

Liberia to join movement to repeal criminal defamation

The World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA) has welcomed Liberian president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's commitment to press freedom after her public endorsement of the Declaration of Table Mountain, a continent-wide call to repeal criminal defamation and 'insult' laws.



"This Declaration seeks to adjust the statutes under which journalists may be prosecuted in court by decriminalising those statutes," said the president in a speech delivered on 3 May to commemorate World Press Freedom Day.

"All of these, and more, we will continue to do to advance the cause of a free press and a more expressive society."

President Sirleaf, the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, becomes the second head of state to endorse the declaration, following Niger president Mahamadou Issoufou's commitment made in November 2011 at a public ceremony held in the Nigerien capital, Niamey.

The Declaration of Table Mountain was adopted at WAN-IFRA's World Newspaper Congress and World Editors Forum held in Cape Town, South Africa, in 2007, the annual summit meeting of the world's press. Numerous press freedom and civil society organisations, including South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu, have endorsed the declaration, which identifies criminal defamation and 'insult' laws as amongst the most severe obstacles to securing the future of the independent press in Africa.

"We are delighted that President Sirleaf has added her voice to those committed to repealing insult and criminal defamation laws across Africa," said Larry Kilman, deputy CEO of WAN-IFRA, who called on other African leaders to follow her example.

"Only through the elimination of these onerous laws can the independent press in Africa be truly free to carry out its duty as a watchdog, and contribute to societal, cultural and economic development," he said.

The vast majority of African nations continue to jail journalists and close media houses on charges of defamation or for "insulting" authorities or their policies. The practice prevents legitimate public discourse and critical writing and leads to self-censorship.

The Declaration can be found at www.declarationoftablemountain.org.

African organisations that have endorsed the Declaration of Table Mountain include: The African Editors Forum, Freedom of Expression Institute, Media Institute of Southern Africa, Media Foundation for West Africa, Observatoire-OLPEC, The Egyptian Organisation for Human Rights, Institute for the Advancement of Journalism, South African National Editors' Forum, Journaliste En Danger, National Union of Somali Journalists, African Media Initiative, and Liberian Media.

International organisations that have endorsed the Declaration include: International Pen, Reporters Without Borders, Article 19, Index on Censorship, International Press Institute, World Press Freedom Committee, Committee to Protect Journalists, Media Rights Agenda, Freedom House, International Publishers Association and the Media Legal Defence Initiative.

The Declaration of Table Mountain campaign is supported through a strategic partnership between WAN-IFRA and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency to advance media development and press freedom worldwide.

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