

# Liberian president commits to repealing criminal defamation

The president of Liberia, Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf has become the latest head of state to commit to the core principles of a free press after endorsing WAN-IFRA's Declaration of Table Mountain in Monrovia on Saturday, 21 July 2012.



"We are signing the Declaration of Table Mountain in order to underscore our message loud and clear, to advance a free press and freedom of expression, not just in Liberia but the entire continent of Africa," president Sirleaf said at a signing ceremony attended by 200 people, including diplomats from Nigeria, the United States and Germany.

The Minister for Information, Cultural Affairs and Tourism, Lewis Brown II said: "On the eve of our 165th anniversary of independence, our country is going through an exciting transition into a future of hope and opportunity, and signing the Declaration of Table Mountain is an important step in this transition to make our country freer, but keep us accountable".

The Declaration of Table Mountain, which calls for the repeal of criminal defamation and 'insult' laws across the African continent, was adopted at the World Newspaper Congress held in Cape Town, South Africa, in 2007, the annual meeting of the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA).

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.

President Mahamadou Issoufou of Niger became the first sitting head of state to sign the Declaration in November 2011.

"By signing the Declaration, President Sirleaf is showing her genuine commitment to freedom of the press as a basic human right, as well as an indispensable constituent of democracy in Liberia", said Roger Parkinson, Senior Ambassador and former president of WAN-IFRA, who attended the signing ceremony on behalf of the organisation.

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. In 2010, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights adopted a resolution calling for criminal defamation laws to be abolished.

The Commission's Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression, Pansy Tlakula, said the signing by President Sirleaf on Saturday "will not only put press freedom high on our agendas, but will also encourage other stakeholders to ensure that the right to freedom of expression is guaranteed and realised. A step forward would be for States Parties to repeal criminal defamation and libel laws from their Constitutions and other national laws." Her full statement can be read here: [www.wan-ifra.org/node/61129](http://www.wan-ifra.org/node/61129)

The Declaration, which also calls for a free press to be higher on the African agenda, can be found at [www.declarationoftablemountain.org](http://www.declarationoftablemountain.org).

Malcolm Joseph, executive director of the Center for Media Studies and Peace Building (CEMESP) in Liberia, said: "By signing onto the Declaration of Table Mountain, the government of Liberia has taken a key and positive step towards expanding the environment for a free press to flourish."

Other members of the international delegation attending the signing ceremony included Liberian press freedom hero Kenneth Best, representing the International Publishers Institute, IPI, Peter Quaqua, President, Press Union of Liberia, Alison Meston, WAN-IFRA Director, Press Freedom and Amadou Kanoute, WAN-IFRA Senior Consultant Africa,

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the first elected female head of state in Africa, was awarded the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize, jointly with Leymah Gbowee of Liberia and Tawakol Karman of Yemen. The women were recognised "for their non-violent struggle for the safety of women and for women's rights to full participation in peace-building work."

The Declaration of Table Mountain is part of an ambitious strategic partnership between the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) and WAN-IFRA to advance media development and press freedom worldwide. The partnership allows WAN-IFRA to broaden and develop its press freedom and media development activities to support free and financially sustainable media worldwide. For more, go to [www.wan-ifra.org/microsites/pressfreedom](http://www.wan-ifra.org/microsites/pressfreedom).

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