



Freedom of expression

Freedom of Expression

Situation in West Africa:

A February 2025 Overview

INTRODUCTION

The freedom of expression and media freedom landscape in West Africa has not seen much improvement. Despite the fact that almost all West African countries have ratified the Africa Charter on Human and People's Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), attacks against civic expression and media freedom persist. Journalists, media houses, and activists (including environmental and political activists) are often attacked for reporting and highlighting injustices, corruption and environmentally destructive practices. Unfortunately, many of the attacks go unpunished thereby fostering a culture of impunity which continues to embolden perpetrators.

As part of efforts to gather evidence to inform advocacy and policy interventions to address the challenge, the Media Foundation for West Africa's (MFWA) has been monitoring the civic space in West Africa to document and report freedom of expression violations. Through the reports, the MFWA also make calls to relevant authorities to take remedial action to ensure that justice is served to the victims. This report presents the findings of the daily monitoring conducted in the month of February 2025. The report also makes recommendations to relevant state-actors to take reparative actions to address the violations recorded.



FINDINGS



The Media Foundation for West Africa's monitoring of freedom of expression developments in West Africa in the month of February 2025 recorded eight cases of freedom of expression abuses. Specifically, there were four incidents of physical attacks against journalists, one detention incident; one incident of media suspension and two cases of attack/threat against dissidents. The eight violations were recorded in Ghana, Sierra Leone and Guinea, with Ghana recording five out of the eight cases. Other developments in the areas of environmental activism, regulation and online attacks are documented in this report.

Attacks against journalists

Four incidents of attacks against journalists were recorded in Ghana in February 2025 – one involved the attack of journalists by football fans, another involved the attack of journalists by miners, another involved the attack of journalists by military men, and another involved an attack against journalists by unidentified people. A total of 14 journalists were attacked in the four incidents. Unfortunately, none of these cases has so far been redressed at the time of finalising this report.

On February 2, 2025, during a Ghana Premier League match between two clubs, Nsoatreman and Asante Kotoko, at the Nana Kronamansah Park in Nsoatre, a town in the Bono region of Ghana, violence broke out when a brawl between players escalated. In the process, one of the Kotoko fans, Francis Yaw Frimpong (Nana Pooley) was stabbed; four journalists, including Kotoko's Head of Media, Steven Owusu, were [attacked](#), and media equipment was destroyed.

Less than 10 days after, on February 11, 2025, five journalists were [attacked](#) by a group of unidentified men while covering the Council of State elections in the Ashanti region. The incident unfolded at the Ashanti Regional Coordinating Council where the journalists were covering the activities of some thugs who were destroying ballot boxes and scattering ballot papers.

In another incident, military personnel beat up two journalists in Walewale, in the West Mamprusi Municipality of the North East Region of Ghana on February 13, 2025. Alhassan Dokurugu of Asaase Radio and Tahiru Ibrahim of Zaa Multimedia were beaten shortly after covering an arson attack on a passenger bus. Upon their arrival at the scene, they observed military officers violently assaulting civilians, including bystanders and travellers. Dokurugu and Ibrahim were leaving the scene on a motor bicycle when they were stopped and questioned by a group of soldiers. The soldiers let them pass after they showed their press cards. They were similarly allowed to pass by another group of soldiers only to be assaulted by a third group at Nalerigu Junction, despite showing their press cards.

In a separate incident involving environmental journalists in the Breman-Adomanya forest area in Ghana's Wassa Amenfi West District, three environmental journalists investigating illegal mining activities were [assaulted](#). Their investigations showed that miners had destroyed a

261-acre area, destroyed farms and polluted River Tano. As the journalists, Akwasi Agyei Annim (Citi FM/TV), Nana Fynn (Angel FM/TV), and another from Rok FM began filming the devastation, a security guard on the ground alerted the miners who were not at the scene. Upon arrival, the miners attacked the journalists despite the fact that they (the journalists) had four police officers as escorts. One journalist's camera was taken, and another was assaulted while trying to record the struggle.

Suspension of media outlets

On February 18, Ghana's Minister for Communication, Digital Technology, and Innovations, Sam Nartey George, announced on his X account the [suspension](#) of seven private radio stations. According to the Minister, one of the affected outlets, Bawku-based Gumah FM, was shut down on national security grounds. For the remaining six [Fire Group of Companies (Sunyani 90.1 MHz), Zar Consult Limited (Tamale 89.7 MHz), Abochannel Media Group (Adidome 105.7 MHz), Okyeame Radio Limited (Bibiani 99.7 MHz), Mumen Bono Foundation (Techiman 99.7 MHz), Osikani Community FM, Nkrankwanta (99.7 MHz)], the Minister indicated that they were suspended for failing to renew their frequency authorisation and not fulfilling their statutory payment obligations.

