

TWO Quarterly Reports of the Media Alert Office/Press Union of Liberia
44Clay Street, Monrovia, Liberia (April to September 2017)

Introduction:

The Press Union of Liberia (PUL), as part of its ongoing efforts to give Liberia's current media environment a new face, has embarked upon a number of programs/initiatives. One of these constructive initiatives is the birth of a Media Alert Office.

In line with the Term of Reference (TOR) of the Media Alert Office, I am pleased to submit these two quarterly reports. The essence of releasing these two reports is to provide an opportunity for the public, users of media products and our local and international partners to have an idea on what is obtaining in Liberia, relative to the country's current media environment in the area of free space for its operations.

In another sense, the drafting and subsequent publication of this combined report is to provide a synopsis of what is happening in Liberia, relative to the trend the country's current media environment is taking in the areas of attack on press freedom/media personnel, institutions and free speech, among other factors.

The first part of the report covers from April 10, 2017 to Monday, June 30, while the second portion covers from August to September 30 2017.

The idea to set up a Media Alert Office by the Press Union of Liberia and one of its partners - Internews - is aimed at tracking, collating, monitoring and analyzing issues of attacks on journalists across Liberia, media institutions and other crucial matters bordering on freedom of expression, as well as take a critical look at the trend of Liberia's current media landscape, as stated from the Genesis of the report.

These monthly figures of attacks are analyzed and forwarded to the leadership of the Union through appropriate recommendations for prompt action.

The Media Alert Office, in accordance with its duties or Term of Reference provides weekly briefings to the leadership of the Press Union of Liberia.

The Office of Media Alert Officer was set up at the PUL Headquarters on Clay Street and official work began on Monday, April 10, 2017.

The tracking or collection of information has been carried out in several ways- taking into consideration, physical/verbal attacks on journalists, media workers/institutions, issues of free speech and press freedom in Liberia.

As the Press Union of Liberia, through the Media Alert Office releases this report, it is worth to note that Liberia has made history for signing the Freedom of Information Act into law in 2010. The Country has also made history for formally signing the Table Mountain Declaration.

However, there is a need to test the birth of these useful internationally acclaimed media instruments by setting up an Office that will look into issues of how these two positive developments can be sustained, relative to the nature of space everyone looks forward to seeing- that is the issue of upholding press freedom through an atmosphere that is free of attacks or intimidation.

Methodology:

The methodology involves monitoring talk shows and reading the various local dailies on a daily basis.

It also includes receiving of formal complaints filed by journalists and media institutions themselves in specific areas and making efforts to have them verified. As part of efforts to afford readers the opportunity to have a clearer picture of the issues outlined in the introductory stage of the report, documentary evidence, including newspaper publications and photographs of these attacks are included in the report.

During the first quarter of operations of the Media Alert Office (April to June) there were three attacks on the media, while the second quarter (July to September) received and documented three(one attack and two threats), totaling 6 during the two quarters.

Montserrado County bears the highest of three, with Margibi coming second with two.

Male/Female ratio first quarter:

The Media Alert Office realized that all the attacks/threats on the media in Liberia during the two reporting periods affected only male journalists.

Counties:

Montserrado County-----1

Margibi County-----2
Male/female ratio second quarter:
Counties:
Montserrado -----2
Nimba-----1

Here are the details of attacks and threats:

Joe K.S. Fineboy

1. The first attack was registered against Journalist Joe K.S. Fineboy, a freelance journalist whose works are frequently aired by Cool FM 91.9MHz located in Paynesville, outside of Monrovia. Cool FM is owned by a Liberian, Mr. Christopher Onanuga.

The complaint was filed against an executive of one of Liberia’s opposition political parties, Mr. Darrius Dillon of the Liberty Party, on Tuesday, April 29, 2017.

Journalist Fineboy had gone to the Party’s Headquarters in Congo Town on Tuesday, April 13, 2017, to seek information about the ‘fleet of vehicles’ being paraded by the Party when the incident occurred.

He reported that Liberty Party’s Deputy Secretary for Press and Propaganda, Mr. Klah Tumbay helped to get him out of the Party’s premises without further trouble.

During the periods under review, the Liberty Party was at the center of attention by both the media and civil society actors to provide information about its fleet of vehicles, as well as allegations that President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf of the governing Unity Party was secretly supporting its Standard Bearer, Cllr. Charles Walker Brumskine, instead of her Party’s Standard bearer and current Liberian Vice President, Mr. Joseph Boakai.

