



FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION MONITOR - WEST AFRICA

January-March 2025

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Executive Summary

The Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) has been working to expand the frontiers of press freedom and freedom of expression, and develop the media in the West Africa region to strengthen the critical role they play in supporting good governance throughout the region. Through its freedom of expression initiatives, the MFWA tracks and reports on issues related to press freedom and the right to expression, including expression through activism and protests. The organisation records instances of violations and threats to media freedom, civic expression, and civil liberties, and uses the evidence for advocacy to seek redress for the abused and to improve the freedom of expression environment across West Africa.

The rights to expression and media freedom continue to be under attack across the West Africa region. Particularly in military-led countries such as Burkina Faso, attacks against journalists and activists are on the rise. Even in countries largely considered as beacons of democracy in the region, such as Ghana, attacks against press freedom and freedom of expression persist. In this report, for example, Burkina Faso came up as the country that recorded the highest incidents of freedom of expression (FOE) violations, closely followed by Ghana. These developments continue to shrink civic spaces for expression and activism.

This report, the Freedom of Expression Monitor, which covers the first quarter of 2025 provides a bird's-eye-view of the freedom of expression and press freedom landscape in West Africa. Through data gathered from daily monitoring of the landscape, complemented by reports from our national partner organisations and other stakeholders, the report highlights the violations perpetrated against journalists, news media organisations, dissidents, and activists (including environmental activists) who basically report or express their perspectives about issues in their respective countries. In particular, findings from the monitoring cites 37 violations that were recorded in 10 countries in the region. The findings also show that arrests and detention are the most common FOE violations, with the main perpetrators being state security agents.

Aside from the violations recorded, the report also brings to fore some noteworthy incidents that happened within the freedom of expression, press freedom and media development landscape in the region during the first quarter of 2025. The report ends with specific recommendations to relevant stakeholders such as state security agents, journalists and news media organisations, governments in the region, ECOWAS and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, for creating a conducive environment for expression across the region.

Introduction



Freedom of expression and of the press constitute fundamental cornerstones of any democratic society. These liberties are indispensable in ensuring transparency in governance, enabling the public to hold authorities accountable, and equipping citizens with the knowledge necessary to make informed decisions. They safeguard the ability of all individuals to express their views freely.

In recognition of the vital role these rights play in progressive societies, practically all countries within the West Africa region have formally committed to upholding these through constitutional guarantees and by ratifying key international legal instruments, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (African Charter). These national, continental and international frameworks have provisions that enshrine the rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and access to information. For instance, Article 9 of the African Charter explicitly affirms that every individual is entitled to receive information and to express and disseminate opinions in accordance with the law, while Article 11 guarantees the right to free assembly.

Unfortunately, the enforcement of these provisions remains a challenge in West Africa, where law enforcement agents, under democratic dispensations, often turn out to be the main culprits violating these provisions of the law. In military-led countries in the region – Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger and Guinea – journalism, activism and dissent have become dangerous enterprises as the junta administrators tend to suppress expression with the aim of controlling narratives in and about their respective countries; a situation that forces journalists, activists dissenting voices into self-censorship.

Violations against the rights to expression, opinion, information and assembly take many forms. Journalists, activists (including environmental activists) and dissenting voices are sometimes threatened, assaulted (physically, verbally and emotionally), arbitrarily arrested or detained, abducted or kidnapped, and in some extreme cases, killed. Some of the attacks are also perpetrated virtually, including digital surveillance and the hacking of devices. In other instances, perpetrators resort to Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPP) and crippling fines to silence dissent. The perpetrators of such crackdowns are often those in positions of power – government officials, state security agents, political party affiliates and influential business entities/individuals – who exploit their authority or affiliation with those in power to suppress criticism and maintain control.

