

Press Union of Liberia

Monrovia - Liberia



**World Press Freedom Day Celebrations
May 3, 2013**

BACKGROUND

On May 3, 2013, Liberian journalists and friends of the media celebrated World Press Freedom Day, a day set aside by the United Nations to remind governments around the world about their obligation to respect and uphold press freedom. The Liberian version of the celebration was held outside of the nation's capital, Monrovia, in Buchanan, Grand Bassa County.

As a tradition, the Press Union of Liberia, the umbrella organization of media organs in the country, used the day to carry out appropriate programs and activities in observance of the occasion. This year, the PUL celebrated the day in partnership with the Center for Media Studies and Peace-building with support from UNESCO under the theme globally set as *"Safe to Speak: Securing Freedom of Expression for All Media."*

Consistent with the theme, a panel of selected media persons and national security personnel was assembled to discuss the growing number of altercations between journalists and security operatives.

The panel discussions and choice of panelists acknowledged the far-from-rosy relationship that exists between the media and government security units. There has been empirical evidence from the documentation of attacks and threats on media by both the Center for Media Studies and Peace-building and the Press Union of Liberia which points to the near constant hostile relationship between journalists and members of the

security sector. This unwholesome situation has created a disturbing perception that media and security personnel are perpetual adversaries. The panel discussion was therefore meant to create a platform for journalists and representatives of the security sector to share notes on how to improve relations in the context to fostering the unhindered gathering and dissemination of news and information by the Liberian media, but also to highlight the overarching roles of both the media and the security in the peace and security of the country.

Opening Ceremonies

Following a parade of the principal streets of Buchanan, journalists who turned out for the World Press Freedom Day as well as their special quests, converged for an indoor program at the United Methodist Compound in Buchanan. Representatives from partner organizations – UNMIL, US Embassy, IREX, The EU Ambassador, The Ministry of Information, UNESCO, local officials and others, proffered solidarity greetings with all hailing the strides of Liberian journalists under difficult conditions.

Statement by PUL President

As a custom, the President of the Press Union of Liberia delivered the organization's official statement—the Union's perspective on the state of the Liberian media. The statement followed the reading of UN Secretary-General's Message commemorating the day. Mr. Peter Quaqua's statement largely took a diagnostic analysis of the Liberian media landscape, holding both influential public officials, by extension

Government, and media managers culpable in the low state of media performance.

He said Liberia's postwar peace and stability have open new opportunities for the citizens to exercise their rights under Article 15 of the Country's Constitution, which guarantees free speech and press freedom. He hailed the media for creating the space and incentive for the citizens to participate in the governance process as shown in the pluralism of the media landscape.

Mr. Quaqua was however quick to point out that the ownership of a growing number of media outlets presents a new kind of dilemma in journalists' quest for ethical standard and professionalism. This is an apparent reference to the situation wherein some of these media institutions are either owned or patronized by politicians and other people with commercial and vested interest. "These owners will do anything to get at their opponents and/or comparators through the media without regard for basic norms and this situation is fast driving the Liberian media into what Ghanaian Prof. Kwame Karikari refers to as the "rented media." He warned this is a serious challenge to the press freedom.

He observed that too often, when officials boast about press freedom in the country, they forget about the harsh economic environment under which the media operates. "In spite of the encouraging political environment, the media remains poorly capitalized, making them even more susceptible to manipulations." According to Mr. Quaqua, advertisement is the new weapon being used against the media in the face of the biting poverty eating up the integrity of the population. He said even where revenues are

low, many media institutions have had “to wait for as long as it pleases government to pay their fees.” This undermines the independence of the media and eventually suppresses critical opinions against our wishes for a democratic state, he added.

For the lack of a better understanding, the PUL leader said, the ministries of Information and Finance were seen negotiating payments of advertising dollars owed media institutions – in some cases negotiating waivers. “Our government strangely introduced a payment scheme for media debts, known as “golden handshake.” This scheme allowed government to arbitrarily pay advertising fees to media outlets across the board regardless of the services rendered. This is a dangerous toy and an attempt to scuttle the operation of the media.”

As a result of this economic squeeze, working journalists are being victimized by some of their employers. Most reporters and editors complain of poor remuneration and conditions of service. “This also threatens the press freedom we seek and talk about today,” Quaqua said, revealing further that the Union has now concluded the second draft of the Collective Bargaining Agreement debated in Grand Cape Mount County at the immediate past anniversary celebration of the Union. He promised that in the coming weeks release the second draft of the document for your comments and final negotiation, as this is one way of answering to some of the ethical transgressions in the media.

