Protesting university students attack journalists, who are simply there to report upon the occurrences...**

Also of note in the abuse of freedom of expression is the large public disapproval of free expression by persons, both within officialdom and civil society, to the extent that people who

are seeking information or drawing attention to abuses are referred in the following manners:

- **You too know;**
- **You got big mouth;**
- **Mind your business**

These are easily expressed by government officials, including police, immigration, solicitors, and magistrates, once you notice or disapprove of their conduct or attitude.

This situation thus raises the question as to the point at which citizens should express displeasure over the conduct of their officials, including corruption (whether actual or attempted).

There is also the issue now of the Press Union questioning reportage of war time issues or scenes. This position is buttressed by segments of the public as being partisan. The questions that further arise include the following:

Does this mean that we do not accept the TRC Process or the ongoing trial of Charles Taylor? Should the statement therefore mean that we should permit impunity to take control in Liberia?

Do we otherwise believe that closing the entire war chapter outside of the TRC or a tribunal would better serve the reconciliation process?

Ethical Issues In The Path Of Free Expression

In a not so recent media roundtable, former Information Minister Lamini Waritay led a tirade upon media ethics. Among other things, he pointed out the following....

1. Our media institutions of learning should emphasize Media Ethics and Media Law in their curricula, and should endeavor to ensure that those who go through their training process are well grounded in these areas.
2. Publishers and media owners must endeavor to instill a high sense of ethical discipline in their reporters/editors, by constantly raising and discussing ethical matters as these relate to reportorial/editorial matters.
3. Media owners must do all they can to improve the working conditions of their personnel, and motivate them into strictly adhering to ethical principles in their work.

The larger public must also be conscientized on ethical issues, so that they would be in a position to detect any breach of ethical principles and bring it to the attention of the PUL for appropriate action. The public could be more positioned to do so by enabling it become discriminatory in the kind of newspapers to buy and read.

This position needs to be strengthened from the following perspective, because media people can easily limit their capacity to freely express themselves by becoming handlers for the newsmakers. This takes us to President Sirleaf's egregious attacks upon the press last year. One could easily have accepted this as criticism, had it not followed sustained media reports on government failings. As expected, the rush of sycophants to express their loyalty was widespread, while they made frantic efforts to crucify others for expressing their disagreements.

CHALLENGES FOR TOMORROW

In a research done as part of the Capacity Building Program for Internet Governance, participants, (including the author) noted that the right to information is closely tied to the accountability mechanism, for monitoring every action of government which leads to good governance, places the dominant actors of governance—the state, the market and civil society in balance, and monitors their performance as per the boundaries for action defined for them. Media thus perform vital tasks of informing, socializing, communicating and articulating the power of the public and preparing them for social transformation and good governance.

In this light, I like to note that the promotion of free expression would best begin with the passage of the freedom of information act that would compel easy access to government information. At present, the draft act has been making the rounds with the Media Law and Policy Reform Working Group. However, at my latest reference, there seems to be limited – if any – governmental involvement in propelling the concept forward. This is no positive sign, and does not in any way project the government as being in favor of a freedom of information regime. It must be clearly stated here that the absence of general and clear and direct government approbation would definitely kill the proposition. The full involvement of the legislature, executive and judiciary branches of the Liberian government is necessary to provide form and effect to this process.

Another reform law that keeps hanging in the balance is the act seeking to transform the Liberia Broadcasting System into a public service broadcaster. Also, the government needs to grant not only its nods, but also its stamps. Signals from the management of the LBS and the Ministry of Information speak otherwise. From the workers' perspective, not much is known, except to the obnoxious and illegal reference of LBS as state radio, whatever that means to them.

The utility of technology as in the adoption of an information technology policy that would effectively enhance freedom to information, well as promote e-governance will reduce the proclivity of anyone to

deprive the government of any money. This cannot however be possible, if the government intends to set the ICT policy without the involvement of relevant stakeholders. It also can't be possible, wherein new telecommunications regimes have an eye on the communications of the public.

I could spend the entire morning ruminating the issues in freedom of expression in Liberia. However, this gathering is rather about dialogue the causes and effects so that we can together work means of ensuring a proper utility of democracy in Liberia.

I would then close with the admonition that peaceful coexistence means that we do not live my chance. We need to accept a rule of law regime, where justice is done to all. By this, we cannot afford to change the locations of the goal posts when the game begins.

AMEN!!!

**KA Kamara, Coordinator –
Liberia Media Project & Chairman, CEMESP
July 13, 2007**

PRESS FREEDOM IN LIBERIA – MY OBSERVATION

By Sherman C. Seequeh, Political Editor, Public Agenda Newspaper

INTRODUCTION

Though the Liberian press is the fifth oldest on the African Continent, freedom of the press is still farfetched.[1] The combination of political autocracy, economic underdevelopment and media hypocrisy continues to curtail press freedom and defy earnest efforts aimed at entrenching the culture of genuine freedom of the press in Liberia. And concurrently, the long-lasting struggle to attain greater press freedom has been tragic, with the victims largely been journalists and their news organs, not to mention the Liberian populace whose human and political freedoms are inextricably tied to press freedom. Successive political regimes, despite their professed ideological standings and missions, have proven themselves consistently akin in their allergy to—and loath for—media freedom. They are all common culprits, however the degree of their guilt, in the strangulation of press freedom by omission or commission.

Very unfortunately the Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf-led Government, which is a conglomerate of known “freedom fighters” and former human rights crusaders, is hardly making any difference. The regime’s relationship with the press is utterly strained, not to mention any effort on its part to improve press development, and ultimately permit unfettered press freedom. The current government’s indifference is aided by the traditional underdevelopment of the Liberian press, an underdevelopment that is part and parcel of the general economic problems facing the postwar country.

This article represents my candid observation and opinion on the status of press freedom specifically under the Sirleaf government, the hypocrisy the government and other stakeholders have accorded the press, thus leading to the evolving problems facing free press and how it impacts the rights of Liberians to free speech and public information. I also briefly recount the role of the print media in promoting free expression and point out how a better government-media relation is *sine qua non* to the entrenchment of free expression and greater democracy.

ISSUES IMPACTING FREEDOM OF SPEECH, PRESS AND EXPRESSION

Not Yet Uhuru succinctly describes the Liberian media landscape. The media—the print media in particular—are not yet free. And press freedom being the macrocosm and vehicle of other civil liberties, its strangulation has spilled over to free speech and the bundles of other freedoms guaranteed by the Liberian Constitution. Factors responsible for the low-level of press freedom in present-day Liberia, as it has been in the past, include bad governance practices, technical and professional inadequacies marring media institutions and personnel and general socioeconomic backwardness of the Liberian state. All of these factors, individually and collectively, have kept free press, in the truest sense of the word, woefully abridged and pointless. The causes are vexing and manifold.

BAD GOVERNANCE PRACTICES & STRAINED GOVERNMENT-MEDIA RELATIONS

The enabling environment is still far fetched. The current political establishment, like its predecessors, considers the press not as a true partner in the country’s recovery and development that deserves the latitude and the enabling environment to make parallel contribution to development and peace. Seemingly, it sees the media as a mere appendage of the democratic multiplex subject to the whims and caprices of the ruling elites.

In the first two years of its existence, the new political superstructure exemplified its allergy and abhorrence to the press, the truly independent press—that is, even in its puberty. While many pensive Liberians were

wondering how the new leadership would demonstrate its promised fundamental break with the past in terms of working with the ever intrusive Liberian media, the then government-elect shocked the Liberian public when it shunned and barred several media organizations from attending its first major press conference. Explanation for the action, according to media attachés to the President-elect, was that the press conference was intended for only “friendly” media—media institutions that were supportive of the campaign efforts of the victorious Unity Party in the 2005 elections.