Continuous advocacy and policy interventions are needed at all times to push back the growing repression against expression in all its forms. As an organisation with the vision of having a “peaceful West Africa in which all persons are free to express themselves and participate in governance processes without fear, threat or intimidation,” the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) continuously advocates for an enabling environment for expression and activism. As part of interventions, the organisation gathers evidence about the freedom of expression situation in the region through daily monitoring of violations, documenting abuses, and advocating for change and reparation. Through its efforts, the MFWA highlights gaps that exist between the legal provisions and the harsh realities that journalists, activists, dissidents and news media organisations face in practice. The findings from the daily monitoring are shared through alerts, statements, monthly and quarterly reports. The evidence-based data from the MFWA is used by the organisation and other freedom of expression and human rights organisations for advocacy, litigation and policy engagements.

This report highlights the findings of the monitoring carried out in the first quarter of 2025 (January-March). The quarterly reports, also referred to as Freedom of Expression Monitor (The Monitor), feature the methodology used for the data collection and analyses; findings of the daily monitoring; reparation of violations (if any); and recommendations for addressing the violations documented and improving the overall landscape. The January to March 2025 Monitor, therefore, sheds light on the developments (positive and negative) recorded in the freedom of expression and media development landscape across the region.

Methodology



This report is compiled using data gathered from the MFWA's own monitoring and monitoring reports received from MFWA's monitors/correspondents in the various countries in West Africa. To complement the monitoring reports from the MFWA and its correspondents, FOE developments reported by MFWA's partner organisations, the media, and other human rights organisations that work in the region are integrated into the report.

Reports from the daily monitoring by the MFWA, its correspondents and partners, as well as other stakeholders as detailed above, are published as Alerts to draw attention to the issues identified for remedial action on an as-and-when basis. The quarterly reports, also known as the Freedom of Expression Monitor (The Monitor), are, however, quarterly publications that collate and analyse the Alerts issued within a particular quarter. The Monitor also highlights other significant developments regarding civil liberties that are recorded in the region each quarter. The Monitor serves as an advocacy tool for the promotion, defence and protection of media and freedom of expression rights (offline & online).

This report shares the findings of the monitoring undertaken during the first quarter of 2025 (January - March 2025). It ends with a number of recommendations to address the violations reported and to improve the freedom of expression situation in the region.

