

**Remarks by
Her Excellency President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf**

**at the Opening of a Two-Day Conference on
“The Liberian Media and the Law”**

**Held at PA’s Rib House, Lakpazee
Sinkor, Monrovia**

May 10, 2016

9:30 am

Senator Teahjay

Minister Eugene Nagbe

Mr. Kamara, President of the Press Union and All the Other Members

Distinguished Guests

Development Partners

Media Practitioners

Other Participants

Ladies and Gentlemen

Let me thank Internews for the invitation to make this opening remark at the two-day seminar “Media Law and Regulatory Reform Stakeholders’ Conference”.

We understand that Internews, with world-wide experience is empowering media in more than 90 countries – which will use such leverage to assist our local media to become more accountable, responsible and professional in their service to our country.

In partnership with Albany Associates of the United Kingdom, Liberia Media Development initiative will lead the media law and regulatory reform agenda, an initiative which is said to have started since 2004, which is not an adequate time to be able to reach this objective. As we understand it, the reform agenda aims to:

- Increase citizens' access to independent and reliable information and empower them engage in well-informed public discussions;
- To equip and empower the local media to help the sustainability of media houses;

- To improve professional skills and standards in the media;
- To strengthen normative-legal enabling environment for freer media; and
- To support the Independent Information Commission to effectively implement the Freedom of Information Act.

We fully subscribe as a government to, and offer Government's Partnership in this reform agenda, which has an objective that places emphasis on equipping and empowering the local media not just for sustainability of media houses but equipping them with the tools and skills and the values that will enable them to place country above self. Empowering sustainability calls for quality in newsgathering and packaging for a news-hungry population.

As you embark on strengthening both the legal and normative means to achieve an enabling environment for a freer media – the onus is on you to enjoin media practitioners on the need to tell the truth, to curb deliberate ethical transgressions, which have become commonplace – thus eroding the foundation of freedom of speech and the press.

This administration has made significant contributions to media respect and sustainability including the enactment of the Freedom of Information Act of 2010 – for which we were honored as “Friend of the Media” by the Africa Editors’ Forum. I think you would agree that Liberia is noted for making history and as you all know – our country holds an enviable record as the first country in West Africa to have made this accomplishment.

Our political tolerance, is manifested by allowing freedom of speech as a fundamental civil liberty and sine qua none of democratic value system. Never

before have we seen the multiplicity of newspapers and proliferation of radio stations (some of which have violated our laws by continuing to be unregistered and non-tax compliant, some of which engage in the promotion of politics rather than journalism). We urge that the media be as accountable as much as they demand accountability from others. We urge that the media is eschewed from extortion while properly demanding the same of others.

When we signed the Table Mountain Declaration in 2012, it was and still is with the interest to repeal the sedition laws and criminal libel laws. This has taken too long a time. We now ask that the media rather than criticizing the fact that this has been done – that you join us to get it done - in ensuring that whatever is before our colleagues in the Legislature is passed. We ask you as media representatives to play you role. We ask that all civil society organizations to join us to complete this process as quickly as possible. We know that one other thing that needs to be done is the establishment of a Regulatory Body; one that will ensure that the values and principles of good journalism are respected.

Every other country of the Mano River Union – our sisterly countries and the majority of countries around us have subscribed to this international standard. How do we go about this reform agenda that has to be accomplished?

As we progress the course of our democratic and recovery paths, we urge the media to act in recognition of the power that you have in shaping minds and changing attitudes, shaping public opinion – mobilizing communities for community development – fostering reconciliation, building and helping to keep the peace. A constructive media, while reserving the right to full independence and the role of a watchdog can promote or destroy the environment for private investment and the economic growth which results with benefits to all including the media itself.

Thank you to Internews, and to all of you for initiating this program. We ask that as you deliberate, you do so in the spirit of goodwill, the spirit of the interest of our country, recognizing that we offer a partnership that together we create the environment in which the media continue to have freedom of expression and freedom to promote the peace and development of our country.

Thank you.