



PRESS STATEMENT

SAMDEN: Sierra Leone repeal of defamation law shows govts can create safe media environment

New Delhi/Kathmandu/Dhaka/Colombo/Boston, August 6, 2020 – The recent repeal of Sierra Leone’s infamous criminal defamation law marks a major victory for media freedom, even as many journalists continue to be harassed, intimidated and detained for critical COVID-19 reporting, the South Asia Media Defenders Network (SAMDEN) said today.

Sierra Leone’s Parliament has unanimously adopted the Independent Media Commission (IMC) Act 2020 replacing Part 5 of the 1965 Public Order Act (POA) which criminalised any publication that is deemed defamatory or seditious.

“At the heart of media freedom is the ability of journalists to receive, produce and share information without facing physical, legal or online threats, to do their work professionally, protected by the laws of the land to uphold freedom of information and expression”, said Sanjoy Hazarika, SAMDEN’s co-convenor. Underlining the need for an inclusive safe media environment, Hazarika added that “safety of the media ensures media freedom” and that the decision should be applauded even as news continues to come in of attacks on media for going about their work.

The Network also supported the Commonwealth Journalists Association’s statement condemning the arrest of distinguished Zimbabwean journalist Hopewell Chin’ono following his extensive investigative reporting revealing corruption practices by members of the ruling ZANU-PK party.

Although SAMDEN works primarily in South Asia, it asserted that “freedom of media is indivisible” and that it celebrated the decision as a “blow for press freedom everywhere.”

President Julius Maada Bio in 2018 had made a campaign promise to repeal the law, which had been used for 55 years to suppress dissent by targeting, harassing and imprisoning journalists, including veterans from the newspapers the New Age, the Salone Times, and the Independent Observer among others. It reportedly violated at least 10 international human rights instruments, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The revocation of the act will strengthen Sierra Leone’s democratic institutions, SAMDEN said.

The Network compared this with the increasing accounts of physical, psychological, legal and administrative attacks on journalists in South Asia during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“The criminalisation of journalism is unacceptable and media lacks security within a pervasive culture of impunity,” it said point out that:

- In Bangladesh, more than 20 journalists have reportedly been detained, assaulted, harassed or investigated for their critical reporting of the government’s COVID-19 response.



- The figure is well over 50 in India with a majority of them reportedly being independent journalists working in rural India.
- In Pakistan, the Pakistan Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) announced restrictive directives for reporting on the pandemic days after two TV journalists covered conditions of a quarantine centre in the peripheral areas. The journalists were reportedly detained.

SAMDEN stressed that these reports are in addition to journalists like Mir Shakil-ur-Rahman in Pakistan, Aasif Sultan and Qazi Shilbi in India, and Matiur Rahman Chowdhury, Shafiqul Islam Kajol along with several others in Bangladesh who continue to be targeted or detained, despite calls by national and international human rights organisations.

SAMDEN, founded in 2017 and anchored in the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI), has five co-conveners including Hazarika and a membership of over 60 media professionals across South Asia. The other conveners are Kanak Mani Dixit, founding editor, Himal South Asian; Mahfuz Anam, editor, The Daily Star, Dhaka; Kumar Lopez, Executive Director, the Sri Lanka Press Institute, and Beena Sarwar, Boston-based journalist, film maker and media teacher.

For more information, please contact:

Sanjoy Hazarika, International Director

sanjoy@humanrightsinitiative.org, sanjoyha@gmail.com

Aditya Sharma, Media and Advocacy Officer

aditya@humanrightsinitiative.org

humanrightsinitiative.org | [Facebook](#) | [Twitter](#) | [YouTube](#)