Though such an empirical display of early adversity towards the totality of the Liberian press gives origin to contemporary strained Government-media relations, aggressions from the ruling elites against the press are not petering out notwithstanding the official claims of press freedom. President Sirleaf’s invariable verbal attacks on the media, at one time describing the media’s work as “check-book journalism”, have substantially run an unfavorable mindset through the ranks and files of most officials who therefore treat the press with disdain, disrespect and discrimination. Not only are journalists often subjected to brutality and denial in the performance of their duties, they are discriminated against as a means of avoiding interaction with the “unfriendly” press.[2] This attitude was crowned with a recent pronouncement by the Ministry of Information that it was working with the Executive Mansion to develop a policy where only a select group of journalists would be allowed to cover the Presidency and “VIPs”.

With little or no access to newsmakers and other sources of public information, largely because of the discriminative and uncooperative attitudes of public officials, denied journalists have no other option but to report whatever information is available and accessible. Officials in turn consider such information half truth and unprofessional. The lingering strain in Government-media relations has spilled over to the larger Liberian public who are the primary beneficiary of media work in ways that negatively impact on their right to be informed and their right to public information. More besides, the evolving situation not only complicates efforts of the Liberian press to contribute to anti-corruption fight, a fight to which President Sirleaf has pleaded the enlistment of the press, it also largely quarantines corrupt officials from exposure by the press.

TECHNICAL, PROFESSIONAL INADEQUACIES & NATIONAL ECONOMIC PARALYSIS

Bad governance in the 160 years of Liberia’s existence has found fertility in the absence of progressive press culture, underpinned and sustained by innate intolerance on the part of the political establishment. A press culture is not only the lifeblood of any democracy, it is a healthy recipe of good governance, justice and development. But in order for a press culture to evolve, there must exist the enabling economic and political environment, and the media must exert themselves and demonstrate competence and capacity to meet the demands and aspirations that come with the culture. Unfortunately, compared with its counterparts, the fifth oldest press culture on the African Continent has hardly advanced beyond its 19th century origin. Though the press is being taken over by private hands, most of the hands are nonetheless virtually penniless individuals who are acutely wanting of the financial capability and/or the technical and professional savvy to make any meaningful contribution that is expected of the press.[3] It is an open secret that most owners of print news organs in the country are penniless journalists, whose calling to the profession is virtually driven by a sense of advocacy or pecuniary gains or popularity or otherwise. And the correlation between weak financial and technical standings on the one hand and inadequate and dismal professional outputs on the other has found expression in the vulnerability and susceptibility of the Liberian press to political manipulation. This also explains the rise-and-fall situation that most print media institutions experience both in terms of stability on the newsstand and consistency in editorial policy.

An equal damaging impact associated with financially weak and professionally inept press, which is a major democratic failure on the part of the Liberian press, is the incapability to reach out extensively and meaningfully to the public. Independent researchers would find difficulty convincing anyone that a single contemporary print media institution prints up to 6,000 copies and covers more than five major cities each

edition. Though there may be up to 30 print media in the country, the circulation of most of them, if not all, is limited to Monrovia and its environs.

The barometer for determining press freedom should not spotlight only the political temperature of the ruling elites; it must also be seen from the acumen and skills of media practitioners to bring out the desired freedom in full from its shell. Certainly, press freedom and free expression are in great danger in Liberia because the vital news and information sought and processed by the print media does not reach out expressively and meaningfully to the readership. And this is happening because the cost of newspapers, L\$20, is unaffordable by most people and because the press lacks the means and the strategy to reach out to the bulk of those who can afford the cost.

It would be a mistake, however, to cast the blame on the press alone. The cost of newspaper, L\$20, is tested to be the minimal tag appropriate under current economic circumstances. Even at that tag, sales usually don't cover cost for production. Advertisement does. But the general economic paralysis which has kept the private sector known for advertising in tightropes, coupled with Government's discrimination in awarding advertisement contracts, constitute a source of strangulation for a larger section of the independent [critical] press. Government ministries and agencies have their media darlings whom they inundate with advertisements while the "unfriendly" media are left to scavenge irregular advertisements from UNMIL and a few private enterprises. In fact, the bulk of foreign-owned enterprises eschew running adverts in the "unfriendly" media lest they be branded subsidizing "enemies of Government".

Advertisement, being the lifeblood of the press, has become an ideal powerful tool—a silent lethal weapon—being used by the Government to stifle the critical media. The Government knows that without advertisement, the press would not be able to cover costs for production, let alone pay staff and service other operational activities;^[4] and consequently, the press will be irregular, less circulative, ineffective, and eventually die a natural death without blame or outcry heaped on government. These despotic tendencies of old are still being replicated by the current political regime, which sees this bloodless method of anti-press maneuvers as the most plausible and reasonable path for a regime that parades with pro-media and pro-democracy coloration.

THE PRINT MEDIA'S ROLE IN PROMOTING FREE EXPRESSION

For a long-deprived people hungering for democracy and economic equality, and for a political administration espousing greater transparency and accountability, the print media is an indispensable partner. The budding Liberian private/public economic sector and all its forces need the print media to reach out to, and be understood by its customers and/or the consumers they serve. Likewise, the political/public sector that has long been dominated by despots and kleptocrats need the print media to convey public policies and electoral issues and information and to stimulate interactions between public officials, opposition elements and the ordinary Liberian. The quality of information provided by the print media to both the economic and political marketplaces largely determines the quality of decisions and choices that the populace makes; and the political and economic decisions and choices determine the kind of political and economic life that the people live, including the right to free expression and free speech.

More besides, the Liberian print media has played a vital and contributive role in the fight against corruption, both in the private and public domains. The press is noted for its robustness in investigating and exposing shady deals—the misuse of public offices and the miscarriage of political authority.

But the Liberian press needs to move a foot forward. The entrenched nature of despotism and corruption in the country demands that the press should move on the trajectory of aggression and advocacy, since other segments of the civil society with traditional responsibility to protect and defend the rights of the people are lackadaisical and faltering in their vocations. Sitting on the fence, and reporting strict news as it occurs

without analysis and deeper investigation not only renders the press in contemporary Liberia pointless, but also patronizes authoritarianism and kleptocracy. The aggressive press keeps public officials edgy, more transparent, more accountable and more democratic.

The time for a more virile press is now, not only because it provides a formidable antithesis to tyranny and corruption; it is also a dripping compost for unfettered expression and free speech. After all, the rudimentary essence of the press is to facilitate the unhindered exchange of views between the governed and the governors. The Liberian press, however the myriad shortcomings it's faced with, should not be dismissed nor should it be allowed to falter. It must continue to inform the public on the performance of public and private sectors, and it should not relent in its positive aggression against the forces of graft and despotism. For it is only by the work of the press that the vicious cycle of political failure, abject poverty and internecine conflict which has haunted the oldest African republic will recede and fade into oblivion.

GOVERNMENT-MEDIA RELATIONS TOWARDS PROMOTING FREE EXPRESSION AND PRESS FREEDOM

In proposing or working towards Government-media relations for whatever reason, it is important to realize that the two, fundamentally, are positive adversaries. Government, by nature, is corrupt and acutely inclined to protect its nature; and the media, by nature, is inquisitive. It is no wonder that even the Sirleaf administration, despite its widely acclaimed human rights department, has had bad blood with the Liberian press. Towards promoting press freedom and free expression, I see no convergence in attitudes between the adversaries except that the media and the rest of the civil society keep their aggressive posture, demanding the comprehensive fulfillment of the constitutional dictates of free press, free expression and free speech. These rights are both natural and civic; they are not gifts or privileges or aid to be negotiated and rationed. They are rights from God firmly recognized and guaranteed by law. To promote and protect these rights is the primary responsibility of Government; the press simply comes in when the government reneges; Simple.

I insist that there is no such thing as relations between the press and government. Both must remain distinct and coordinate social forces engaged in cross-monitoring each other. The media and Government need no formal relations, except to continue to play their respective roles of promoting the public interest, particularly protecting the rights of the people as enshrined in the Constitution and laws of Liberia.