The PUL President also spoke of credits that must be given to the Liberian government for showing some measure of willingness to improve the legal environment for the operation of the media. Some of the strides in this area of legal security and freedom for journalists include the signing by President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of the Declaration of Table Mountain (DTM), an expressed commitment of her government to repealing all the anti speech and press laws still on penal code in Liberia. The DTM seeks to decriminalize defamation and insult laws.

By this commitment, Mr. Quaqua hopes, “our court system will also revisit the excessive fines or penalties levied against media outlets found guilty in label suits. We have seen jury reward 900 thousand dollars, 1.5 million dollars and 5 million dollars in separate cases as damages against the media. This sort of prohibitive punishment simply amounts to tyranny of the judiciary and therefore a structural attempt to shut down the media.”

He called on Government to heed its commitment to media freedom and free expression by further hastening the passage of the bill to transform the state-owned Liberia Broadcasting System into a public service broadcaster and the act to establish an independent broadcast regulator. These two bills were left before the 52nd legislature as the country went to elections.

Panel Discussion

The topic for the panel was, “Media-Security Relations—an Imperative for Consolidating Peace in Liberia.” The topic came from the backdrop of the strains that characterize relations between journalists and government

officials, particularly security operatives assigned with those officials. Media watchdog groups have documented scores of incidents of fracas, including the manhandling of journalists and the smashing and seizure of journalists' gadgets while covering official functions.

The event was therefore meant to bring both sides around the table, present their cases and plow new grounds for improved relations that would facilitate the unhindered exercise of the media's right and responsibility in the discharge of their duties.

On the platform as principal discussants were former PUL Secretary General Frank Sainworla; Deputy Police Director for Operations Abraham Kromah; longtime civil society activist and Trust Africa's Project Director Ezekiel Pajibo, The Executive Protection Service Director Othello Warrick and a proxy of the Defense Minister.

Frank Sainworla:

Mr. Sainworla recalled myriad incidents of "horrific encounters", as he put it, between Liberian state security forces and journalists not only during the civil war years but also at various stages during peace time, citing the arrests, maltreatment and jailing of journalists during the Samuel Doe and Charles Taylor regimes. Some of the incidents he recounted include those of the late Liberian broadcast Journalist Charles Gbenyon who lost his life in the November 12, 1985 abortive coup that followed the late General Thomas Quinwonkpa's invasion from neighboring Sierra Leone. Before that, he also recalled, there were dangerous acrimonious relations between

media practitioners (including the late Albert Porte and Tuan Wreh) during the Tubman and Tolbert regimes.

Mr. Sainworla acknowledged that with the formal end to the Liberian civil war in 2003 and the subsequent holding of elections in October 2005 and the coming into office of President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf in January 2006, “a new era [has] dawned since then, where bullets have been silent and Liberians have enjoyed a great level of peace and stability.

He however observed that the situation today is no doubt a far cry from what it was during those turbulent years in so far as threat to physical security of journalists and media personnel is concerned. The Sirleaf government is noted for boasting that no Journalist is in jail. This is true, he noted, but said the existing scenario now may likely change when state security totally takes control of national security.

It is the opinion of Mr. Sainworla that the presence in the country of UNMIL has gone a long way in taming the local forces’ actions, and feels that this lull in time should provide a perfect opportunity for state security forces known for their anti-media and anti-freedom inclination to put their house in order before the expiry of the tenure of UNMIL.

With the prevailing fragile peace, coupled with noticeable absence of a genuine national reconciliation program, Sainworla believes fostering healthy media-security relations is absolutely imperative for protecting and consolidating this peace. But in order to realize this, he said, there must

first be mutual respect, understanding and appreciation of each other's role and responsibilities within the democratic system.

Both the security forces and the media must understand their respective roles under the law and their respective professional codes of ethics and practice. Thus, he noted that the lack of understanding and appreciation of these roles in the past coupled with the absence of mutual respect had led to turbulent relations between journalists and state security forces.

As UNMIL phases out and an all Liberian joint security team takes full control, Mr. Sainworla stressed "it's prudent for Liberians to brace ourselves from overzealousness, overlapping of functions and the jostling for supremacy, which could lead to excesses, and which could have the propensity to strain local security relations with the media--the mirror of society."

According to Sainworla, forging healthy media-security relations will not come in a vacuum but that there must be deliberate efforts by all sides to make it a reality since Liberia's hard won peace, which had to be at the expense of an estimated 250,000 precious lives, cannot be consolidated if the media and security forces are constantly at each other's throat. He also called on ruling elites to professionalize and de-politicize state security forces by allowing merit to prevail over loyalty to individuals rather than the state and by living up to professional code of practice.