Journalist Fineboy told the Press Union of Liberia that his mobile phone and recorder were smashed in the process. The case was turned over to Liberia’s first multi-stakeholders’ National Media Council for redress. Upon the receipt of the complaint, the National Media Council invited both parties for hearing in October. During hearing into the matter, the complainant, Journalist Fineboy requested the Council to halt further hearing into the matter, instead to mediate between him

and the accused, Mr. Dillon, as a means of bringing about amicable resolution to the matter. According to Journalist Fineboy, his decision to beg for pardon stemmed from the fact that he did not act in accordance with the Liberian journalist Code of Ethics during his reportorial duty at the Liberty Party's Headquarters. Following the mediation by the Council, both parties shook hands as a sign of peace.

NMC rules on Duoloquee-Liberty Party Case:

2. The Press Union of Liberia, through the National Media Council, on Tuesday, August 29, came out with its formal position/findings on a complaint filed against the Liberty Party and initially placed on file by the Media Alert Office as an attack on the media.

The Press Union of Liberia, through the National Media Council, on Tuesday, August 29, came out with its formal position/findings on a complaint filed against the Liberty Party on June 9, 2017 by Journalist Franklin Doloquee of the Liberia Broadcasting System and New Dawn Newspaper.

Mr. Doloquee, who is the Nimba County correspondent for the Liberia Broadcasting System alleged that he was manhandled and his recorder taken away by a security guard of the Party during its candidate nomination program in Ganta City, Nimba County in 2017.

The complaint was received, filed and subsequently looked into by the National Media Council.

The Media Alert Office of the PUL, charged with the responsibility of tracking, collating and analyzing issues of content and violations against journalists' rights and free speech also filed the complaint and forwarded it to the NMC for immediate redress.

After investigation in which the both sides were invited, including independent accounts from witnesses who are also journalists, the NMC did not see any evidence in Mr. Doloquee's allegations against the Liberty Party.

Besides, the NMC also noticed contradictions in journalist Duoloquee's comments and noted further that Journalist Doloquee exaggerated his comments. The NMC therefore cleared the Liberty Party of the claims.

In fact the New Dawn Newspaper, of which Mr. Doloquee is also a reporter, was the first to have retracted its publication of wrong doing against the LP, after the matter had already been reported to the PUL.

The Paper, at the time said it was misled by Journalist Doloquee and therefore apologized to the Liberty Party.

The matter is now laid to rest, with journalists asked to abide by protocols in carrying out their professional duties.

The leadership of the Press Union of Liberia also urged journalists and those in other professions to respect each other's rights.

Radio Joy Africa

3. The Press Union of Liberia's Media Alert Office during the time under review was also able to track another attack on the existence of a community radio in Kakata, Margibi County. Radio Joy Africa was abruptly shut down after it was taken off a power-grid owned by Lone Star GSM Company.

The action was carried out by the Margibi County Chairmen of the All Liberian Party, Mr. Alfred Jerbo, allegedly on the orders of the Political leader of the ALP, Mr. Benoni W. Urey.

Mr. Urey, a businessman-turned politician, contested the Liberian Presidency on October 10, 2017 on the ticket of the All Liberian Party (ALP).

Mr. Jerbo is said to have also switched off and subsequently disconnected the station while a talk show was ongoing. The ALP's action followed a talk show, which seemed not to be in its (party) interest.

Radio Joy Africa Arson Attack



4. As if disconnecting the local radio from the tower of the Lone Star GSM Company did not affect the station's operations, Radio Joy Africa suffered an arson attack on Tuesday, August 29, 2017. As reported by ELBC Radio and confirmed by a staff of the Station, Patrick Kollie, the community radio lost equipment, its only generator and other valuable properties during the fire incident.

Nation Times Newspaper

5. The Wednesday, August 2, 2017 publication of the Nation Times Newspaper, in its Volume 12, Edition 17, carried a communication from the Office of the Director of the Executive Protection Force (EPS), seeking the assistance of the Press Union of Liberia's President, Mr. Charles B. Coffey, to "Escort the living body of Mr. Omasco Giago, Acting Managing Editor of the Nation Times and Mr. Octavian Williams, Publisher, to the Office of the EPS Director, Mr. Sam Gaye," on Monday, July 24, 2017 at 10:00 AM for "questioning and self-explanatory assertions" for an article published by the periodical concerning alleged security threats on the life of President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf. It can be recalled that the Nation Times, in its Thursday, July 20, Volume 12 Edition 14, reported that President Sirleaf's life was in danger, owing to the participation of her Security Advisor, Dr. H. Boima Fahnbulleh, Aid Decamp, General Jerry Hinneh and another security aid in the 2017 Presidential and Legislative Elections in Liberia.

Here is the caption of the story: President Sirleaf Risks Assassination...Chief Bodyguard Seeks Presidency---Fell Betrayed by Boss."