True, the press needs the Government for the information and news it seeks for the public, and the government needs the press to interact with the public. But the Constitution and laws are clear on fact that public information is—and must be—free, and that and the people must have—and must be given—unhindered access thereto. On the other hand, the press has fundamental responsibility to inform the public, a perversion or abuse of which is liable to reprimand. To fulfill these organic responsibilities does not warrant any kind of relationship, in my view.

CONCLUSION

Free press and free expression are still under threat in Liberia. In fact, the renowned international media watchdog group, *Freedom House*, recently included the country amongst those surveyed to be lacking free press in the world. The boast that no journalist has ever been imprisoned since the inception of the current Government does not in any way translate into a radical departure from yesteryears when the press was treated with utter contempt, humiliation and indifference. Consistent brutality, discrimination and verbal attacks visited upon the Liberian press by officials the Sirleaf Government are not less in magnitude than they were in times past. There are all indications that the government, like its predecessors, is abhorrent and repulsive to free press and free expression. In fact, there is the conjecture that the government would

be worse or would have untold numbers of journalists behind bars, if not dead, had it commanded its own military and if the international community were not overwhelmingly present on the ground.

The economic environment is also a basic factor impugning on the full realization of press freedom and free expression in the country. Granted that the press is not immune to the cataclysmic consequences of years of political failure compounded by prolonged civil conflict, the press itself lacks creative and innovative ways to service the public good. And consequently, low professional and technical capacity, all rising out of poor financial background, is grossly impeding press freedom and free expression.

[1] The first Liberian newspaper, the Liberian Herald appeared on the newsstand in 1930s after 1) the Egyptian French-language periodicals in 1797, 2) South Africa 's Cape Town Gazette in 1822, 3) Sierra Leone 's The Royal Gazette in 1801 and 4) Ghana 's The Royal Gold Coast Gazette

[2] Incidents of hand-picking journalists to cover official functions are commonplace; and the journalists thrown out often belong to the critical, if not radical, sections of the Liberian press.

[3] Out of the nearly 30 private newspapers in the country, only two run their own presses. The rest rely on private commercial presses that charge exorbitant printing fees.

[4] The weak financial standings of most print media institutions has triggered human resource flight, with countless known professional media people seeking greener pastures in other sectors, thus creating quality problem in the media and leaving its impact on free press and free speech.

2007

25 January 2007

Lawmakers Threaten To Bar Journalists From Forum, Accuse Them Of Bias

(CEMESP/IFEX) - One of the factions involved in the current leadership struggle in the Liberian House of Representatives has threatened to prevent journalists from covering their activities for what they term as “biased coverage” of the ongoing leadership crisis in that body.

The lawmakers accused three radio stations - internationally funded Star Radio, Catholic-run Radio Veritas and privately owned Truth FM - of being involved in propaganda against them, by branding them as “rebels, renegades and criminals”.

On 23 January 2007, lawmakers attending a session that had been prohibited by the Supreme Court claimed that some journalists were paid agents of embattled Speaker Edwin Snowe.

The lawmakers also accused members of the public, including human rights activists, of siding with the embattled Speaker.

They further threatened to take “serious actions” against journalists and media houses if they did not halt their alleged practices.

A motion has already been filed to “begin barring reporters who were insulting them”.

The lawmakers also promised to file a complaint with the Press Union of Liberia, the association of journalists in Liberia.

1 February 2007

Journalist Suspended For Airing Interview Of Opposition Parliamentarian

(CEMESP/IFEX) - Reporter Othello Guzean of the government-controlled radio network, Liberia Broadcasting System (LBS), has been suspended indefinitely by the network’s Director General; Charles Snetter Jr. According to a 16 January 2006 letter from Snetter to the reporter, Guzean was suspended for allegedly violating the editorial policy of the station.

However, Guzean indicated to CEMESP that he was suspended because he conducted and aired an interview of Montserrado County District Seven parliamentarian Thomas Fallah.

In the interview, Representative Fallah, an opposition parliamentarian from the Congress for Democratic Change Party, accused President Ellen-Johnson Sirleaf of manipulating some members of the House of Representatives to remove Edwin Snowe as Speaker of the National Legislature of Liberia.

The LBS Director General, according to Guzean, described the airing of such an interview as unacceptable and in contravention of the station’s editorial policy.

The Director General reportedly described Representative Fallah’s reference to President Sirleaf as “Madam Sirleaf” during the interview as an insult to the Presidency of Liberia.

Snetter also seized the cassette containing the interview, Guzean said. Guzean is meanwhile calling on the Press Union of Liberia and other media rights organizations to intervene to ensure that the LBS management pays his salary and all other benefits due him in accordance with Liberian labor laws.

February 22, 2007

Police Declare Journalist “Wanted”

(CEMESP/IFEX) - The Managing Editor of the Independent newspaper in Liberia’s capitol Monrovia, journalist Sam Dean has been declared a wanted man by authorities of the Liberia National Police.

The Police declared Journalist Dean wanted for his alleged involvement in the publication of a pornographic photo in the February 20, 2007 edition of the Independent newspaper; depicting Presidential Affairs Minister Willis Knuckles having sex with two women.

The decision to declare journalist Dean wanted was prompted by the earlier pronouncement by Liberia’s Solicitor General Tiawon Gongloe calling on the Liberia National Police to arrest the Journalist.

But the Lawyers representing the Journalist Attorneys Syrenius Cephas and Adolphus Karnuah said they were deeply troubled by reports that the Government was hunting Journalist Dean and has accordingly deployed plain cloths Security Personnel around his private residence to arrest him upon site.

The Lawyers in a statement issued on February 21, 2007 further described as a complete mockery of justice for the Liberian government to go after journalist Dean instead of the Minister who allegedly committed the act Mr. Knuckles is yet to deny the allegation, but has publicly apologized to his wife, children, and pastor and President Sirleaf for embarrassment the sex scandal has caused them.

The Independent Newspaper has been critical and has consistently reported on the excesses of the Ellen Johnson Sirleaf led Government.

28 February 2007

Newspaper’s License Revoked, Premises Sealed

(CEMESP/IFEX) - On 27 February 2007, the government of Liberia revoked the operational license of “The Independent” newspaper in Monrovia for one year.

The decision was announced at a press conference in Monrovia by acting Information Minister Laurence Bropleh. Minister Bropleh said the decision was in response to “The Independent”’s publication of a photograph showing former Presidential Affairs Minister Willis Knuckles in a sex scene with two ladies.

Knuckles resigned on 26 February 2007.

At the press conference, Minister Bropleh also summoned the owners of printing presses in Monrovia and ordered them not to print “The Independent”.

Police were also reported to have sealed the premises of “The Independent”. Local news reported that more than 20 police officers moved on the premises of “The Independent” and chained the gates.

The actions have since been protested by the Press Union of Liberia (PUL), the Center for Media Studies and Peace Building (CEMESP) and the Liberia Media Center (LMC).

All the groups believe that the decisions act against freedom of Expression and were taken outside of due process.

6 March 2007

Liberian Tabloid Files Appeal With Supreme Court After Government Ban Over Sex Photo

New York, March 6, 2007-The Committee to Protect Journalists called on Liberia's Supreme Court to rescind a ban on private bi-weekly, The Independent. The paper filed an appeal with the court on grounds that the government violated Liberia's Constitution when it revoked their license and closed its offices after the paper's February 20 and February 27 publications of a compromising photo of ex-Presidential Affairs Minister Willis Knuckles with two women, according to local journalists.

The Independent's appeal alleged the government did not grant the newspaper a required hearing before issuing its ban, defense lawyer Edward Goba told CPJ. A ruling by the Supreme Court is expected on March 12. The Press Union of Liberia (PUL) said the police's 48-hour shuttering of the paper was illegal because it lacked a court order, PUL President George Barpeen told CPJ.

On Friday, the private daily The Inquirer quoted Assistant Information Minister Designate for Information Services Gabriel I.H. Williams as saying, "If we are going to revoke the license as it is in the case of The Independent, we are not going to call the police and say go and close their offices. If we are going to do that, we will go through the courts."