Findings

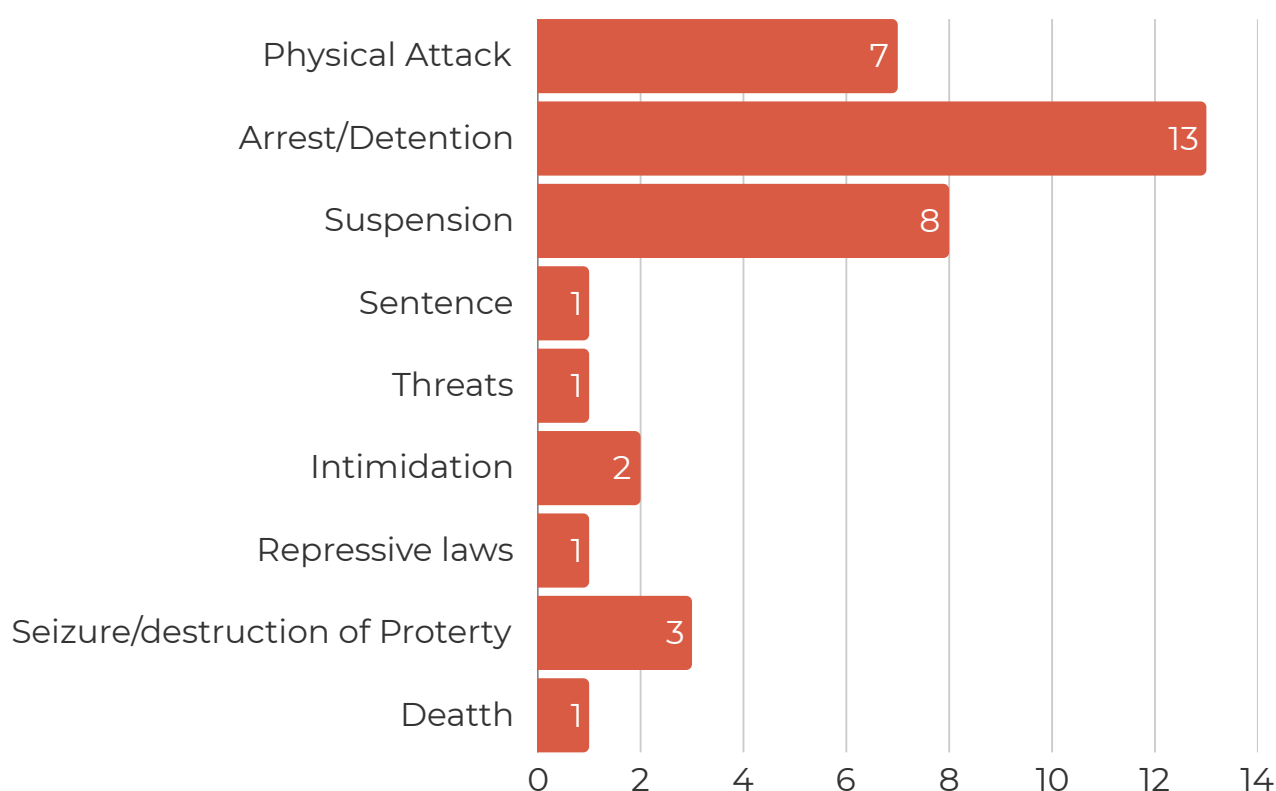
The findings of the monitoring of freedom of expression developments (including environmental activism and expression through protests) in West Africa over the first quarter of 2025 are reported below. The report highlights incidents of freedom of expression (FOE) violations recorded during the quarter, offering insights into the frequency and nature of these occurrences. It further examines the specific countries where these violations took place, along with a breakdown of the incidents reported per country. It also identifies the perpetrators of the FOE abuses recorded, shedding light on the actors responsible for suppressing free expression. The report also highlights the targets and victims of the violations reported for the quarter. The report also features redress actions recorded and some significant developments that happened during the quarter



Incidents of FOE Violations

During the period under review, a total of 37 FOE violations were recorded. The 37 violations were made up of nine categories of violations. Arrests/Detentions was the dominant violation with 13 occurrences; followed by 8 incidents of suspensions (journalists and media) and 7 incidents of physical attacks. Figure 1 below presents the types of violations recorded and their respective frequencies.

Figure 1: Frequency of violations recorded



A summarised narration of all the violations recorded during the first quarter of 2025 can be found [here](#).

Countries and Incidents of Violations

The 37 violations were recorded in 10 countries. Burkina Faso recorded more cases of violations (9) than the other countries cited. Ghana followed with eight (8) incidents of violations. In Table 1 below, the frequency of violations recorded in each of the 10 countries is presented. It also features the different types of violations recorded in the respective countries cited.