While the PUL discourages the intimidation of the press, it is worth noting that the tabloid which is known to be associated with Mr. Octavin Williams is currently appearing on the newsstands with a misleading imprint. Contact numbers in the stamp of the paper are wrong in total disregard for the ethics of journalism which calls for full attribution at all times except in the case of extreme threats where professionals go pseudo.

Abraham Morris of the In Profile Daily Newspaper



6. During the period under review, the Media Alert Office was able to capture an issue bordering on threats against Reporter Abraham Morris of the In Profile Daily Newspaper.

The story, under the caption: “Lawsuit”- East International Threatens In Profile’s Reporter, was carried in the Paper’s Monday, July 31, 2017, Volume 9 Edition 169. The In Profile, in the publication said its staff, Mr. Morris was doing a follow up on allegations by a civil society advocate, Martin K. Kollie that an alleged surrogate of the East International wanted to bribe him (Kollie) with \$6,000 United States Dollars to stop his criticism against the company’s alleged dubious activities.

Besides, Journalist Morris was seeking clarifications from the Company about “controversies” surrounding a 59.9 Million United States Dollar Pre-financing Agreement recently passed by the Liberian Senate.

Here is a text allegedly sent to Reporter Morris by the General Manager of the East International Group Incorporated, Mr. J. Kelvin Buimah, as contained in the In Profile Daily’s Monday, July 31, 2017 Publication: “Continue sending more texts, we will meet and you will prove it in court.

Attacks- Kanney Ziamo



7. The Heritage Newspaper, in its Thursday, October 5, 2017 Edition 3447 Volume 19 reported an attack on Journalist Kanney Ziammo of Radio Gompa, Nimba County.

Reporter Ziamma who also reports for the Liberia News Agency (LINA) was brutalized by a member of the opposition Alternative National Congress, Metri Gono, along with other supporters of the ANC. The ANC executive had accused Journalist Ziammo's ethnic group, (Gio) of being under miners. The allegation was reportedly made during conversation between the two.

But as reported by the paper, Journalist Ziammo out rightly rejected such claims against members of the Gio ethnic group. The situation led to the brutalization of the local journalist.

The Media Alert Office considers Journalist Ziammo's brutalization as an attack on the media and calls for immediate probe by the PUL/National Media Council.

8. Attack- James Karimu of Prime FM Monrovia

A reporter of Prime FM, in Monrovia, James Karimu was also attacked during the Month of October. The reporter offered political analysis in an argument on the electoral process at a location in Monrovia which turned hostile.

Journalists Karimu told the Media Alert Officer those who attacked him are from the opposition CDC.

Mr. Karimu is the Legislative Reporter for Prime FM.

9. Attacks- Arson on Smith Tobey

On Wednesday, October 18, 2017, Smith Tobey, a Manager at Okay FM was another victim of an arson attack. Mr. Tobey is also a talk show presenter on Okay FM in Monrovia.

The Liberian journalist's house on the Robertsfield Highway was attacked by unknown individuals during the morning hours.

The Press Union of Liberia strongly condemned the arson attack on Journalist Tobey's residence. The Liberia National Police opened investigation in the matter, with several persons being held.

10. Attack- Henry Costa, Political Commentator

One of Liberia's political commentator, Henry Costa also came under attack by a group believed to be members and sympathizers of the Coalition for Democratic Change (CDC) on Tuesday, October 24, 2017 in Monrovia.

The CDC is headed by former football legend, Senator George Opong Manneh Weah, now President Elect.

Costa is not a journalist. He is member of the All Liberian Party of Benoni Urey. The young politician however runs a provocative talk show on Shatta FM, after the closure of his Voice FM.

Mr. Costa was trying to gauge public opinion on a George Weah-led government in Liberia. The political commentator, said, in his opinion, Mr. Weah lacks the experience to serve as President of Liberia. Immediately, after the talk show, Mr. Costa was pursued by a group believed to be supporters of Senator George Weah's Coalition for Democratic Change. He managed to escape further wrath of the crowd as other concerned members of the public intervened.

The attack of Costa was captured by several local dailies, including the Heritage and the People's Newspaper.

For example, Heritage, Wednesday, October 25, 2017 Edition 20 Number 34490, reads:

Following His Outburst Against Weah: Talk Show Host Costa Attacked

The people's News Paper, in its Wednesday, October 25, 2017 Edition 5 Volume 93 reads:

"Weah Supporters Attack Henry Costa"

Analysis:

The attack on the talk show host is an attack on free speech.

11. Lawsuit- PUL VP Octavian Williams

Also in the month of October, the Vice President of the Press Union of Liberia, Octavin Williams was accused of libel and taken to court. Importantly, the lawsuit was brought against him by Rodney Sieh, the Managing Editor of Frontpage Africa Newspaper.