"The government has acknowledged that it did not follow due process," said CPJ Executive Director Joel Simon. "We urge the Supreme Court to rescind the ban against the paper."

The publication of the photograph had prompted the resignation of Knuckles following protests from women's groups, according to international news reports. The government alleged the newspaper violated the penal code by publishing obscene materials, but did not charge the paper with the misdemeanor offense, Goba told CPJ. The paper intends to sue the government for damages in connection with financial losses incurred during the closure of the offices, Managing Editor Sam Dean told CPJ.

8 March 2007

Editor Receives Death Threats

SOURCE: International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), Brussels

****Updates IFEX alerts of 22 and 28 February 2007****

(IFJ/IFEX) - The following is a 7 March 2007 IFJ media release:

IFJ Urges Liberian Government to Lift Ban on Newspaper after Sex Scandal

The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) today called on the Liberian authorities to lift a one-year revocation of the license of private newspaper The Independent after it published explicit photographs of a minister engaged in sexual acts with two women.

After the publication of the pictures, the newspaper's editor Sam Dean received death threats.

"We call on the government to lift the arbitrary ban on The Independent and to let the legal system decide if any punishment is necessary," said Gabriel Baglo, Director of the IFJ Africa Office. "The government's decision is entirely disproportionate and seems to be simply an act of a vengeance. We are also calling for the end of threats to Sam Dean."

In its February 20 and February 27 editions, The Independent published explicit photographs showing Presidential Affairs Minister Willis Knuckles engaged in sexual acts with two women. The minister resigned and apologized after their publication.

After the photos were published, the government revoked the license of the newspaper for one year and the police closed its offices for 48 hours. The newspaper's lawyers filed an appeal with the Supreme Court, which is expected to issue a decision on the shut down next week.

According to reports, the editor of The Independent is currently in hiding after he received death threats. The Press Union of Liberia (PUL) said that it would resist any attempt by the government to exert revenge through mob justice against the paper.

The IFJ supports the PUL's move to punish the ethical misconduct of its Members in this issue. As a member institution, The Independent was suspended for three months for breaking the Union's code of ethics and Conduct by publishing the photos.

In a related case, the PUL has fined Radio Veritas 2,500 Liberian Dollars (40euros) for "broadcasting the vivid description of the obscene Material." The IFJ represents over 500,000 journalists in more than 115 countries.

21 March 2007

Publisher In Hiding Seeks Assistance Following Raid On His Home

SOURCE: Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA), Accra

****Updates IFEX alerts of 8 March 28 and 22 February 2007****

15 March 2007, Sam Dean, publisher of "The Independent", a Monrovia-based privately owned newspaper currently facing a ban, alleged that his life is in danger due to continuous threats on his life by agents of the state security. He has therefore been in hiding.

Dean told a Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) correspondent that He needs assistance to leave the country to escape the threats.

"As a result of the continued threats to my life, coupled with the Arbitrary banning of the paper ("The Independent"), I am kindly requesting your urgent assistance to get me out of Liberia, as I have been in a hideout since last month (February). I am spending huge sums of money daily to keep myself safe and have run out of cash to contain this insecurity," said Dean.

In a statement on 9 March, the publisher catalogued a number of threats, harassment and intimidation directed at him and his staff members by state security agents.

On February 19, "The Independent" published a photograph of Willis Knuckles, former Presidential Affairs Minister, allegedly having sex with two women at the same time.

The statement said one Matthew Willie led seven security men to besiege His residence on 22 February in order to arrest him, but his neighbors intervened.

On February 27, "The Independent" republished the photograph following the minister's resignation. This prompted the government to revoke the Newspaper's license for a year, and order the closure of its offices.

After the first publication, Dean was declared wanted; he was not arrested.

28 March 2007

Court Nullifies Ban On Newspaper For Allegedly Publishing Pornography

Updates IFEX alerts of 21 and 8 March, 28 and 22 February 2007**

(CEMESP/IFEX) - "The Independent" newspaper, which was banned by the Government for publishing a sex photo of former Presidential Affairs Minister Willis Knuckles, has been ordered by the Supreme Court of Liberia to return to 'status quo ante'. The court's latest ruling is a result of a challenge by "The Independent" through its legal counsel, Attorney-at-Law Sayma Syrenius Cephus, protesting the government of Liberia's order through the court's system.

Accordingly, Attorney Cephus said, "That instruction or mandate from the office of the Chamber Justice suggests that "The Independent" newspaper can now publish because, if the instruction says return to 'status quo ante', what they are saying is that they return to the previous positions that both parties were occupying prior to the commencement of the action. The stay order is a victory for us."

Commenting further, "The Independent" newspaper, through its lawyer, said the paper will appear on newsstands on 29 March 2007. "The paper is now a free agent to do what it has been doing," Attorney Cephus added.

"The Independent" has said that while it is true that they are not interested in publishing pornography, they are determined to comprehensively, exhaustively and critically analyze national issues.

The paper has maintained that it has a mandate to alert the public about decadence in society.

It is now clear that, following the legal fight between "The Independent" and the Government of Liberia, Managing Editor Sam Dean and his paper can now return to their normal operations, provided the country is run according to law.

April 4, 2007

Government Maintains Ban On Newspaper, Instructs Printing Houses Not To Print

*****Updates IFEX alerts of 28, 21 and 8 March 28 and 22 February 2007*****

(CEMESP/IFEX) - It was a success story for "The Independent" newspaper last week when the Supreme Court of Liberia ordered both parties to the case to return to "status quo ante."

Sayma Syrenius Cephus, the lawyer for "The Independent", said the paper was to appear on the newsstand on 29 March since the court has mandated that "The Independent" return to its previous position as a free agent to do its business.

However, the paper did not appear on the newsstands as expected because the government of Liberia has maintained its ban on the newspaper and has instructed printing houses not to print it.

The government, through the Justice Ministry, has described as "Misinterpretation" reports that the ban on the paper had been lifted.

Instead, according to Solicitor General Cllr. Tiawan Gongloe, all Parties should remain as they are until the Supreme Court looks into the matter.

The Supreme Court will hear the case in full on 4 April 2004.

9 April 2007

Sports Official Assaults Journalist Over Coverage

SOURCE: Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA), Accra

(MFWA/IFEX) - On 31 March 2007, Julu Johnson, sports editor of the “News”, an independent Monrovia-based newspaper, was assaulted by Napoleon Japloe, Assistant Secretary of the Liberia Football Association (LFA).

Japloe, who accused Johnson of writing negative stories about him, slapped him several times in the face before pushing him to the ground.

According to an MFWA correspondent, the incident occurred at the headquarters of the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) in Monrovia.

Numennie Williams, an official of the Sports Writers Association of Liberia (SWAL) has since condemned the attack on Johnson. Williams, who witnessed the incident, told MFWA’s correspondent that he would ensure the matter is properly investigated and the LFA official dealt with.

16 April 2007

Football Official Suspended For Assaulting Journalist

SOURCE: Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA), Accra

The Liberian Football Association (LFA) on 9 April 2007 suspended its secretary general, Napoleon Japloe for one month for assaulting Julu Johnson; Sports Editor of the independent Monrovia-based the “News” newspaper.

According to the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) correspondent, The LFA took the decision following calls by members of the Sports Writers Association of Liberia (SWAL) for punitive action to be taken against the football official. An official of SWAL, Numennie Williams who witnessed the attack on 31 March 2007 condemned it and vowed to ensure that the matter was investigated and the LFA official dealt with.

Japloe attacked Johnson for allegedly writing an “erroneous” article about him. The incident occurred at the headquarters of the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) in Monrovia.

May 7, 2007

The Independent Seeks Justice, not Pardon

(CEMESP/IFEX) - The Managing Editor of the Independent, the newspaper which the Government of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf banned for publishing a gang sex photograph involving former State for Presidential Affairs minister Willis Knuckles, says he wants justice and not pardon in the paper’s case currently before the Supreme Court of Liberia.

