



## MEDIA FREEDOM REVIEW- AUGUST 2022

The monthly ‘**Media Freedom Review**’ is a publication of the Media Reform Coordinating Group (MRCG) produced from the monitoring and reporting on freedom of expression and of the press, internet freedom, digital and online rights, and safety and security of journalists in Sierra Leone.

In August 2022, the MRCG monitored a death threat against a journalist; followed up on the physical assault on a journalist; a physical assault of a journalist; the alleged ‘assassination attempt’ on a journalist and the matter between a journalist and a magistrate in Pujehun. The MRCG also monitored shutdown of the country’s internet during a protest and measures taken to monitor social media. It also covered other programmes, including the suspension of the license of a media institution, and a forum to review and finalize the draft Policy on Safety of Journalists.

Umaru Fofana, *BBC’s* Correspondent in Sierra Leone, on 12 August 2022 posted on his Facebook page a death threat against him from some ‘unknown members’ of the public. Mr Fofana stated that as much as he took the threat seriously, he would not allow such to negatively affect his professional practice to judiciously serve the interest of his country and its citizens. <https://www.facebook.com/100050433761914/posts/pfbid02yBpoBfWagq6ByRonAqHnULr9c8LZsJDfau2cQTHsVVzPZBoqas9JmXsUNNBS16GPI/?app=fbl>. In a follow up with the Police on the said matter, they told MRCG that the matter had not been reported to them. The MRCG condemns such action particularly at a time that media stakeholders are making efforts to strengthen the safety and security of journalists in their line of duty.



In a follow up on the matter of Maada Jesse Jengo, a journalist working for *Voice of Peace and Development Radio FM 96.5 (VOPAD)* in Waterloo, Western Area Rural who was physically assaulted by ‘four officers of the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF)’ on 2 July 2022, the Station Manager, *VOPAD radio*, Joseph Lamin, told the MRCG that the perpetrators had held a meeting with the management of the radio, the journalist’s family and some Waterloo community stakeholders to settle the matter amicably. He said during the meeting, they agreed that the perpetrators would refund the journalist’s items that got missing during the incident and his medical bills. He continued that the perpetrators had paid half of the agreed amount, but have not showed up or called for any further arrangements, noting that he would soon take the matter with the RSLAF. Director of Public Relations and Information, RSLAF, Col. Abu Bakarr Bah, confirmed to MRCG that both parties had agreed to settle the matter. He assured that the RSLAF would ensure full compliance from the perpetrators.

In another follow-up on the alleged physical assault on journalist Abdulia Gbla of *Gbla Online TV*, by a Member of Parliament (MP), Hon. Abdul Muniru Lansana of Constituency 121 on the 28 June 2022, Abdulai Gbla told the MRCG that after the Executive of SLAJ had met with the Clerk of Parliament, Hon. Paran Umar Tarawally on 5 July 2022 nothing has been done by Parliament to further investigate the matter and none of the parties have reached out to him. SLAJ President, Ahmed Sahid Nasralla told MRCG that the investigation was still ongoing.

On the alleged ‘assassination attempt’ on journalist Gibril Gottor and his family in Kambia, Northern Sierra Leone, Gibril told the MRCG that the police were yet to provide him and his family with security and that he has decided

to move on with his life. The Police said that they had deployed personnel to patrol the entire community, including Gibril's house, a claim which Gibril denied, but that they cannot provide him with personal security as they do not have enough manpower to do so.

The case of journalist Osman Hardy Jalloh at the Human Rights Commission for Sierra Leone as a result of a complaint against Magistrate Joseph Toby of Pujehun Magistrate Court (formerly of Magistrate Court Number 2 in Kenema) is yet to be concluded. The journalist was arrested and detained). Al Mansaray, the owner of *TV-News24*, who was the lead complainant on the matter, told the MRCG that they are planning to take legal action against Magistrate Toby, however, he is still looking for a trusted lawyer to argue the case when it would get to the court.



The MRCG and Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) on 1 August 2022 organised a training workshop on Investigative and Anti-Corruption reporting for 15 investigative journalists from various media houses in Freetown. The MFWA also used the workshop as a platform to launch the Right to Access Information Manual for journalists in Sierra Leone at the New Brookfields Hotel, Freetown.

