

British press get new watchdog

LONDON, UK: British politicians said on Monday (18 March) they had reached a deal on a tough new system of newspaper self-regulation to rein in the excesses of the press revealed in the *News of the World* phone-hacking scandal.



Political leaders said the deal, finally struck at 2:30 am after months of negotiations, addressed the abuses laid bare in last year's Leveson Inquiry while protecting freedom of the press.

The issue had split the governing coalition, with Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron rejecting plans for a new press law advocated by his Liberal Democrat coalition partners and the opposition Labour Party.

Both sides claimed victory on Monday, with Cameron saying he had saved newspapers from potential censorship, but Labour leader Ed Miliband insisting the new system would be protected from meddling politicians.

Victims of phone-hacking welcomed the deal as a way to ensure individuals had more power against Britain's voracious media.

However, Miliband said newspapers had "nothing to fear", after the owners of the *Daily Mail*, *The Sun* and *The Daily Telegraph* warned they may boycott the new regulator if it was written into law.

Cameron was due to unveil the deal to parliament later on Monday (18 March), detailing the establishment of a new, independent press watchdog with the power to investigate complaints, impose fines and ensure apologies are prominent and timely.

Newspaper editors will have a say but will not be able to veto appointments to the watchdog, officials said, while media groups that refuse to sign up to the new system will be subject to exemplary damages in any libel cases.

The changes are being introduced in the wake of the scandal at Rupert Murdoch's *News of the World*, which illegally accessed the voicemails of celebrities, politicians and victims of crime, including missing 13-year-old Milly Dowler, who was later found murdered.

Cameron subsequently commissioned the Leveson Inquiry in July 2011, which reported last year that newspapers "wreak havoc with the lives of innocent people" and recommended a complete overhaul of their system of self-regulation.

Months of talks between the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats and Labour broke down last week, and Cameron proposed to put his own plans to a parliamentary vote on Monday (18 March).

The deadline sent the parties back to the negotiating table at the weekend and they finally reached a deal although both sides disagreed on what exactly it represents.

Source: *AFP* via I-Net Bridge