Journalist Dean said Information Minister Dr. Laurence Bropleh’s recent statement that he is begging and negotiating with the Government to pardon the newspaper is a complete lie and another scheme to bring the newspaper to public disrepute.

He described the management of the Independent newspaper as a team of civilized and trained media experts who believe in the rule of law and sees the court as the final arbiter of justice.

A Liberian newspaper quoted Information Minister Bropleh as informing a gathering of journalists on World press Freedom Day, that the Government of Liberia was at the verge of lifting its ban on the Independent newspaper because according to him Journalist Dean has been begging for the lifting of the one-year ban.

Dean told CEMESP that at no time had he ever attempted begging the Government of Liberia to reopen the Independent.

"We are not petit in our taught, neither are we desperate to have the newspaper reappear on the news-stand, that we will sell our rights and trade off our moral imperatives. We want the ruling of the Supreme Court and not pardon" Dean says.

8 May 2007

Government Representative Threatens Legal Action Against Newspaper Over Article Implicating Him In Oil Deal With Foreign Company

(CEMESP/IFEX) - A member of the House of Representatives of Liberia has threatened the management of the "Liberian Express" bi-weekly newspaper with legal action.

Representative Dusty Wolokollie accused the newspaper of publishing what he termed "a falsehood against him" and boasted that he will take the newspaper to court for libel and will demand US\$20,000 in damages.

The ruling Unity Party representative made the threat against the newspaper on 3 May 2007, World Press Freedom Day, after the newspaper published an article linking him to a meeting allegedly held in London to make an oil deal with the management of the Broadway Consolidated company. Broadway Consolidated is a UK-based mineral company, which entered into an off- shore concession agreement with the Government of Liberia.

Wolokollie says he will not request that the newspaper retract the story, nor will he file a complaint about the newspaper to the Press Union of Liberia. He says, instead, that he intends "to teach the Liberian media a lesson".

The Managing Editor of the "Liberian Express", former Press Union of Liberia President James Kiazolu, says his newspaper stands by the story.

4 June 2007

Ban Lifted On Newspaper That Published Sex Photograph Of Ex-official
****Updates alerts of 4 April, 28, 21 and 8 March, 28 and 22 February 2007****

(CEMESP/IFEX) - The government of Liberia has lifted the ban imposed on the "Independent Newspaper". Information Minister Dr. Laurence Bropleh announced the lifting of the ban when he addressed journalists on 30 May 2007.

The government, on 27 February, revoked the operational permit of the "Independent" after it published a photograph showing President Ellen Sirleaf's then chief of office staff Willis Knuckles engaging in group sex with two ladies.

Announcing the lifting of the ban at a press conference held in Monrovia, Dr. Bropleh said the action to revoke the newspaper's permit was in keeping with the Ministry of Information's statutory mandate to serve as regulator and enforcement body of the government on matters affecting communication in the country.

He, however, vowed that the government would continue to work for press freedom in Liberia.

The newspaper's legal counsellor Atty. Serius Cephas has described the government's decision to lift the ban on the newspaper as a sham. Atty. Cephas told CEMESP that the "Independent" is seeking justice, and not pardon. He described as an irony for the government, who happens to be the defendant in the case, to

pardon instead of the complainant (the “Independent”). “We want the Supreme Court to rule on the matter,” Atty. Cephas averred.

It can be recalled that the “Independent” filed a lawsuit against the government for the illegal closure of the newspaper.

21 June 2007

Journalists Attacked While Covering Students Protest

(CEMESP/IFEX) - Journalists Zaza Evans Ballah of the Independent Public Agenda Newspaper and Daylue Goah of the New Democrat were on June 19, 2007 severely flogged by soldiers of the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) and officers of the Liberia National Police (LNP).

The two journalists were attacked by the soldiers while covering an attack by UNMIL and LNP officers on students of the University of Who Were Peacefully Requesting their striking professors to return to classes.

Reporter Ballah told CEMESP that while photographing the incident, a group of Nigerian and Bangladeshi soldiers of UNMIL moved on him and seized his camera, removed the chip, and forcefully cut the chain holding his Press I.D. Card from his neck.

He said, the security men kicked him to the ground & stepped his chest and arms. Reporter Ballah also said his camera was later returned to him without the chip, while his mobile phone got missing during the attack on him. The reporter is said to be experiencing serious pains in the chest and arms.

For his part reporter Daylue Goah of the New Democrat Newspaper said, he was severely beaten by combined units of UNMIL Soldiers and LNP Officers. Goah said the UNMIL and Liberian Police tore and destroyed his Press Card, and forced him to delete from his camera photos he had already taken.

Journalist Daylue Goah was immediately rushed to the JFK Medical Center Emergency Room for medical treatment.

The Press Union of Liberia (PUL) has categorically condemned the brutal attack on the journalists by personnel of UNMIL and the Liberia National Police.

The PUL in a statement issued on June 20, said it was not a surprise that the government security forces were involved in such attack on the press, because they were notorious for such atrocious actions. The PUL said the participation of UNMIL Soldiers in the flogging of the journalists present a gloomy picture for the democratic order in Liberia.

25 June 2007

Sports Journalist Assaulted By Football Coach, Threatened By Team Administrator, After Exposing Their Salaries.

(CEMESP/IFEX) - On 18 June 2007, sports journalist Julu Johnson of the “Independent News” newspaper in Monrovia was attacked and assaulted by the head coach of Liberia’s National Football team, Frank Jericho Nagbe.

Johnson was attacked for publishing an article, which states that the football coach was earning a salary of US\$650 per month.

Johnson told CEMESP that around 6:00 a.m. (local time) on 18 June, following Liberia's goal-less home draw match against Equatorial Guinea, the coach, accompanied by his aide George Doe, stormed Johnson's West Point community residence and assaulted him.

The coach remarked that Johnson, who is also Secretary General of the Sports Writers Association of Liberia, had published his salary on the Internet. He argued that his salary is private and that the journalist had no business publishing it.

After neighbours of the journalist went to his rescue, coach Nagbe left the scene, but with a threat to later "unleash his boys" on Johnson wherever he is spotted.

On 17 June, a day before the attack, Johnson also received a threat from the Administrative Manager of Liberia's National Football team, Benedict Wreh. Wreh threatened to take action against the journalist for publishing his US\$400 monthly salary.

Johnson told CEMESP that the two men in question are public servants who are paid with taxpayers' money and therefore the publication of their salaries is not an invasion of privacy, as they claim.

16 August 2007

House Of Representatives Reacts Negatively To Radio Talk Show Hosts' Comments

(CEMESP/IFEX) - The House of Representatives in Monrovia has lashed at and threatened to summon the presenter of a talk show before that body for "preaching hate messages".

Ambrose Nmah, presenter of the Truth FM Breakfast Show, was the subject of a plenary discussion during the house's session on 14 August 2007.

The House of Representatives was reacting to comments made by Nmah during the 14 August edition of his show, in which he attributed the imminent closure of a local nursing school, run by the Phebe Hospital in Central Liberia, to the reduction of the hospital's budget by the members of Parliament. During the show, Nmah expressed strong disagreement with the House's action.

The House insists that Nmah's conclusion is untrue and aimed at inciting the population against members of the body. They also accused him of preaching, "Hate messages" and using his radio to ridicule the legislature.

The House also clarified that the Phebe Hospital budget was reduced so as to provide funding to ensure that other medical facilities in rural Liberia would remain functional.

Nmah is a provocative host and has often clashed with other individuals over issues of the day. He is Director-General of Renaissance Communication Incorporated, the owner of Truth FM and Real TV in Liberia.

During the same debate on 14 August, members of the House of Representatives drew attention to another provocative talk show (50-50) on SKY FM 107, accusing the show's host, T-Max Jlateh, of mocking them.

The House has not taken any decision on either case.

4 September 2007

Journalist Assaulted By Police, Arrested While Covering Drug Raid

(CEMESP/IFEX) - A combined team of officers from the Liberia National Police and the Drug Enforcement authority physically attacked and arrested a journalist for attempting to cover a police operation on 31 August 2007.

