



NATIONAL FORUM ON SAFETY OF JOURNALISTS IN SIERRA LEONE

OUTCOME DOCUMENT

PREAMBLE

The Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) and the **Media Reform Coordinating Group (MRCG)** Sierra Leone, with funding support from the **Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands** in Ghana, organised a **National Forum on the Safety of Journalists in Sierra Leone** at the Sierra Palms Hotel, Lumley Beach Road, Freetown on the 22nd April 2021. The forum was attended by 60 media and free expression stakeholders, Government representatives and civil society.

They included editors, managers, journalists and representative of media associations (such as SLAJ, SLRU, IRN, GoE, WIMSAL, SLBC, SWASAL; the Ministry of Information and Communication; the Independent Media Commission (IMC), Right to Access Information Commission (RAIC), and , security sector (Sierra Leone Police, Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF), Office of National Security (OSN)), civil society organisations (Citizens Advocacy Network etc.) and representatives of journalism training institutions (Mass Communications Department, Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone; and Limkokwing University of Creative Technology etc.

The **National Forum on Safety of Journalists in Sierra Leone** is part of MFWA and MRCG's advocacy on the Safety and security of Journalists in Sierra Leone. It was aimed at highlighting issues around the safety and security of journalists in the country; building capacity of stakeholders on safety of journalists' standards; fostering collaboration among stakeholders (media, security agencies, regulatory bodies, civil society, etc.) to combat impunity for crimes against journalists; promote the safety of journalists and enhance understanding of the role of the media and security agencies and how they can work together to promote peace.

This activity is part of a project titled, "**Improving Press Freedom and Safety of Journalists Situation in Sierra Leone**", implemented by MFWA and MRCG.

The opening session of the conference was chaired by Usman Bah, MRCG Project Officer; welcome remarks made by Dr. Francis Sowa, National Coordinator of the MRCG; statements made by the IMC Executive Secretary, Khalil Kallon and the SLAJ President, Ahmed S. Nasralla;

and Keynote Address and Launch of Study report on Safety of Journalists in Sierra Leone by the Minister of Information and Communications, Mohamed Rahman Swaray.

Various sessions were facilitated and led by Mr. Ransford Wright, National Coordinator of the Independent Radio Network (IRN) hosting heads of SLAJ, SLRU, GoE, WIMSAL and RAIC; by Dr. Williette James, Head of Department, Mass Communication Fourah Bay College which incorporated statements and responses by representatives of media and state security agencies, media and communication learning institutions and CSOs, including Sierra Leone Police, Military and ONS, among others. A presentation was made by Commissioner Mustapaha M.K Sesay on Improving Safety and Security of Journalists in Sierra Leone. There were discussion sessions at the end of all presentations and panel contributions.

All the participants agreed that the forum was timely, as this is the first time issues of safety of journalists are being discussed and addressed in detail.

OBSERVATIONS

Whereas the Constitution of Sierra Leone, 1991 (Act No. 6 of 1991), guarantees freedom of expression and of the press; Section 25 (1) states thus: ‘Except with his own consent, no person shall be hindered in the enjoyment of his freedom of expression, and for the purpose of this section the said freedom includes the freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart ideas and information without interference, freedom from interference with his correspondence, freedom to own, establish and operate any medium for the dissemination of information, ideas and opinions, and academic freedom in institutions of learning;

Whereas Article 11 of the Constitution provides the obligations of the mass media: ‘The press, radio and television and other agencies of the mass media shall at all times be free to uphold the fundamental objectives contained in this Constitution and highlight the responsibility and accountability of the Government to the people’;

Considering the Right to Access Information Act, 2013, provides for access to certain information held by public bodies;

Noting the repeal of Part 5 of the Public Order Act of 1965, which criminalized free speech, Sierra Leone has a civil libel law of 1961 (The Defamation Ordinance, Act No. 32 of 1961), which does not criminalize libel and gives journalists room for apology when they get their facts wrong.

Whereas MRCCG monitors the exercise and legal guarantees of press freedom and freedom of expression issues in Sierra Leone, including invitations, intimidations, attacks, assaults, arrests, detentions and prosecution of journalists and civil society activists; and also tracks media performance under a project titled, “Enhancing Press Freedom and Reforms of Media Laws in Sierra Leone”, supported by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) in the United States

of America, there are concerns of journalists who were arrested, detained and released without any charge and some of the complainants had to abandon their matters because they thought the police took unreasonable period to either investigate or charge them to court;

Whereas the last report on 'Press Freedom in Sierra Leone' released in May 2020 by the MRCG showed that of the 26 cases monitored, 21 had to do with journalists who were intimidated, attacked, arrested or charged to court;

Whereas in 2013, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed 2 November as the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists, Resolution 68/163 deals with "The safety of journalists and the issue of impunity" in which the UN condemns unequivocally all forms of attacks and violence against journalists and media workers, such as torture, extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances and arbitrary detention, as well as intimidation and harassment in both conflict and non-conflict situations; also urges Member States to do their utmost to prevent violence against journalists and media workers, to ensure accountability through the conduct of impartial, speedy and effective investigations into all allegations of violence against journalists and media workers, and to bring the perpetrators of such crimes to justice and ensure that victims have access to appropriate remedies.

Noting the discussions and points made at the safety and security forum, including the timeliness and necessary of such training;

We the participants at this one day forum recommend the following:

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Media stakeholders to develop a National Safety Policy for the safety and security of Media Institutions and Practitioners in Sierra Leone;
2. Media Houses should develop internal Safety and Security Protocols for all staff;
3. Law enforcement officers/personnel on operation should protect journalists and ensure their safety and security, especially during violent situations;
4. National Media Stakeholders should develop a comprehensive National Gender Policy for media institutions, applicable to all media houses;
5. MRCG/SLAJ to develop and agree on an MoU with the Sierra Leone Police Force on Police/Media Relations;
6. Continuous training of all journalists across the country on safety and security issues;
7. SLAJ and MRCG to undertake outreach activities to security forces during muster parades.
8. Continuous organization of roundtable discussions and dialogues between the security agencies and media institutions to addressing safety issues;
9. SLAJ/media institutions to ensure the provision of protective gears for journalists to ensure their safety and security;
10. Address issues of religious and traditional intimidation that may affect the work of journalists;

11. Continuous training of police and military personnel on media relations and the safety and security of journalists, including the integration of such topics in the training curricula of the Police and Military;
12. Support police accountability mechanisms, including strengthening the independence of The Independent Police Complaints Board (IPCB) and the Complaints, Discipline and Internal Investigations Department (CDIID) of the Sierra Leone Police in addressing unethical conducts.

Endorsed by representatives of:

1. Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ)
2. Independent Media Commission (IMC)
3. Guild of Newspaper Editors (GoE)
4. Women in the Media Sierra Leone (WIMSAL)
5. Independent Radio Network (IRN)
6. Sierra Leone Reporters Union (SLRU)
7. Mass Communication Department, Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone
8. Limkokwing University of Creative Technology
9. Office of National Security and Security Sector Institutions
10. Office of National Security (ONS)
11. Citizens Advocacy Network (CAN)

Dated 22nd April, 2021.