<https://www.facebook.com/MRCGinSL/videos/534862175103777/?app=fbl>.

The Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) and MRCG on 2 August 2022 convened a Forum for the adoption of the Comprehensive National Framework on the Safety of Journalists in Sierra Leone. The Forum brought together various stakeholders, including the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ), Ministry of Information and Communications, Independent Media Commission (IMC), Office of National Security (ONS), Sierra Leone Police (SLP), Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF), Women in the Media Sierra Leone (WIMSAL), Civil Society Organizations, and students from journalism schools etc.

<https://www.facebook.com/MRCGinSL/videos/1081623939226470/?app=fbl>.

There was a shutdown of the country's internet for about some hours on 10 August 2022, following protests and civil unrests in Freetown and other parts in the Northern and North-West Regions of the country. Zoodlabs Sierra Leone, a technology and smart utility infrastructure company, in press release dated 10 August 2022 stated that the internet shutdown in the country was as a result of an emergency technical maintenance on some of their international routes. <https://twitter.com/ZoodlabsS/status/1557432953541722118?s=08>. The MRCG on 10 August 2022 issued a press release where it called on all journalists and media practitioners to ensure their safety while covering and reporting on the protests. <https://www.facebook.com/2226750424106118/posts/pfbid0VW7wAGPgVdRjt54JRQMj7ZsRo3xuLjekipX7FaMWBGTvj5Hvwth16cAX7QCsqdwMI/>.

The National Cybersecurity Coordination Centre in collaboration with the Ministry of Information and Communication (MIC) and the Security Sectors in a press release dated 11 August 2022 stated that Section 49(1) of the Cybersecurity and Crime Act, 2021 indicates that anyone who aids in the act of [cyber terrorism], "which in this instance is the spreading of incendiary information on social media platforms to destabilize the State also commits the same offence." The release that came after the August 10 2022 protests, also noted that "government has now put mechanisms in place for a robust monitoring of the social media spaces and platforms that can be accessed by Sierra Leoneans." The release warned that "anyone who is caught in the sharing of such information shall face the full consequence of the law."



The Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ), as part of its project titled ‘Cyber Safe Sierra Leone’, held a stakeholders’ consultation workshop on 4 August 2022, on the Cyber Security and Crime Act of 2021. The workshop assembled journalists, civil society organizations and Government stakeholders to discuss key provisions of the Cyber Security law, in order to identify gaps in sections that could be opened to abuse of citizens’ right to freedom of expression and to help develop advocacy messages around specific provisions of the said law in order to help increase public awareness and sensitization of the Cyber law. SLAJ President, Ahmed Sahid Nasralla, said there were two aspects to the project, **“first, the law is the law and so we want to promote public awareness about the law so that people understand key provisions to help them avoid coming into conflict with the law. The second is to build advocacy around certain provisions of the law that have the potential to undermine fundamental human rights such as free expression, online freedoms and data privacy rights.”** <https://www.facebook.com/1000011826651239/posts/pfbid028hmfJXN1Dx2EVc7jwfgEVPfvhd7J1b3v1ZnZU4wCf6SoHPPzt2C6ciesvDffKboKI/>

The President of SLAJ, Ahmed Sahid Nasralla, on 18 August 2022, delivered a statement at the Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and Media Dialogue with His Excellency President Julius Maada Bio on reflections on the August 10 ‘Violent Protests’ in Sierra Leone. He emphatically stated that everyone should take responsibility for what happened, the government, opposition parties, the security sector, the media, CSOs, traditional and religious leaders, and Sierra Leoneans in the diaspora. **“I am not sure I am the right person to evaluate the media. I leave it to you the people. Help us become better placed to safeguard our democracy and promote peace and national cohesion,”** said SLAJ President. <https://www.facebook.com/100001182651239/posts/pfbid0ZV6NG4CkCVUGKm64vuZotAwimuvTBrQfKJxhPg28xAiengZzTwAuXg97R6LE7iu2l/?app=fbl>

The National Telecommunications Commission (NATCOM) in a press release dated 19 August 2022 “suspended the licences of *Star Radio* and *Television* to operate and broadcast.” According to the release, the suspension follows a breach in the licences conditions pursuant to sections 30 and 65 of the NATCOM Act of 2006 as amended. The release stated that the action was taken after several correspondences and meetings relating to the licenses conditions between the Commission and *Star radio* and *Television* which the management failed to follow through.