He then turned to journalists and said: "Professionalize the journalism field by ensuring that media practitioners scrupulously adhere to the code of

conduct and ethics, putting them above partisan interest, where practicing journalists will be practicing journalists and practicing spin doctors will be practicing spin doctors.”

Ezekiel Pajibo

Mr. Ezekiel Pajibo, a former student leader and longtime civil society actor, began his presentation by urging Liberians, particularly those in arms, to understand and move away from the idea that security is about protecting the state against the people.

“Without the people there would be no state,” he said, adding, “the security cannot protect the state against the people.” He explained that the state is the embodiment of the people and state has a social contract with the people, which is why the people cannot seek to provide special treatment to them, he reasoned.

He however recognized that there is a mutual relation between the media and the security forces, since according to him, the media is primarily the intelligence arm of the security, as the media gets the information the security acts upon. He perceived the media as in his words, “intelligence gathering sector of the state. If one reads the newspapers on a daily basis, the person becomes intelligent.”

He explained it further this way: “You get more information, more insight; you know where to go at night and where not to go. You get to know the safe and unsafe neighborhoods. You know where crime is higher and where it is not higher. That is what you get from the media. So I think in that

regard, the media and security need to collaborate. But we also live in difficult times. We live in a post war society. A post war society that is extremely fragile.

So there is a tendency for people to try to limit others' rights. But Pajibo thinks that the counter balance to that is for one to recognize that with rights comes, responsibility.

Pajibo reasoned that government officials and their security units need to calm down and behave polite to the citizens because whenever they behave polite to the citizens, the citizens will behave polite to them. "But when you are screening and shouting," he said, "then the hostile environment does not lend itself for respect for the security. Respect must be earned."

Col. Abraham Kromah

Next on the podium to address the audience was Abraham Kromah, Deputy Director for Operation of the Liberia National Police. He represented the segment of Government that perhaps has the most problem with the media.

He said the police are the statutory arm of Government that advocates for fairness, of just interaction and of justice while the media is also an advocate for fairness, justice and the truth; reasons why he said both the media and the police need to work together for the good of the Liberian society.

The Liberian police have got an unpleasant relationship with both the media and the public, but the Deputy Police Director assured the audience “we have not chosen to go back to those old days of the military and the most recent past” and promised that the LNP remains an open organization to address issues as they are presented.

He pleaded: “Let each and every one of you as editors-in-chief, managing editors and as individual journalists go beyond this day--this is a very important day for you, me and the rest of the Liberian populace. As we go beyond this day, let us come with that sense of responsibility.” This was an apparent reference to the usual criticism against the media for sometimes failing to report ‘fairly and responsibly’, even though it also means the media must protect state “secrets” and publish anything pertaining to Government.

Irrespective of all of the shortcomings that the LNP have had in its relationship with the media, the Deputy Police Director promised: “We will respect the fact that you all as journalists have that right which is guaranteed under our constitution and the LNP will not abrogate that for personal aggrandizement or for some little bad feeling that we had.” He recounted incidents where someone was brought into the Police Station for questioning and a journalist’s camera was knocked down by another security from another security agency.

He promised that police officers will always be open to engage the media because that is one of the ways a vibrant society can be built. “Without your right to express, without your right to speak for those silent minorities, we

would not have built the society that we have built,” he further acknowledged.

Othello Warrick

The most controversial remarks came from the head of the Executive Protection Service (EPS), Othello Warrick. The EPS was formally, the Special Security Service (SSS), charged with the responsibility of providing security for the President of Liberia and other VIPs. Like other security units in the country, the EPS or its predecessors, have had strained relations with the media and the general public. Warrick, the current head of the EPS, commenced his presentation recalling the heavy-handedness of presidential guards and other security apparatuses of Government in the past with the question, “Can you remember the days of Samuel Doe and General Taylor?” stating that it was not a statement to relegate those individuals but to give “a sober reflection of the essence of freedom in those difficult days of the existence of Liberians”.

Looking back to the days of conflict and beyond, Warrick opined one can confess that the human rights credential of state security forces has scored a mark of improvement under the Sirleaf administration, and that the media should acknowledged the transformation, citing victims of presidential guards, such as Charles Gbenyon during the Samuel K. Doe regime.

“We have tried as EPS to put behind SSS,” Warrick’s reference to the unsavory deeds of the Special Security forces under President’s Predecessors. “When we took over the EPS, we looked at the history of the

SSS. We wrote down in our oath that we will never harass or arrest or trace any journalist at night but yet there is another face to that. As we come to say--we have given you absolute protection.”

