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LIBERIA

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The Liberian media environment improved in 2012 due to a decrease in libel cases, efforts to repeal defamation laws, and a reduction in violence against journalists. The constitution provides for freedoms of speech and press, and the government largely respected these rights. In July 2012, President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf became the second African head of state to endorse the Declaration of Table Mountain, which calls on African governments to abolish criminal defamation laws. The Press Union of Liberia submitted a draft bill to parliament in late November that would carry out such an abolition, but it had not been enacted at year's end, and some libel charges continued to be leveled against media houses during the year. In addition, the compensation sought and imposed in civil cases is often excessive, leading to severe financial difficulties for journalists and their outlets, and encouraging self-censorship in the media. In February, former senator Nathaniel J. Williams filed a libel suit against the *Independent* newspaper for an article alleging that he had been evicted from his rented home. Williams claimed damages of US\$5 million. In March, Robert Sirleaf, the chairman of the board of directors at the National Oil Company of Liberia and the president's son, threatened a libel suit against the *Independent* if it did not retract an article claiming that he had seized national oil holdings for commercial use. Corruption and bribery in the judicial sector also contribute to a largely unfavorable environment for journalists. In February, three newspaper publishers were ordered to appear before the Supreme Court on possible charges of contempt following the publication of an article that accused the judges of embezzling funds. At the hearing, representatives of two of the papers apologized to the court.

In 2010, Liberia enacted West Africa's first freedom of information law. Both journalists and the general public have the right to access any public document, with exemptions for those related to national security. However, implementation of the law, as well as public awareness regarding how to use it, has remained weak.

According to the Center for Media Studies and Peace Building (CEMESP), there are very few legal provisions that help guide media policy or offer protections to journalists in Liberia. Existing regulatory bodies are largely ineffective at implementing laws and regulations governing the media, and self-regulatory mechanisms have not yet been developed. A 2008 bill that would establish an independent broadcast regulator with safeguards against