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Liberia: Journalists under threat again

Four independent journalists detained for writing articles critical of the government should be immediately released, Amnesty International said today. The four have been detained since 21 February and were yesterday denied bail by a Liberian criminal court.

"The Liberian authorities have a track record of silencing critics. Journalists and human rights defenders are frequently arrested, ill-treated, charged with criminal offences, threatened or forced into exile," the organization said.

Joseph Bartuah, Managing Editor, Abdullah Dukuly, Editor in Chief, Jerome Dalieh, News Editor, and Bobby Tapson, reporter, were arrested in Monrovia after their newspaper *The News* reported government spending on spare parts for helicopters while delaying months of wages for civil servants. *The News* article also reported government spending on Christmas cards while water, electricity and telephones were unavailable in the country.

According to the writ of arrest, the four journalists "intended to reveal national defence information to foreign power(s) with the purpose of injuring Liberia or of benefiting the said foreign power(s) in the event of military or diplomatic confrontation with the Republic of Liberia". The accused are currently held at the Central Prison in Monrovia.

Amnesty International is calling on the Liberian authorities to release them unconditionally and immediately as prisoners of conscience, unless there is credible evidence of any criminal offence. If such evidence exists, the Liberian authorities should ensure that they are promptly and fairly tried, with full rights of defence and according to international standards for fair trial.

Background

Journalists briefly detained last year included Suah Deddeh, Chair of the Liberian Press Union, in March, and Isaac Redd, a radio journalist, in April. In March 2000, the Liberian government closed down the independent Star Radio station after it broadcast information about human rights abuses in Liberia. Another independent radio, Radio Veritas, was also closed down in March last year but allowed to reopen shortly afterwards as a result of protests. In September 2000, seven staff members of the independent New Democrat, including its editor, Charles Jackson, fled Liberia following death threats, intimidation and harassment by the security forces.

In August, four journalists working for UK television station, Channel 4, were detained for several days and accused of spying. The four were beaten following their arrest and one of them was threatened with death. They were released unconditionally after widespread protests.

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