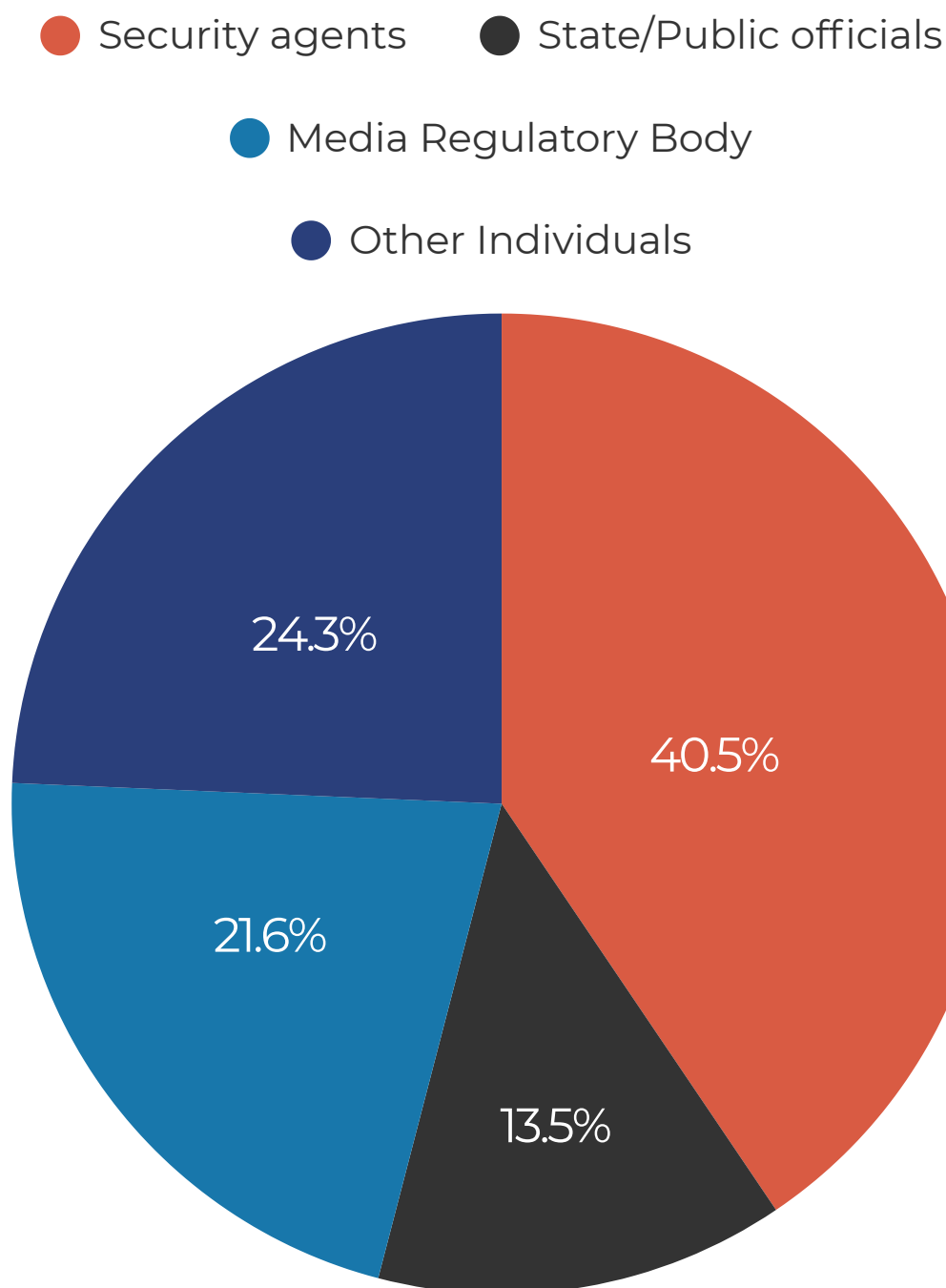
Table 1: Countries and Types of Violations

Country	Types of Violations									
	Physical Attack	Arrest/ Detention	Suspension	Sentence	Threats	Intimidation	Repressive Laws	Seizure/ Destruction of Property	Death	Total
Nigeria	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	3
Mali	-	1	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	2
Burkina Faso	-	7	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	9
Guinea	-	1	1	-	1	-	-	-	-	3
Ghana	4	1	1	-	-	-	-	2	-	8
Mauritania	1	2	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	4
Sierra Leone	-	-	1	-	-	1	-	-	1	3
Benin	-	-	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	3
Gambia	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	1
Senegal	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Total	7	13	8	1	1	2	1	3	1	37

Perpetrators of Violations

The 37 violations recorded over the three months were carried out by four (4) categories of perpetrators. Security agents accounted for fifteen (15) violations, while State/Public Officials accounted for five (5) violations. Media Regulatory Bodies and other individuals accounted for 8 and 9 violations respectively, as illustrated in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Percentage distribution of the violations per type of perpetrators



To further disaggregate the statistics in Figure 2 to highlight the categories of perpetrators who carried out the violations cited in each country, Table 2 below presents a breakdown of the types of perpetrators by country.