But after making those comments, he went on to issue these threats: “We have come to say that as we all stay together we want to assure you and to register that the level of freedom that you have limitation. The level of freedom you have today has limitation. It does not go beyond the flag of Liberia—the president. The protection of the president remains the sole responsibility of the EPS. And let me go on a little bit in the later dates of the assumption of our duty, do not, and I repeat, do not allow individuals to mislead you to question the integrity of those that have earned their integrities over the years.

He continued: “We are not saying that you cannot preach freedom, transparency. Your level of publication must be sanctioned by yourself because as you go out and question the integrity of Liberians you yourself think about it. You do not go free. Any press member that surpasses his/her responsibility to get involved in presidential intelligence; trust me, we will restrict you. Do not pass that border. To all public officials: this is not to tell you that you do not have the right to presidential freedom. But when you get detail and come into the affairs of the EPS to require information about presidential movement—presidential activities—we consider that as intrusion to the safety of the president. It says that anyone who does that the EPS has the right to arrest you without a warrant...”

Warrick further commented: We came today to register but will not for the sake of this day. We will allow the freedom that madam Sirleaf has given to be enjoyed. But be careful in questioning the integrity of Liberians because you have your pen and we have our gun. And if you incriminate the character and integrity of Liberians like myself, we will come after you. We will definitely.

Post-Panel Discussion Uproar

“Be careful in questioning the integrity of Liberians because you have your pen. We also have our guns. And if you incriminate the character and integrity of Liberians like myself, we will come after you. We will definitely.” Determined to hammer home his threats, when Mr. Warrick was given the second chance around during questions and answers, he referred to some journalists as terrorists.

Those final words of President Sirleaf’s chief guard during the panel discussion sparked tumultuous outrage in the audience of nearly 200 journalists and a horde of local and national guests and attendees at this year’s Press Freedom Day celebration. The statements were widely understood not only as a slap in the face of journalists who were celebrating a very special day of their profession and featuring activities to mend fences between media people and government security units but also as a serious threat to their security and freedom in the exercise of a constitutionally guaranteed right. Thus, reactions to the statements at the occasion were spontaneous and strong. Some booed while some took the

stage to vent their anger, and to defy the presidential security chief in his threat to “come after” journalists.

Solidarity Action

The Union did not want to jump at any quick conclusions that President Sirleaf sent her EPS Director, to spew those threats of restricting freedoms, about going after journalists who will dare question the integrity of Liberians, including himself and his characterization of some journalists as terrorist.

But for nearly a week, our government refused to condemn this threat against the media. There were fears that the lack of response to such a condescending and threatening statement by a senior security functionary points to approval by the president and threatens freedom of expression, highlighting impunity against the media.

Hence, a mass meeting was called on May 9 to derive a collective decision to send a message to Mr. Warrick and his principal. The meeting decided as follows:

- All independent newspapers will print black front pages with appropriate inscriptions to protest the threats and insults by Mr. Warrick and the insensitivity shown to the public so far by the President;
- Radio and TV stations will express their protest by suspending broadcast for 2 hours from 9:00 – 11:00 am daily beginning

Friday for four days followed by replay of Warrick's threat and the PUL response;

- As Journalists feel unsafe in the presence of presidential guards who threaten their lives, correspondents assigned by media houses to cover the presidency are being withdrawn;
- Also, there is a news blackout imposed on the Liberian presidency until there can be expressed and established guarantees for the freedom and safety of journalists across the country and an end to media impunity;
- The PUL is holding consultations with lawyers to explore possible pursuit of legal action against the EPS chief for "terroristic threats";
- The PUL will further consult with the Africa Editor's Forum which, in 2010 recognized President Sirleaf as a Friend of the Media, to consider a public withdrawal of the award in response to the threats that this "friend" is condoning threats the future of journalism in Liberia.

Meanwhile, other options within the framework of media freedom shall be pursued if need be.



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For ten days, the President did not make any public statement to condemn nor disassociate herself from the threats. But when she finally broke silence, she made an equally offensive remark that affirmed her EPS Director's threats. That was considered a contradiction for a president who carries "The Friend of Media Award" from the Africa Editor's Forum.

In effect, the President comments that she wished we "can carry on the blackout for as long as one year," removed any doubts we had that the pronouncements by Mr. Warrick represented the thinking within the

government hierarchy, notwithstanding the letter [and somewhat shift position] written by Deputy Minister of Information for Public Affairs, Isaac Jackson to express regrets for the Director's comments and to reassure the Union of Government's commitment to press freedom.

The Union ended its protest action after two weeks, noting the 'double standard of president Sirleaf on press freedom.