Journalist J. Rufus Paul of the “Daily Observer” newspaper was arrested for what the police call “trying to cover a raiding exercise without invitation.” The police were carrying out an early morning raid on a building said to be a center of illicit narcotic activities in central Monrovia, when Paul, a resident of the district, alerted by neighbors, decided to cover the operation.

Upon arrival at the scene, a female police officer confronted Paul and asked him what he was doing there with a camera. Though Paul quickly identified himself as reporter wishing to cover the police operation, he was ordered arrested by the officer in charge of the operation.

The police’s argument is that Paul should have sought permission from Police headquarters before embarking on coverage of the operation.

The reporter’s identity card and camera were immediately taken away from him and he was handcuffed and placed among those arrested in connection with the illicit drug activity in the area, and taken to the police headquarters by a group of officers.

According to Paul, who sustained a minor injury in the process, he was taken before the Deputy Police Commissioner for Crime Services upon arrival at the Police Headquarters, who apologized to him for his men’s actions but warned him that as a journalist he has to be prepared to face police brutality.

Meanwhile, the Liberia National Police has promised to investigate the matter.

24 September 2007

Journalists Manhandled By Presidential Bodyguards

(CEMESP/IFEX) - On 21 September 2007, bodyguards of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, from the Special Security Service (SSS), brutalized and intimidated several local journalists and correspondents of international news organizations.

The journalists, including Jonathan Paylelay of the BBC, Dosso Zoom of Radio France International, Alphonso Towah of the Reuters News Agency and other local journalists told CEMESP that the SSS officers physically assaulted them.

During the scuffle, journalists Paylelay, Zoom and Towah were held by their clothes, beaten and bundled out of the interview area for what the presidential guards termed as “bridge of protocol.” The journalists, who had gathered at the Roberts International Airport as early as 11.00 a.m. (local time), far ahead of the scheduled arrival of the Sierra Leonean President Ernest Koroma, were earlier denied entry into The VIP terminal where both Presidents Koroma and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf later signed a joint communiqué for a non-aggression treaty between Sierra Leone and Liberia.

A few minutes after the incident, Presidential Press Secretary Cyrus Badio met with the offended journalists and apologized for the action perpetrated against them by the State security personnel.

This latest action of state security personnel against journalists is not the first since the induction of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf almost two years ago.

The first major event about a year ago was at the Executive Mansion when journalist Abbas Dulleh of the "New Domacrat", Olando Zeongar of the "Heritage" and Jallah Grayfield of Radio Veritas were manhandled and equipment damaged by some officers of the SSS (see alerts of 12 September and 14 June 2006).

September 28, 2007

Court Holds Three Journalists In Contempt

(CEMESP/IFEX) - The Criminal Court "C" at the Temple of Justice in Monrovia, Liberia on September 28, 2007 held three Liberian journalists for contempt of the court.

The court presided over by judge J. Boima Kontoe ordered the clerk of the court to issue a writ of summon on journalists Precious Seboe of the News Newspaper, Abbas Dulleh of the New Democrat Newspaper and Alesia Anderson of the New Vision Newspaper.

The journalists were summoned by the court for their reports in the September 27, 2007 edition of their respective newspapers, in which it was disclosed that former Liberian Transitional Government chairman Gyude Bryant corruption case record had disappeared from the court's file.

The judge also disclosed that the publications have caused embarrassment to the court.

Appearing before the court on Friday September 28th 2007, Journalist Precious Seboe pleaded not guilty, following the reading of a writ of summons issued her.

The defense Council for the journalists Cllr. Daku Mulbah pleaded for clemency because according to him, it will portray a bad signal for the country, if the world gets to hear that journalists are been placed behind bars for reporting on the activities of the court.

The court has given a 72-hour ultimatum for the Newspapers to retract the reports or pay a fine of one hundred United States dollars each.

October 2nd, 2007

Liberian Government Censors the Independent Media

(CEMESP/IFEX) - The Government of Liberia, through the Executive Mansion Press Bureau and the Ministry of Information has imposed what has been described as media censorship on the independent media in Liberia.

The disclosure was made on Monday October 1, 2007 at the regular press conference hosted by Presidential press Secretary Cyrus Badio.

Mr. Badio said his bureau will collaborate with the Ministry of Information to identify selected reporters to cover the Presidency.

Information Minister Laurence Bropleh recently announced that the Government of Liberia was contemplating on selecting specific photo journalists and reporters who will fetch photographs and information from the presidency on behalf of the rest of the journalists in Liberia.

The Minister's statement came in the wake of recent scuffle at the Roberts International Airport in Liberia, which left several journalists brutalized by President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's Bodyguards.

Meanwhile, the Press Union of Liberia (PUL) has condemned the move by the Government of Liberia to censor the independent media.

The PUL in a reaction also expressed dismay over what it called the “ruthless posture” against journalists by state security men.

The Union also expressed sadness over President Sirleaf’s remarks following the incident, saying that the journalists were aggressive in the discharge of their duties.

The Union maintained that the President’s pronouncement fueled the intimidation of journalists and opens the floodgate for the persecution of media practitioners as a remedy for due process of law.

October 12, 2007

Journalist Accused of Putting Colleagues in Harm’s Way

(CEMESP/IFEX) - A local correspondent of the BBC has complained a threat to his life by fellow journalist Ambrose Nmah.

In a letter widely disseminated on the internet, Jonathan Paye-Layleh alleged that Nmah’s publicly broadcast justification of the security attack on journalists during the visit of Sierra Leone’s President Ernest Koroma puts “not only me but all media practitioners in Liberia in harm’s war.”

Mr. Nmah, Station Manager of Truth FM reportedly made the comments on a morning magazine show, “Good Morning, Madam President.”

Paye-Layleh further quoted Nmah as saying that “journalists can get killed for breaching security protocol,” and blamed the journalists for whatever happened at the airport.

Paye-Layleh fears that Nmah’s “conclusion that {journalists} breached security protocol and subsequent declaration that the security officers were right to do what they did, are tantamount to unduly inciting state security forces against media practitioners.”

The journalist’s complaint was addressed to the Press Union of Liberia, and widely carried in the local media, seeking for Nmah “to be cited to explain to the public what he meant by his conclusions.”

On 21 September 2007, bodyguards of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, from the Special Security Service (SSS), brutalized and intimidated several local journalists and correspondents of international news organizations, including Paye-Layleh, who had gathered at the international airport to report on the visit of Sierra Leone’s new president.

The journalists said they were held by their clothes, beaten and bundled out of the interview area for what the presidential guards termed as “breach of protocol.”

October 12, 2007

Liberian Government Clarifies Inquest for Female Journalist

(CEMESP/IFEX) - Liberia’s Information Minister Dr. Lawrence Bropleh has clarified that the government of Liberia has no intentions of arresting or setting up a board of inquiry to probe journalist Mae Azango.

Journalist Azango made headlines in recent days, when she delivered a paper in which she indicated that “Issues of sexual harassment exist for most female journalists in Liberia. Mae is part of a delegation of Liberian journalists touring the United States.

In the aftermath of the statement, Information Minister Laurence Bropleh was quoted by the Daily Observer as saying that Journalist Azango will have to face an inquisition at the Ministry of Information in connection with her statements.

Bropleh said that he did not know the validity of Azango’s observation, but suggested that it had the potential of ruining the image of the country, and queried Mae for not making the revelation in Liberia, but in faraway USA.

Minister Bropleh alleged that people make such charges without any means of authentication simply because they want to seek asylum, and added: “I am waiting on the arrival of Mae so that she can tell us which agency, ministry or public officials have requested for sex before giving out information”.

However, in a seeming reversal of his comments, the Minister told the FrontPage Africa website: “The government is not planning an inquest or inquiry at all. What I said was that we were unaware of such activities taking place and would simply like to hear from Ms. Azango herself so we could help her and other female journalist deal with the situation as we would not tolerate such acts against our journalists.”

Bropleh’s clarification followed a protest from the Press Union of Liberia. The Press Union said it would discourage Azango from appearing before any board of inquiry set up by the government.