Table 2: Countries and Perpetrators of violations

Country	Perpetrators				Total
	Security Agents	State/Public Officials	Media Regulatory Bodies	Other Individuals	
Nigeria	2	-	-	1	3
Benin	-	-	3	-	3
Mali	1	-	1	-	2
Ghana	1	1	1	5	8
Burkina Faso	7	-	2	-	9
Guinea	1	-	1	1	3
Mauritania	1	2	-	1	4
Sierra Leone	1	1	-	1	3
Gambia	-	1	-	-	1
Senegal	1	-	-	-	1
Total	15	5	8	9	37

TARGETS/VICTIMS OF VIOLATIONS

A total of 20 journalists; seven media outlets and 10 activists and other individuals directly suffered from the 37 violations recorded during the first quarter of 2025. Table 3 below presents a breakdown of the distribution of the violations, the victims and the respective countries.

Table 3: Targets and frequency of violations suffered

<u>Country</u>	Targets and Frequency of Violations Suffered			
	Journalists/Media Workers	Media Organisations	Activists	Total
Nigeria	3	-	-	3
Benin	1	2	-	3
Mali	-	1	1	2
Ghana	7	1	-	8
Burkina Faso	3	2	4	9
Guinea	-	1	2	3
Mauritania	1	-	3	4
Sierra leone	3	-	-	3
Gambia	1	-	-	1
Senegal	1	-	-	1
Total	20	7	10	37

Redress for Violations/Impunity

The UN Plan of Action for the Safety of Journalists emphasises the importance of preventive measures. However, the response of authorities to FOE violations is equally critical in demonstrating their commitment to safeguarding journalism and upholding the right to free speech. Regrettably, violations against FOE often go unaddressed, with little to no redress in the form of reparations or accountability. For example, during the quarter under review, only one out of the 37 FOE violations cited received redress, even though two incidents that happened in December 2024 also received redress during the monitoring period.

On March 5, 2025, the Asankragwa Magistrate Court ruled that Daniel Baidoo, prime suspect and leader of a group of illegal miners who attacked journalists who were reporting on devastation caused by illegal mining, must pay the sum of GH¢37,000 (USD2,386) in compensation for the journalists' equipment destroyed during the assault. The compensation sum has been lodged with the Police of Asankragwa who was ordered by the court to release the money to the victims. The court also issued a bench warrant for the arrest of four additional suspects who are on the run.

On March 4, 2025 social media influencer and reality TV star, Hawa Hunt, was released and acquitted by Sierra Leone's Court of Appeal, after two months of detention on cybercrime-related charges. Hunt was arrested following some critical comments she made about President Bio and First Lady Fatima Bio in a viral video. Hunt's arrest, which occurred a day after the First Lady visited the TV show she was on, sparked speculation of political interference.

After two months in court-ordered detention, Vincent Djiropo, Dominique Mensah and 18 others were released on 26 February 2025. The 20 individuals were had been detained for defending a forest which they describe as their ancestral land.

Apart from the specific incidents of violations against FOE rights reported above, other significant developments that took place during the first quarter of 2025 and have a bearing on the FOE and media development space in West Africa are highlighted in this section. Capturing such issues in the report ensures that a more holistic situation in the region is presented.

