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<http://www.rsf.org/liberia-is-freedom-of-information-a-08-09-2014,46917.html>

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Africa - Liberia

Intimidation

## Is freedom of information a collateral victim of Ebola virus?

8 September 2014

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**As the Ebola virus continues to spread in Liberia, the authorities have reinforced their control over the national media in the past three weeks although the free flow of news and information is essential to controlling this public health crisis.**

**Will freedom of information be one of the Ebola epidemic's collateral victims?** The Press Union of Liberia wrote to justice minister Christiana Tah on 4 September voicing alarm about the recent violations of freedom of information.

The national newspapers have been repeatedly obstructed since the start of the Ebola outbreak. The investigative daily *FrontPage Africa* was ordered to turn off its generator. The police questioned the editors of *Women Voices*. A curfew has prevented reporters from going out at night. And the *National Chronicle* has been closed for the past three weeks.

The Press Union of Liberia's letter to the justice minister stressed that journalists wanted to help combat the Ebola epidemic and deplored the fact the media's role in this national crisis was being restricted and blocked.

*"We support the Press Union of Liberia's response to these disturbing developments,"* Reporters Without Borders assistant research director Virginie Dangles said.

*"Such media freedom violations are unacceptable. Liberia's public health crisis must not be used as a pretext for cracking down on the media. On the contrary, the media need to be involved as much as possible, to provide the population with constant information about the state of the epidemic, the government's response and the preventive measures being adopted."*

The police went to *FrontPage Africa*'s headquarters on 1 September and ordered it to turn off its generator on the grounds that it was causing pollution. This made it impossible to produce and print the newspaper. Nearby companies were nonetheless allowed to continue using their generators.

*FrontPage Africa* was previously closed for months, from August to November 2013, and [its editor, Rodney Sieh, was detained](#).

Police questioned *Women Voices* editor **Helen G. Nah** on 30 August about a story in the previous day's issue headlined "Police accused of Ebola money corruption: junior officers crying foul of unfair distribution of operation money." Although no charge was brought against her, she was interrogated for several hours.

The ability to do investigative reporting has been considerably reduced for the past several weeks. When proclaiming a state of emergency at the start of August, President Elaine Johnson Sirleaf warned that certain rights, including media rights, would be curtailed. A curfew was then imposed on 19 August, preventing everyone, including journalists, from going out after 9 pm.

On 14 August, five days before the introduction of the curfew, police raided the *National Chronicle*, broke down its front door, released teargas inside, seized two computers and arrested news editor **Emmanuel Mensah**, computer technician **Emmanuel Logan** and copy editor **Philibert S. Browne**. Roughed up at the time of their arrest, the three journalists were later released.

The newspaper, which has been closed ever since the raid, had recently published a series of articles critical of the president's son Fumba Sirleaf, who heads the National Security Agency.

The day that the *National Chronicle* was closed down, information minister Lewis Brown had asked journalists to restrict their coverage.

*"We are in a state of emergency,"* he said. *"We're beginning to see all sorts of reports as if we are*

*in normal times. Please, please, if you cannot help us, don't hurt us. That's the last warning you will ever hear from me."*

Liberia is ranked 89th out of 180 countries in the [2014 Reporters Without Borders press freedom index](#).

*(photo: Christiana Tah, justice minister of Liberia)*

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