October 16, 2007

Government Demands Media Registration For Debt Payment

(CEMESP/IFEX) - Media houses in Monrovia have begun complaining that government agencies are refusing to pay their legitimate advertisement debts until they produce evidence of legal existence.

An inquiry by CEMESP received corroboration from The New Democrat, The NEWS and Public Agenda Newspapers. Other papers have been hesitant to comment.

In its editorial for October 15, 2007, the New Democrat newspaper questioned the action by arguing that the logic implied “would demand that ministries receive the registration documents of all media houses before advertising in them...”

The Democrat further argued that “ministries demanding business registration papers before debt repayment... is just one ugly beginning in a bad direction,” suggesting that the next demand could be “submission of editorial policy...”

In further arguments, The Democrat suggested to the government that if demand for registration papers is the rule, then it should equally apply to all government vendors.

This latest action from the government furthers events from the past where papers seen to be antagonistic to the government were simply denied government adverts.

Several editors told CEMESP that they have since complied, but noted that they had been wary of such instances since the days of Charles Taylor, when many newspapers were closed down for tax payment.

They added that whether the papers are registered or not do not seem to be the problem, rather they are concerned that registration issues would come forth, when people want to collect legitimate debts.

October 23, 2007

Newspaper, 7 Journalists Sued for Libel

(CEMESP/IFEX) - The Public Agenda Newspaper and seven Liberian journalists have been taken to court on allegations of libel. The journalists had written a petition to the Press Union of Liberia, seeking an investigation of Ambrose Nmah, Director of Renaissance Communications, a Radio & Television Service widely believed to be pro-government, for the comments he made against journalists manhandled by state security forces.

Ambrose Nmah, Director of Renaissance Communications, a Radio & Television Service widely believed to be pro-government, filed a "13-count complaint" against the journalists at the Civil Law Court on claims that a statement published by the defendants has injured his reputation, character and occupation.

The suit states that the Public Agenda and its Managing Editor Gibson Jerue along with other senior editors including Robert Kpadeh of the Parrot Newspaper, Sam Dean of the Independent Newspaper, Wellington Geevon-Smith of the Star Radio, Sheriff Adams of the News Newspaper, Sayma Syrenius Cephus of the Plain Truth Newspaper, and Alphonsus Zeon, former Secretary General of the Press Union of Liberia, "jointly and severally published and/or caused to be published several defamatory statements..." about Nmah in the October 15, 2007, Vol.2 no.35 of the Public Agenda Newspaper, reproduced them on the internet and circulated them to international professional bodies.

According to the court order, Nmah alleged that "the 1st and 2nd defendants accused and described Plaintiff as a 'journalistic serpent', of being a militia of the NPFL; and is also one of whom 'the willful killing of journalists is justified and had it happened to fellow journalists, the victims would have deserved their death and he would celebrate.'"

In count 8 of the suit, Nmah alleged that the "... defendants, having no reasonable basis to believe same to be true, accused (him) of spreading 'sustained hate media messages, directed against his fellow journalists' in the country."

According to Nmah, the journalists' action "constitutes libel per se" which has caused injury to his name, reputation, character and occupation and has exposed him and his family to hatred, contempt, degradation, public ridicule and prayed for general damages to the tune of \$10,000 (ten thousand dollars).

The reports being specified grew out of a complaint by BBC reporter Jonathan Paye-Layleh that Nmah had justified security attacks upon journalists on account that the journalist had breached security protocols.

Late in September, a horde of journalists were manhandled by state Security personnel during a visit by Sierra Leone President Ernest Koroma.

24 October 2007

Judge Threatens Journalists With Contempt Charges, Jail Over Coverage

(CEMESP/IFEX) - On 22 October 2007, Chief Justice Johnnie Lewis threatened to imprison journalists for committing such "infractions" as "misspelling his name", "giving him wrong and inappropriate titles" and "attaching his photos to stories that have nothing to do with him in their papers."

Lewis made the threats in open court, with the heads of several newspapers in attendance by invitation. The session was also attended by other members of the Supreme Court.

Lewis warned the journalists that his invitation to that meeting was their “last chance” and called on them to desist or be charged with contempt, punishable by 30 days’ imprisonment.

He reminded those present that, although the Liberian Constitution guarantees freedom of expression, it also requires journalists to be responsible. Lewis added that “maybe after spending 30 days at South Beach they would become responsible journalists.”

At the meeting, the Chief Justice asked the clerk to give each of the journalists a sheet of paper, upon which he asked them to write out his full name and title.

CEMESP views the comments by the Chief Justice as yet another attempt by government officials to unduly restrain journalists in the course of their work of informing the public, and to limit their exercise of the universally and constitutionally-guaranteed right to free expression.

December 13, 2007

Lawmaker Threatens to Drag Newspaper To Court

(CEMESP/IFEX) - The New Democrat Newspaper, an independent daily in Liberia has been threatened with lawsuit by a member of the Lower House in the Liberian Parliament.

The Margibi county Representative, Emmanuel Nuquay, told reporters in the Presence of his Lawyer Cllr. Marcus Jones, that he was considering dragging the newspaper to court for what he described as character assassination.

The New Democrat newspaper, had earlier reported a story captioned “The House Sinks Into Kickbacks”, in which the paper quoted a source which accused Representatives Nuquay and David Saydee of requesting kickbacks from possible bidders for the furnishing of the Capitol Building, the seat of the Liberian Legislature.

Representatives David Saydee and Emmanuel Nuquay, are Chairman and Co-chairman respectively of the House Standing Committee on Procurement.

The New Democrat newspaper also reported that the House of Representatives is said to be indebted to a number of institutions for a protracted period of time and that the Procurement committee chairman and co-chairman have refused to settle payments due to their request for kickbacks.

Meanwhile, Representative Nuquay through his legal counsel, has demanded that the New Democrat newspaper makes a retraction of its story, and denied that neither him nor the House Procurement committee Chairman Rep. David Saydee ever solicited or requested kickbacks.

17 December 2007

Police Forcefully Close Community Radio Station For 24 Hours Over Coverage Of Labour Dispute

(CEMESP/IFEX) - On 13 December 2007, the government of Liberia, through the Ministry of Justice, unlawfully closed down Stone FM, a community radio station located in Harbel, approximately 35 miles from Liberia’s capital, Monrovia.

The premises of the radio station were sealed by a squad of officers of the Liberian National Police led by Captain Suzanna Blackie, commander of the Margibi county police detachment.

Stone FM Station Manager James King told CEMESP that the uniformed Police officers, some of whom were armed with pistols, stormed the radio station and ordered the reporters to leave.

He said the police action traumatized a child broadcaster who was on-air at the time.

The station was accused of broadcasting "hate messages" against the government of Liberia and authorities of the Firestone Rubber Plantation in the wake of a strike action by employees of Firestone.

The employees' spokesperson, Eripmah Caesar, allegedly used the radio station to incite his fellow workmates to stay away from work until the management of Firestone recognizes their new leadership.

However, the station manager denies the government's accusation. He challenged the government to produce a recording of what the authorities consider "hate messages".

King described the closure of his radio station by the Ministry of Justice as "unfortunate".

On the night of 15 December, the government of Liberia reopened the Radio station, following the intervention of freedom of expression advocates.

20 December 2007

Journalists Sued For Libel By Media Executive For Criticizing His Defence Of Police Brutality Against Reporters

SOURCE: International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), Brussels

*****Updates IFEX alert of 24 September 2007*****

(IFJ/IFEX) - The following is a 19 December 2007 IFJ media release:

IFJ Supports Journalists Sued for Libel by Media Executive in Liberia

The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) today backed the call of the Press Union of Liberia (PUL) for journalists in the country to stand in solidarity with six colleagues and a newspaper accused of libel by Ambrose Nmah, the general manager of a media group.

Nmah, who also presents a news program on the radio, is suing the journalists after they published a statement calling on the PUL to investigate him for allegedly making comments on his radio program justifying physical attacks on journalists by police officers.