Detention of journalist

A Dutch journalist, Sophie Van Leeuwen, working as Africa Correspondent for RTL News (in the Netherlands), was on February 13, 2025 [detained](#) and interrogated at the Police Criminal Investigations Department in Freetown, Sierra Leone. According to the police, her detention was in relation to investigations about her activities in the country. The police did not provide specifics, but there were rumours that the detention of Van Leeuwen might have been linked to her

possible investigations into Johannes Leijdekkers, a Dutch national convicted in absentia for drug trafficking, who was reportedly residing in Sierra Leone. Van Leeuvan was later released and left the country few days after.

Attacks against dissidents

In Guinea, arbitrary arrest of critical voices persist. Abdoul Sacko, Coordinator of the Forum des Forces Sociales de Guinée and one of the most outspoken critics of Guinea's military government, was arrested on February 19, 2025, around 4:00 am and taken to an undisclosed location. The Forum des Forces Sociales de Guinée brings together some civil society groups; politically aligned groups and trade unions that are opposed to the junta administration. Sacko was found a day after his arrest, 20 February 2025, 100 kilometers from the capital, Conakry, with severe injuries and signs of torture.

On the same 20 February 2025, Dr. Faya Millimono, President of the opposition party, Bloc Libéral (BL), told journalists who had gone for a press conference Millimono was due to address that he had been forced to cancel the presser after receiving a death threat the same day. Although he did not reveal the identity of the perpetrators of the threat, the serious tone in which he spoke struck a chord with those present. At the start of the transition, Millimono had thrown his support behind the military government. However, he became highly critical of the CNRD (Comité National du Rassemblement pour le Développement) after noting their resolve to remain in power. He expresses his criticisms (among other opinions) on the progress of the Guinean transition through regular press conferences. It was one of such pressers he was due to address when he announced it could not take place because of a death threat he had received.

Redress

In the month under review, the MFWA mounted pressure on Ivorian authorities to release Vincent Djiropo, Dominique Mensah and 18 community members of the Winnin community who had been in detention without trial since December 2024. The organisation issued a [statement](#) calling for the release of the environmentalists, and [another](#) joining local CSO coalition to make same demands. On February 26, 2025, the 20 detained environmentalists were [released](#).

Other developments

Before Ghana's 2024 elections, environmental journalist Erastus Asare Donkor of the Multimedia Group was [forced to flee](#) the country due to life-threatening intimidation linked to his investigative reports on illegal mining, commonly known as galamsey in Ghana. On February 1, 2025, he recounted his ordeal on JoyNews' Newsfile programme, revealing that his exposés on the destructive environmental activities across the Western, Eastern and Ashanti regions of Ghana had provoked powerful individuals who began threatening his family. The harassment escalated after he published a report on illegal mining activities by Edelmetallum Resources Limited, during which he and his crew were detained and assaulted by the company's security. In November 2024, a Facebook user warned Erastus' wife to advise him to stop reporting on illegal mining if she wanted him to stay with his family. Erastus reported the threat to the police. He, however, resorted to sleeping away from home after realising he was being followed. He stated that the illegal miners he exposed were politically connected and accused him of harming their party's electoral chances. As the threats intensified, some security personnel advised him to leave the country, leading to his absence during the December 7 elections. With the elections over, Erastus said the threats had stopped.

On the regulatory front, two significant developments were recorded. In Mali, the broadcast sector was hit by a steep [increase](#) in licence fees, raising concerns about the survival of the industry that is already beset by myriad problems. On 31 December 2024, Mali's media regulatory body, the High Authority for Communication (HAC), signed two new decrees on the annual fee and methods of payment for the operation of private audiovisual communication services, as well as the costs of issuing licences for the establishment, operation, and change of operations. The media was informed of the signed decrees on February 8, 2025. Negotiations between media organisations/associations and the media regulatory body are still ongoing.

In another concerning development, Niger's Minister of Communication, Posts, and Digital Economy, Sidi Mohamed Raliou, [announced](#) on February 26, 2025 during an interview on national television that the government was planning to introduce strict regulations for large social media groups. According to him, social media groups with 50 or more members would be required to secure authorization to operate. The Minister cited economic, security and disinformation concerns as reasons for the move, arguing that many users exploit these platforms to engage in unregulated commercial activities, spread of disinformation and the disruption of public order. The move was, however, seen as a pretext to stifle expression and digital rights as the announced plan seem to follow a broader pattern of repression since the July 2023 coup, including the [reintroduction](#) of prison sentences for online defamation and a sharp decline in media freedom.

On developments in the digital/cyber space, two major issues were noted. Renowned human rights lawyer Femi Falana (SAN) [filed](#) a \$5 million lawsuit against Meta Platforms, Inc., accusing the company of violating his privacy by using his name, image, and voice in a false

advertisement for a health product. The ad, shared via the Facebook page, "AfriCare Health Centre," claimed that Falana had suffered from prostatitis for 16 years. Falana denies any link to the product or platform and argues that the video harmed his reputation and violated his rights under Nigeria's Constitution and the Data Protection Act 2023. The lawsuit, filed at the Lagos State High Court, seeks the removal of the video, damages, and a formal declaration of rights violation. Falana also accuses Meta of negligence for failing to verify the content before publication. This comes after Meta was fined \$220 million in July 2024 by Nigerian regulators for similar data privacy breaches involving Meta and WhatsApp. A court hearing date for Falana's case is yet to be set.

