

Reporters Without Borders

<http://www.rsf.org/liberia-newspaper-editor-jailed-for-23-08-2013,45096.html>

Africa - Liberia

Abusive closure

Court closes newspaper two days after jailing editor

26 August 2013

Reporters Without Borders condemns the supreme court's decision to ban publication of the daily *FrontPage Africa* on 23 August, two days after its editor, **Rodney Sieh**, was jailed.

The ban was ordered shortly after the Press Union of Liberia and civil society representatives tried to negotiate with the authorities in order to prevent the newspaper's closure.

22.08.2013 - Newspaper editor jailed for inability to pay astronomical damages award

Reporters Without Borders condemns *FrontPage Africa* editor **Rodney Sieh's** imprisonment after Liberia's supreme court upheld a decision ordering him to pay former agriculture minister Chris Toe 1.6 million dollars (1.2 million euros) in libel damages.

On 20 August, a judge ordered the newspaper's closure and Sieh's detention pending payment and, as a result, Sieh was jailed yesterday after he said he would not pay.

"The supreme court's decision is an unacceptable violation of freedom of information," Reporters Without Borders said. "It is shocking that a journalist is in prison because of his work in a country whose president is a Nobel peace laureate, one who moreover gave a firm undertaking to support press freedom by signing the Declaration of Table Mountain in 2007.

"We urge President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf to do everything possible within the limits of her powers to ensure that these undertakings are respected and that Sieh is released at once. His imprisonment had highlighted the urgency of completing the decriminalization of media offences by imposing ceilings on damages awards, or else the reforms already carried out will have little effect."

Reporters Without Borders added: "Such a disproportionate damages award as the one issued against *FrontPage Africa* constitutes intimidation of the media, which have a vital role to play in combatting corruption."

Toe sued *FrontPage Africa* over a series of articles in 2009 accusing him of embezzling agriculture ministry funds. Toe claims that the newspaper got its facts wrong and therefore defamed him. The Press Union of Liberia and civil society representatives are currently negotiating with the authorities in an attempt to prevent *FrontPage Africa's* closure.

The same judge also heard another libel action against Sieh on 20 August, one brought by National Port Authority chief Matilda Parker. She is seeking 1 million dollars in damages (750,000 euros) for insulting comments about her posted by visitors to the *FrontPage Africa* website, although Sieh gave a formal apology and suspended the editor who allowed the comments to be posted. Parker's lawyers said they would also seek *FrontPage Africa's* closure.

Liberia is ranked 97th out of 179 countries in the [2013 Reporters Without Borders press freedom index](#).

Photo : A man selling newspapers in Monrovia (Issouf Sanogo / AFP)

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