

AFRICAN UNION HEADS OF STATES ASKED TO PRIORITIZE FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IN AFRICA

PRESS RELEASE

By the Freedom on Information Coalition-Sierra Leone
C/O National Forum for Human Rights Headquarters, Wellington Street, Freetown

In the recent Dakar, Senegal Conference on “Freedom of Expression” in Africa, the spotlight was turned on the Gambia, which was accused by Gambian participants at the conference for arbitrarily arresting, detaining, torturing, and physically and economically harassing journalists, and human rights activists. The conference called on all Africans to band together to investigate, and, if necessary, put pressure of the Gambian government of President Yahya Jammeh, to end the abuses of human rights in the Gambia.

The Dakar Freedom of Expression (FOE) conference, organized by ARTICLE IXX, also sent an Open Letter to all Africa Union Heads of States who were part of the recent Africa Union conference in the Gambia to strive to uphold the fundamental principles of the African and Peoples Human Rights – especially those who relates to the protection of journalists - to which their governments were signatories. This letter also appealed to the African leaders to recognize the centrality of Freedom of Expression in the developmental process of Africa.

This FOE conference, funded by Open Society of West Africa, and the U.S-based Ford Foundation, was attended by Alfred Carew, the Executive Secretary of the National Forum for Human Rights-Sierra Leone; and Oswald Hanciles, the Secretary General of the Freedom of Information Coalition in Sierra Leone. Concerns were raised at the conference about the still obnoxious Public Order Act in the laws of Sierra Leone, which were said to inhibit FOE, and the issue of the death of For di People editor, Harry Yansanneh also received prominence; however, the Sierra Leonean participants spoke glowingly about the relative Freedom of Expression in Sierra Leone, the multiplicity of the private print and electronic media in the country, the near absence of fear of extra judicial action against media professionals in the country, which makes Sierra Leone a better media climate when compared to other African countries like the Gambia, Zimbabwe, Libya, Tunisia. Messrs Carew and Hanciles however stressed that Freedom of Expression in Sierra Leone would remain a charade, without journalists being able to access detailed information on especially public enterprises, and stated that only with Parliament passing the Freedom of Information Bill into law will Freedom of Expression become meaningful in Sierra Leone.

The conference, attended by media, development, and human rights activities from countries in West, North, and South Africa (ranging from the Gambia, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Nigeria, to Sudan, Namibia, and Botswana) resolved to broaden the existing network on FOE to include women, youth, religious groups, so that FOE will take its central place in ensuring the wave of democracy, and anti-corruption does not ebb in Africa.

The Freedom of Information Coalition in Sierra Leone is appealing to all relevant groups in Sierra Leone to join it to lobby Parliament to pass into law the Freedom of Information Bill that had been presented to Parliament by the FOI.