The Nation Times newspaper associated with Mr. Williams had published a story alleging that Mr. Sieh was invading a lawsuit in the United States after failing to settle his rental indebtedness to his former landlord at a Greenview Garden Apartment in America.

The paper also disclosed that while this case was ongoing, a Liberian women identified as Yewande Adebayo-Richardson on September 7th, 2010, issued a notice of summons in a lawsuit filed against Rodney Sieh and the Management of Front Page Africa, and further noted that the FPA Publisher may face an arrest if he attempted traveling to the United States.

Mr. Rodney Sieh has since denied the accusation in public and private spaces.

Mediatory meetings led by the Press Union of Liberia to withdraw the case from court has so far ended in deadlock with Mr. Octavin Williams refusing to retract his publication and apologize.

Analysis: This is a groundbreaking case which could test the media community's call for the decriminalization of speech offenses.

12. Threat- Tokpa Tarnue

The Alert Office during the period under review also tracked an arson threat against the Lofa County Correspondent of the National Broadcaster- Liberia Broadcasting System. Mr. Tokpa Tarnue wrote the Press Union to formally complaint of the threat against his home.

In his letter, Tarnue stated that the Police Chief in Lofa, J. Titoe Lolin informed him of rumors to burn his home in Voinjama, Lofa County. The arson threat occurred in the aftermath of the tour of Lofa by the opposition Coalition for Democratic Change of Montserrado County Senator George M. Weah. (President-Elect)

As part of reporter Tarnue's coverage of the political rallies, he provided analysis on the huge turnout that witnessed Mr. Weah's campaign visit to Lofa. Mr. Tarnue said the mammoth crowd attracted to the rallies show up as a result of celebrities accompanying Senator Weah on his trips. It can be recalled that the CDC Standard Bearer, an international football icon, invited famous African superstars included Frank Itus during the political campaign.

Journalist Tarnue's report is said to have annoyed some young people believed to be partisans of the CDC.

The Press Union of Liberia wrote the Liberia National Police about the threat seeking in deep investigation. Mr. Tarnue later informed the Union of his bosses at LBS decision to let the matter be.

13. Threat- Meloshi Roberts

In Tubmanburg, Bomi County in the same October, Journalist Meloshi Roberts narrowly escaped a stone-throwing crowd allegedly made predominately of youth. Reporter Roberts is the Bomi County correspondent of the Liberia Broadcasting System.

Those who attempted stoning and chopping him with machetes are said to be youthful partisans of the Coalition for Democratic Change.

Journalist Roberts had gone to take part in a random political discussions on the current electoral process in Liberia, at an entertainment center in Tubmanburg, where he also resides when the incident occurred.

14. 10 Million US Dollar Law suit

The publisher of an online media outlet, The Global News Network, J. Cholo Brooks was greeted with a law suit during the reporting period, particularly the month of November, 2017.

Mr. Brooks had carried a story on a construction company owned by one Praise Glory Lawal.

Documents in possession of the Press Union of Liberia, subsequently turned over to the Media Alert Office suggest that the journalist's publication was based on a communication from the Liberia Anti-Corruption Commission, calling for a halt to all further payments to the Praise Glory Lawal Construction Company, of which Mr. Lawal is the CEO, until ongoing investigation was concluded.

The publication had to do with millions of United States Dollars allegedly paid to the PGL for the construction of the Brewerville/Bopolu Road, yet to be completed.

15. Attack- Abraham Gui-Johnson

As we prepare this report, a staff of Radio Bushrod D 98.1 FM, Abraham Gui-Johnson was allegedly assaulted by five men officers of the Armed Forces of Liberia. The group was reportedly headed by one S.S Blamo of the Coast Guard base.

The management of Radio D 15 has formally sent a letter to the leadership of the Press Union of Liberia. The latter, dated December 28, 2017 has been turned over to the Media Alert Office for probe.

The process of verification is ongoing to determine the merits into the matter through substantiation.

Conclusion:

The monitoring of content across the media has been a difficult task in the last six months for a dedicated staff in the absence on monitoring mechanism, especially with the evolution of the social media. The public including some media practitioners themselves are posting things without taking into consideration its explosive nature. Some are posting profanity and anti-peace messages relative to the current political situation (2017 Presidential and Legislative Elections) in Liberia.

This report cannot conclude without the journalism community appreciating the sole funder of the Media Alert Office at the PUL, the American People and Government through their International Aid Agency (USAID).

Finally, this project is at the code of the protection of journalism in Liberia and will stay in the operations of the Press Union of Liberia and this leadership at the Union continue to source funding for its implementation.

We will continue to document people who find it rewarding to assault journalists- by during so democrats all over the world will shun them and boycott their qualities. Those who still feel that some journalists are not professional in their work, the way to proceed is to forward your grievances to the National Media Council and avoid physically attacking us.

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