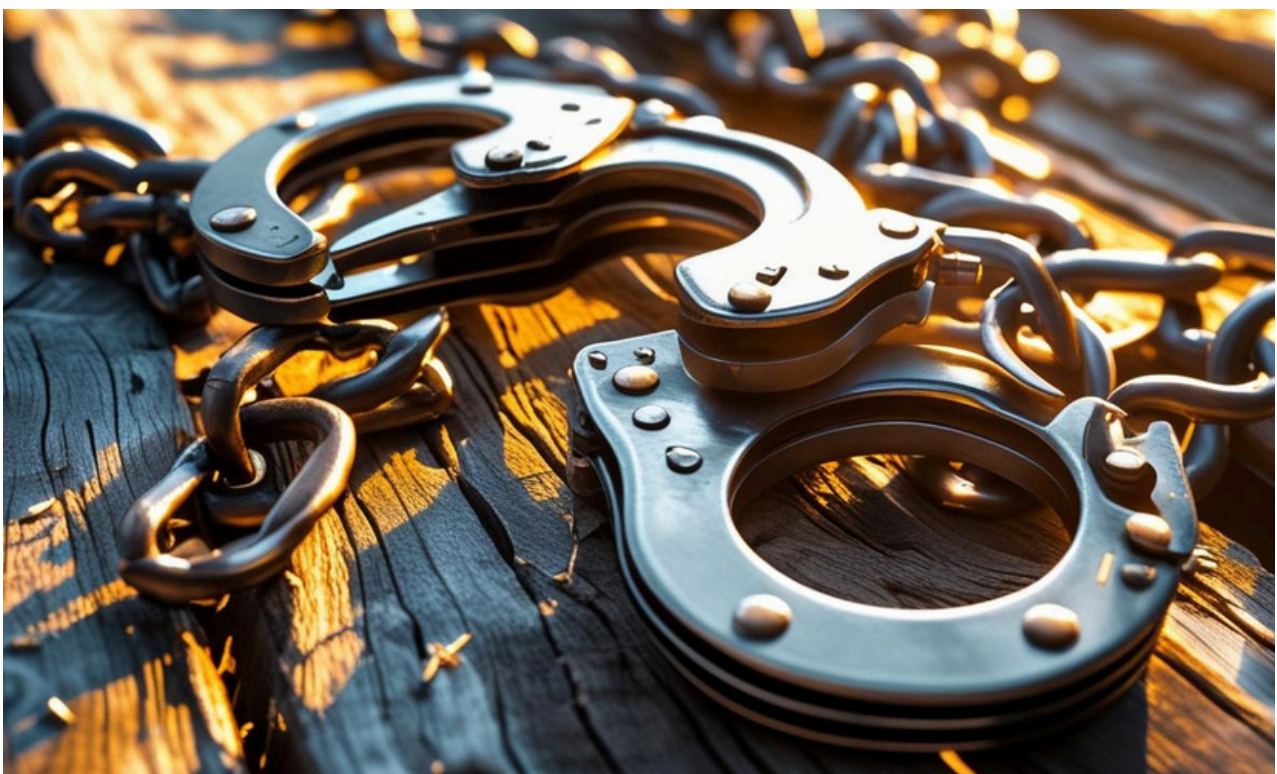


January 16, 2025 marked six years since the assassination of investigative journalist Ahmed Hussein Suale Divela. Two months after the sixth anniversary of Suale's passing, Daniel Owusu Koranteng, also known as Akwasi Amakye, was arrested in Accra on March 17, 2025 in connection with Suale's death.

In a unanimous decision, a jury of the Essex County Superior Court in New Jersey awarded undercover journalist Anas Aremeyaw Anas USD18 million (GH¢279 million) in damages. The jury unanimously found former Ghanaian MP, Kennedy Agyapong, liable for making malicious and false accusations against the journalist during a US-based online show. The ruling, which followed a defamation suit filed against the former MP marks a significant victory for safeguarding journalists and journalism as a whole.