"It's an amazing situation when one journalist would state publicly that some of his colleagues should be subject to violence," said Gabriel Baglo, Director of the IFJ Africa office. "We support all the actions taken so far by our affiliate, the PUL, to solve the matter. We believe that this matter should be solved by the media community and not in the court system."

Ambrose Nmah is the general manager of Renaissance Communication Incorporated, a pro-government media group that owns Truth FM radio and Real TV. On October 17, Nmah and his company launched a libel suit against Star radio Editor-in-chief Geevon Smith, The News' editor Sheriff Adams, The Parrot's managing editor Robert Kpadeh, The Independent's managing editor Sam Dean, Plain Truth's publisher Seranous Cephus and former PUL Secretary General Alphonsus Zeon.

According to the PUL, the six journalists in a statement on 12 October called on the union to investigate comments Nmah allegedly made during a programme on Truth Fm “justifying attacks on some journalists for their breach of security protocol according to state authorities, during the visit to Liberia of Sierra Leone President Ernest Bai Koroma .”

“On his show that I would have been responsible for my own death if I had been killed,” BBC Stringer Jonathan Paye-Layleh, told the PUL. Paye-Layleh was brutally assaulted while covering President Koroma’s visit. He is not involved in the libel suit.

Public Agenda newspaper is also being sued for alleged publication of defamatory articles. The plaintiff is claiming 10,000.00 US dollars in damages. The trial was due to start on Monday but it has been postponed and no new date has been set.

The IFJ believes that Nmah and the other journalists should allow the PUL to mediate this conflict and decide what if any actions need to be taken.

27 December 2007

Journalists Detained For Photographing Corpses At Police Station; Camera Confiscated

(CEMESP/IFEX) - National police in Monrovia, the capital, detained three journalists for photographing the removal of two decomposed human bodies from a police cell on 19 December 2007.

Journalists Jerome Toe of the “Liberia Journal” newspaper, Helroz Zorleh of “Public Agenda” and Emmanuel Mensah of the “National Chronicle” were detained for what the police called a “violation of a crime scene” after the journalists insisted on taking photographs of the bodies.

The police ordered the three journalists arrested and Mensah’s camera scanned for photographs of the decomposed bodies. Mensah and his colleagues refused to comply, whereupon the police sent for reinforcements. When the reinforcements arrived, the journalists were roughed up, bundled into a police pickup and taken to the police headquarters, where they were detained and the camera confiscated.

They were released upon the intervention of several organizations defending freedom of expression, including CEMESP, the Press Union of Liberia and the Foundation for Human Rights and Democracy. Malcolm Joseph of CEMESP, human rights advocate Aloysius Toe, Peter Quaqua of the Press Union of Liberia and other media practitioners assembled at the police headquarters to inquire into the matter.

After a thorough discussion, police spokesperson Alvin Jask-Kanneh announced that an investigation will be conducted to ascertain the facts regarding the case.

FREE EXPRESSION CITATIONS

1. Article 15 (Constitution of Liberia)¹

- a) Every person shall have the right to freedom of expression, being fully responsible for the abuse thereof. This right shall not be curtailed, restricted or enjoined by government save during an emergency declared in accordance with this Constitution.
- b) The right encompasses the right to hold opinions without interference and the right to knowledge. It includes freedom of speech and of the press, academic freedom to receive and impart knowledge and information and the right of libraries to make such knowledge available. It includes non-interference with the use of the mail, telephone and telegraph. It likewise includes the right to remain silent.

- c) In pursuance of this right, there shall be no limitation on the public right to be informed about the government and its functionaries.
- d) Access to state owned media shall not be denied because of any disagreement with or dislike of the ideas expressed. Denial of such access may be challenged in a court of competent jurisdiction.
- e) This freedom may be limited only by judicial action in proceedings grounded in defamation or invasion of the rights of privacy and publicity or in the commercial aspect of expression in deception, false advertising and copyright infringement.

2. Article 9(African [Banjul] Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights)²

- 1. Every individual shall have the right to receive information. 2. Every individual shall have the right to express and disseminate his opinions within the law.

3. Article 2 (International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights)³

- 1. Each State Party to the present Covenant undertakes to take steps, individually and through international assistance and co-operation, especially economic and technical, to the maximum of its available resources, with a view to achieving progressively the full realization of the rights recognized in the present Covenant by all appropriate means, including particularly the adoption of legislative measures.
- 2. The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to guarantee that the rights enunciated in the present Covenant will be exercised without discrimination of any kind as to race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.
- 3. Developing countries, with due regard to human rights and their national economy, may determine to what extent they would guarantee the economic rights recognized in the present Covenant to non-nationals.

4. Article 19(Universal Declaration of Human Rights)⁴

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

(Footnotes)

¹ The Liberia 1986 Constitution replaced the Liberia 1847 Constitution which was suspended on April 12, 1980, following the coup d'etat which overthrew the presidency of H. E. William R. Tolbert, Jr. On January 6, 1986 the Constitution came into force.

² Adopted by the Organization of African Unity (OAU) entered into force Oct. 21, 1986

³ Adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by General Assembly resolution 2200A (XXI) of 16 December 1966; entry into force

3 January 1976, in accordance with article 27 ⁴

Adopted and proclaimed by United Nations General Assembly resolution 217 A (III) of 10 December 1948

An Overview Of The Enactment And Implementation Of Access To Information Laws In Liberia

Malcolm W. Joseph

Executive Director, Center for Media Studies & Peace Building (CEMESP)

As of September 2005, a total of 63 countries around the world had access to information laws, according to the Open Society Justice Initiative. These laws are based on the principle that every member of the public has the right of access to information held by government bodies or in the possession of any institution funded by public and private bodies performing public functions. In that same vein, governments may only withhold information from public access if disclosure would cause demonstrable harm to legitimate interests, such as national security or privacy, and these exceptions must be clearly and specifically defined by law.

In Liberia, there has been an effort to institute wide-ranging reform in the legal and institutional frameworks within which the media operates, and to promote democracy through unhindered access to information. The centerpiece of that effort was the convening in October 2004 of a National Conference on Media Law and Policy Reform, organized by the Partnership on Media and Conflict Prevention in West Africa, the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism, UNESCO, UNDP-Liberia and the Press Union of Liberia, with support from International Media Support, Open Society Institute, UNESCO and Ibis-West Africa.

Among recommendations advanced by journalists, human rights activists and lawyers that attended the conference was the enactment of a Freedom of Information Act that would give members of the public, including journalists, a right of access to records and information held by public bodies.

Following on the recommendation, the working group in 2005 drafted the Freedom of Information Act of Liberia. Efforts to get the Act passed by the National Transitional Legislative Assembly did not materialize. With a constitutionally elected government now in place, the Act is now due to be presented to the National Legislature for passage into law.

Acknowledgement

On the publication of this compendium, the Center for Media Studies and Peace Building (CEMESP) likes to note the contributions made by various actors, including funding organizations, media advocacy groups, journalists and others affected by the threat on free expression. The contributions have been diverse for a number of reasons, some including funds, encouragement, attribution for prior publications, ... While it would be impossible to note each contributor by person, it would also not be prudent should we not list a few very important supporters

We accordingly like to note the following:

- National Endowment for Democracy (NED)
- International Freedom of Expression eXchange (IFEX)
- UNESCO – BREDA
- Media Foundation for West Africa
- Press Union of Liberia
- Liberia Media Center
- New Democrat Newspaper
- International Federation of Journalists
- Committee to Protect Journalists
- World Editors' Forum
- World Association of Newspapers

At CEMESP secretariat, we like to note the roles of the following: Calixte Hessou, Mabandu Sherif and Prutus Sackie. Note is also made here of Kenneth G. Bracewell. We will also acknowledge the role of all human rights, especially free expression, advocates who have shared our ambition of curbing abuse of these universally acknowledged rights. It is our prayers that acceptance of the issues we advocate will make a next edition of this publication unnecessary.