The Independent Media Commission (IMC) on 22 August 2022 held a consultative meeting with editors and station managers at the Commission’s Conference Hall in Freetown on ethical publications and broadcast. The IMC’s Executive Secretary, Khalil Kallon stated that the consultative meeting was to curb unethical broadcast and publications by certain media houses during and after the August 10 civil unrests. IMC’s Chairman, Dr Victor Massaquoi cautioned journalists that as they report on issues and events, they must be responsible in the discharge of their duties to avoid unethical reportage. The meeting ended with the following five key resolutions, which included: managers/editors to uphold and respect the provisions of the IMC Act 2020 and Media Code of Practice; managers/editors to denounce promotion of hate speech/messages in the media; IMC to distinguish publications considered to be tribal, political, inciting and hate speeches; and IMC to ensure that the media has more ethical reporting standards training across the country.

The Ministry of Information and Communication (MIC) in collaboration with Sierra Leone Film Industry on 24 August 2022 held a consultative meeting at the Sierra Leone Standard Bureau conference room, ferry junction. The meeting was geared towards drafting a Policy that would regulate the film industry in Sierra Leone. The Minister of Information and Communication, Mohamed Rahman Swaray, said that the government was willing to support the process. <https://www.facebook.com/mic.gov.sl/videos/8162480133777126/>

SLAJ, on 24 August 2022 held a workshop with bloggers to continue discussion on the Cyber Security and Crime Act 2021 under a project titled ‘Cyber Safe Sierra Leone.’ The purpose of the engagement was an attempt by SLAJ

to bring together bloggers to educate them about the provisions of the law and solicit their support in the awareness-raising drive.

<https://www.facebook.com/100001182651239/posts/pfbid0ZSUYZQ4iqRw4QKsjLnWp6MfLCBSQxxEAjvYJnLKaQuXhWiwpTWYkUNBG8HEr29BI/?app=fbl>.

The MRCG on 26 August 2022 organized a workshop to review and finalize the draft Policy on Safety of Journalists in Sierra Leone at the Negus Nagas Complex, Grafton village, Western Rural District. The workshop, which was funded by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) in the United States of America, assembled heads of national journalists' associations and organizations. The Policy was drafted to promote the safety of journalists in Sierra Leone; to comply with international standards on safety of journalists in the country; to ensure that the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed between the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ) and the Security Sector Institutions is implemented; and to provide a generic template which media institutions can use to develop their own policy on the safety of journalists.

<https://www.facebook.com/2226750424106118/posts/pfbid025m6538m3a6qSLEfU3LG6gX4cQUZdaa9PLyCvudvXUXn9FnP5E2mYEGEnBQKFomQdl/>

The details of the cases and issues will be published in the MRCG Bi-Annual Press Freedom Report for June to November 2022. The MRCG would like to restate that while the country is making progress in press freedom rankings, the general climate for freedom of expression for everybody should be guaranteed.

The MRCG's freedom of expression and of the press, internet freedom, digital and online rights, and safety and security of journalists in Sierra Leone initiative is funded by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) in the United States of America. The MRCG seeks to strengthen democratic dialogue and accountability, consolidate peace and ensure development through professional, independent and sustainable media, based on the right to freedom of expression and of the press.

**MRCG is the coordinating Secretariat for media reform, research and capacity building. It comprises Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ), Independent Radio Network (IRN), Guild of Editors (GoE), Women in the Media Sierra Leone (WIMSAL), Sierra Leone Reporters Union (SLRU), Sport Writers Association of Sierra Leone (SWASAL), Mass Communication (Fourah Bay College), Ministry of Information and Communications (MIC), Independent Media Commission (IMC) and the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC).**