A concerning incident that also happened during the monitoring period was the detention and interrogation of a Dutch journalist working with RTL News, Sophie Van Leeuwen, by Sierra Leonean police while reportedly conducting documentary work in Freetown. The police, however, released her the same day (February 13, 2025).

In the midst of the above developments and attacks against the right to expression, a number of capacity building workshops also took place during the period under review. The workshops were aimed at strengthening the capacity of journalists (male and females) to improve their coverage of specific issues and general professional standards.



Conclusion



The record of 37 violations over the three-month period (January to March 2025) suggests that approximately 12 violations against the right to expression were recorded month on month across West Africa. This finding affirms the relative prevalence of FOE violations in the region, especially in military-led Burkina Faso where a quarter of the violations were cited. The most frequent violations cited, arbitrary arrests and detentions, physical assaults, and suspension of media outlets, underscore a persistent climate of intimidation.

Particularly worrying is the fact that state actors, especially security forces and public officials, continue to dominate as perpetrators, fostering a culture of impunity. Indeed, over 40 percent of the violations recorded were perpetrated by state security agents, the law enforcement entity; and because the prosecutors cannot be expected to objectively prosecute themselves, if they do at all, the culture of impunity continues to thrive.

Another troubling incident recorded during the monitoring period is the killing of a journalist in Sierra Leone by his colleague. It is unfortunate that exactly six years after the unresolved death of Ahmed Suale, another journalist would be killed by a fellow media worker. The urgency the Sierra Leonean police attached to the incident, thereby arresting the key suspect, is however commendable.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Without urgent corrective measures, the cycle of repression risks deepening self-censorship, eroding democratic norms, and ultimately undermining regional stability. In consideration of the findings in this report, therefore, the MFWA makes the following recommendations for the improvement of the freedom of expression environment in the region.

To State Security Agencies:

- Cease all forms of violence and intimidation against activists, journalists and media professionals.
- Investigate and prosecute security officers responsible for attacks and unlawful arrests of activists and journalists.

To Media Organisations and Journalists

- Uphold the highest standards of professionalism.
- Utilise all legal mechanisms available to secure justice for abused journalists and other media workers.

To Governments in West Africa

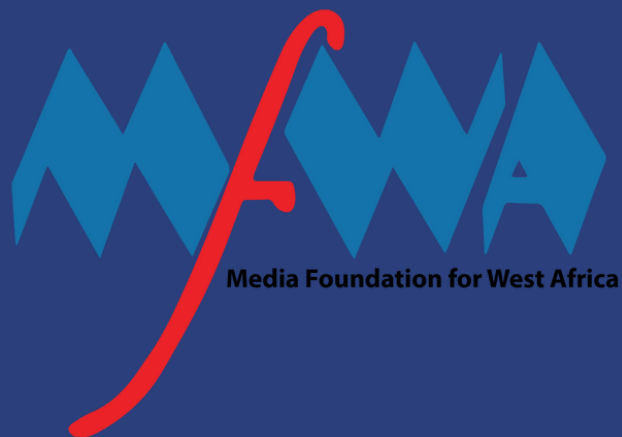
- Uphold constitutional and international commitments to press freedom and freedom of expression.
- Direct State security agents to end arbitrary arrests, detentions, and attacks against activists and media professionals; and hold perpetrators accountable.
- Ensure the independence of media regulatory bodies and prevent conflict of interest and politically motivated sanctions against media outlets.
- Provide specialised training workshops for law enforcement officers on press freedom and human rights.

To ECOWAS

- Encourage Member States to uphold their commitments under Article 66 of the ECOWAS Revised Treaty, which requires them to “ensure respect for the rights of journalists.”
- Help address impunity regarding FOE violations by engaging and demanding accountability from Member States that repeatedly violate statutory obligations to protect press freedom, freedom of expression and democratic norms in their countries.

To the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa at the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACHPR)

- Increase diplomatic pressure on governments, especially Burkina Faso, to uphold press freedom, FOE and human rights commitments.



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