

# World's Press condemns closure of Liberian news site, wants jailed editor released

PARIS, FRANCE / DARMSTADT, GERMANY: The World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA) and the World Editors Forum have called for the release of Editor Rodney Sieh from prison in Liberia, a country whose president, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, committed to repeal criminal defamation laws last year.



Sieh, Managing Editor of FrontPageAfrica, has been hospitalised after beginning a hunger strike to protest his imprisonment and the exorbitant US\$1.5m libel judgment against him. He wrote about his case [on the op-ed page of the New York Times](#).

In a letter to President Sirleaf, and in a conference call with government officials and local press representatives on Tuesday, WAN-IFRA and WEF called on the government to honour its commitment to press freedom.

In July last year, President Sirleaf became the second African head-of-state to sign the Declaration of Table Mountain, a continent-wide campaign that calls for the repeal of insult and criminal defamation laws and for setting a free press higher on the agenda.

The jailing of Sieh "called into disrepute the spirit of the Declaration... as well as the pledges made by you and your government to make Liberia freer and more accountable," said the letter to the president.

The Declaration, initiated by WAN-IFRA and WEF at the World Newspaper Congress in Cape Town, South Africa, in 2007, has been endorsed by numerous press freedom and civil society organisations. It identifies criminal defamation and insult laws as amongst the most severe obstacles to securing the future of the independent press in Africa.

## Excessive fine politically motivated?

The closure of FrontPageAfrica, and the excessive libel damages and imprisonment imposed on Sieh for reporting the findings of an official government inquiry into corruption, are serious setbacks to press freedom and the fight against corruption in Liberia, WAN-IFRA said in the letter to the president.

WAN-IFRA said the heavy fine appeared politically motivated and had been deliberately applied to silence a critical media outlet. FrontPageAfrica has repeatedly reported on corruption, official misconduct, and human rights abuses.

In a conference call on Tuesday, Liberian Minister for Information Lewis G. Brown II said a new bill to repeal criminal defamation would be introduced before parliament in January 2014. However, he characterised the libel case as a private matter between a journalist and a citizen. WAN-IFRA and representatives from local media organisations - Malcolm Joseph from Liberia's Centre for Media Studies and Peace Building, and Peter Quaqua of the Liberian Press Union - called for Sieh's release and pointed out that President Sirleaf had requested a repeal of the legislation but that it had yet to be done.

"We are keen to work with all stakeholders in Liberia, including the government and international organisations, to ensure the bill goes before parliament as soon as possible", said Alison Meston, WAN-IFRA Director of Press Freedom.

WAN-IFRA and the WEF hold that a civil award of reasonable damages is adequate and appropriate relief in all proven cases of defamation.

The full letter to President Sirleaf can be read [here](#).

For more information of the Declaration of Table Mountain, WAN-IFRA's continent-wide campaign to repeal criminal defamation, [click here](#).

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