The X (formerly Twitter) account of Nigerian investigative newspaper Premium Times, with over 2 million followers, was [hacked](#) by a crypto-marketing group. The hackers have been using the account to promote cryptocurrency content unrelated to journalism, including links promoting crypto tags. Premium Times confirmed the breach in a statement indicating that the hackers bypassed their two-factor authentication. The newspaper is investigating the breach and working to regain full control of the account. The Editor-in-Chief confirmed that they had contacted X's support team, but the challenge was yet to be resolved.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The eight incidents of violations recorded in Ghana, Guinea and Sierra Leone over the one-month period is concerning. The findings show that on the average, journalists were attacked every week in Ghana; a rather unfortunate and an alarming situation that needs urgent attention to ensure that the rate of abuse against journalists does not persist or escalate. Equally worrying is

the trauma and intimidation Erastus Asare Donkor had to endure in the last two months of 2024. The accounts of Erastus Asare Donkor; the attack against journalists by miners in the Wassa Amenfi West District of Ghana; and the detention of environmentalists in Côte d'Ivoire for over two months without trial, portray a growing intolerance against environmental activism by both journalists and activists. Attacks against environmentalists must be stopped as a matter of urgency to encourage others to boldly report destructive environmental activities that are dissipating farmlands, forests, river bodies and ultimately, food security.

The physical attacks against journalists in Ghana; the detention of the Dutch journalist in Sierra Leone; and the arrest and intimidation of critical voices in Guinea are all pointers to the shrinking civic space in West Africa. The suspension of media outlets in Ghana, the increased financial pressures on broadcasters in Mali and the planned restrictions on large social media groups also need attention as they ultimately limit spaces for expression and access to information.



It is, however, refreshing to note that at least one violation has seen some redress – the release of the environmentalists of the Winnin community. More of such actions are needed to embolden activists and journalists in their pursuit for sustainable environmental practices.

In consideration of the findings in February 2025, the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) calls to the governments of Ghana, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Niger and the Malian High Authority for Communication (HAC) to take appropriate reparative steps towards the issues raised in this report.

Government of Ghana

The MFWA calls on the government of Ghana to investigate the attacks against journalists as highlighted in this report to bring the culprits to book. The threats against Erastus Asare Donkor and other environmentalists must also be given particular attention to ward off culprits. Such a decisive step will demonstrate the government's commitment to media freedom, freedom of expression and democratic values. We also urge the government to engage all stakeholders in dealing with the issues that have led to the suspension of the seven media outlets. The process must be deemed and seen as transparent and participatory, and aimed at strengthening the media industry through dialogue, and not a political vendetta.

Government of Guinea

The MFWA calls on the government of Guinea to protect, respect and promote the right to expression in all its forms. In particular, we urge the Guinean authorities to investigate the arrest of Abdoul Sacko and the threat against Dr. Faya Millimono and bring the culprits to book.

Government of Côte d'Ivoire

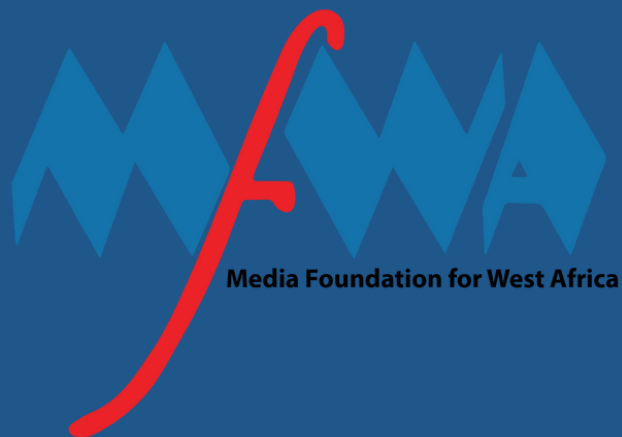
While we commend the release of the 20 environmental activists, their arrest and arbitrary detention should not have happened in the first place. The MFWA, therefore, calls on the government to ensure that all charges against the 20 are dropped immediately and unconditionally. We also encourage the government to ensure that civil rights and liberties are respected and protected.

Government of Niger


We call on the government of Niger to halt the intended plans to regulate large social media groups. If the Ministry of Communications, Posts, and Digital Economy has cause to believe that such groups are being used for nefarious activities, it should engage all stakeholders in the ecosystem to ensure that through a transparent and a participatory process, decisions on how to deal with the issues are reached and implemented while respecting civil rights and liberties as guaranteed by the Nigerien Constitution.

High Authority for Communication in Mali

We call on the Malian High Authority for Communication to open discussions with media organisations in the country to discuss and reach a mutual agreement on fees that will help the government to achieve its target while enabling the media industry in the country to thrive.



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