

Reporters Without Borders

<http://www.rsf.org/liberia-newspaper-editor-released-former-14-11-2013,45189.html>

Africa - Liberia

Free at last

Newspaper editor released, former minster drops case

14 November 2013

Reporters Without Borders is pleased to learn that *Frontpage Africa* editor **Rodney Sieh** is a free man again. Sieh was taken back to prison when his 30 days of "compassionate leave" expired on 8 November but was formally released the same day.

In a related development, former agriculture minister Chris Toe yesterday withdrew his libel action against Sieh and let it be known he is no longer seeking payment of the 1.5 million dollars in damages ordered by a court. It was Sieh's failure to pay that led to his imprisonment.

"Sieh's release is a great relief after this saga consisting of his arrest, imprisonment, home leave on 'compassionate' grounds, house arrest and finally last week's release," Reporters Without Borders said. "We hope it ends the judicial harassment to which Sieh and his newspaper have been subjected for the past four months.

"We urge the authorities to complete the decriminalization of media offences by establishing a ceiling on damages awards without any further delay, so that such an episode does not recur. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf signed the decriminalization bill into law in July 2012. More than a year later, Liberia's entire press corps is still waiting for it to become a reality."

The court handling the Sieh case is expected to issue a final ruling on 18 November.

21.10.2013 - Editor placed under house arrest for the remainder of parole

Reporters Without Borders is disturbed by the justice ministry's decision on 18 October to place *Frontpage Africa* editor **Rodney Sieh** under house arrest during the rest of the 30 days of "compassionate" leave from prison that he was accorded on 8 October.

"The house arrest order contradicts the parole that Sieh was granted on health grounds," Reporters Without Borders said. "Sieh is like a ball being batted to and fro in a power struggle between different Liberian officials. This constitutes cruel treatment and we call for the immediate withdrawal of this measure, which restricts his freedom of movement and his access to health care."

The house arrest order came two days after the Supreme Court ordered justice minister Christiana Tah to show cause why she should not be held in contempt for ordering Sieh's temporary release in "defiance" of the court's decision in August to jail him for failing to pay 1.6 million dollars in damages to a former agriculture minister.

Sieh will now have to spend the remaining days of his parole confined to his home and under constant police surveillance.

10.10.2013 - Editor's 30-day release is "totally unsatisfactory"

Reporters Without Borders calls for *Frontpage Africa* editor **Rodney Sieh**'s definitive release and the reopening of his newspaper after a court freed him yesterday on "compassionate grounds" for a period of 30 days beginning on 8 October.

Jailed on 21 August for being unable to pay former agriculture minister Chris Toe 1.6 million dollars (1.2 million euros) in libel damages, Sieh is forbidden to travel abroad and must notify the authorities if he leaves the capital, Monrovia, during this temporary period of release.

"Sieh's temporary release is totally unsatisfactory," Reporters Without Borders said. "This half-measure allows the Liberian government to save face with respect to all the pressure it has been under for several months from Liberian and international human rights NGOs, but it does not address the underlying problem, the illegitimacy of Sieh's detention in the first place.

"This case underlines the importance of completing the decriminalization of defamation by setting a ceiling on damage awards. Sieh was jailed for being unable to pay the excessive damages ordered in this case. Such a disproportionate amount helps to intimidate the media and obstruct freedom of information."

17.09.2013 - Journalist Rodney Sieh sent back to prison after hospitalization

Reporters Without Borders is outraged by the re-admission to Monrovia central prison today of the journalist **Rodney Sieh**, after 22 days in the John F. Kennedy Memorial Hospital.

"The harassment of this journalist by the Liberian legal system is totally underserved and we call for his immediate release," the press freedom organization said.

"Rodney Sieh was only carrying out his job as a journalist. We call once again on the government to take action to decriminalise media offences, in particular to stop imposing disproportionate fines on journalists in order to intimidate them, since the media play an important role in the fight against corruption."

Sieh was imprisoned on 20 August for refusing to pay a fine of nearly 1.6 million dollars in libel damages in a case brought by the former agriculture minister, **Chris Toe**.

Since then, Toe has told the media he would drop the case if the journalist apologised publicly.

Sieh's lawyers say their client will not consider such an apology since the articles that appeared in his newspaper *Frontpage Africa* were based on extracts of official reports by the General Auditing Commission, the country's anti-corruption body.

Photo: The editor of the daily *Frontpage Africa*, Rodney Sieh (Ken Harper/SI Newhouse School of Public Communications).

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