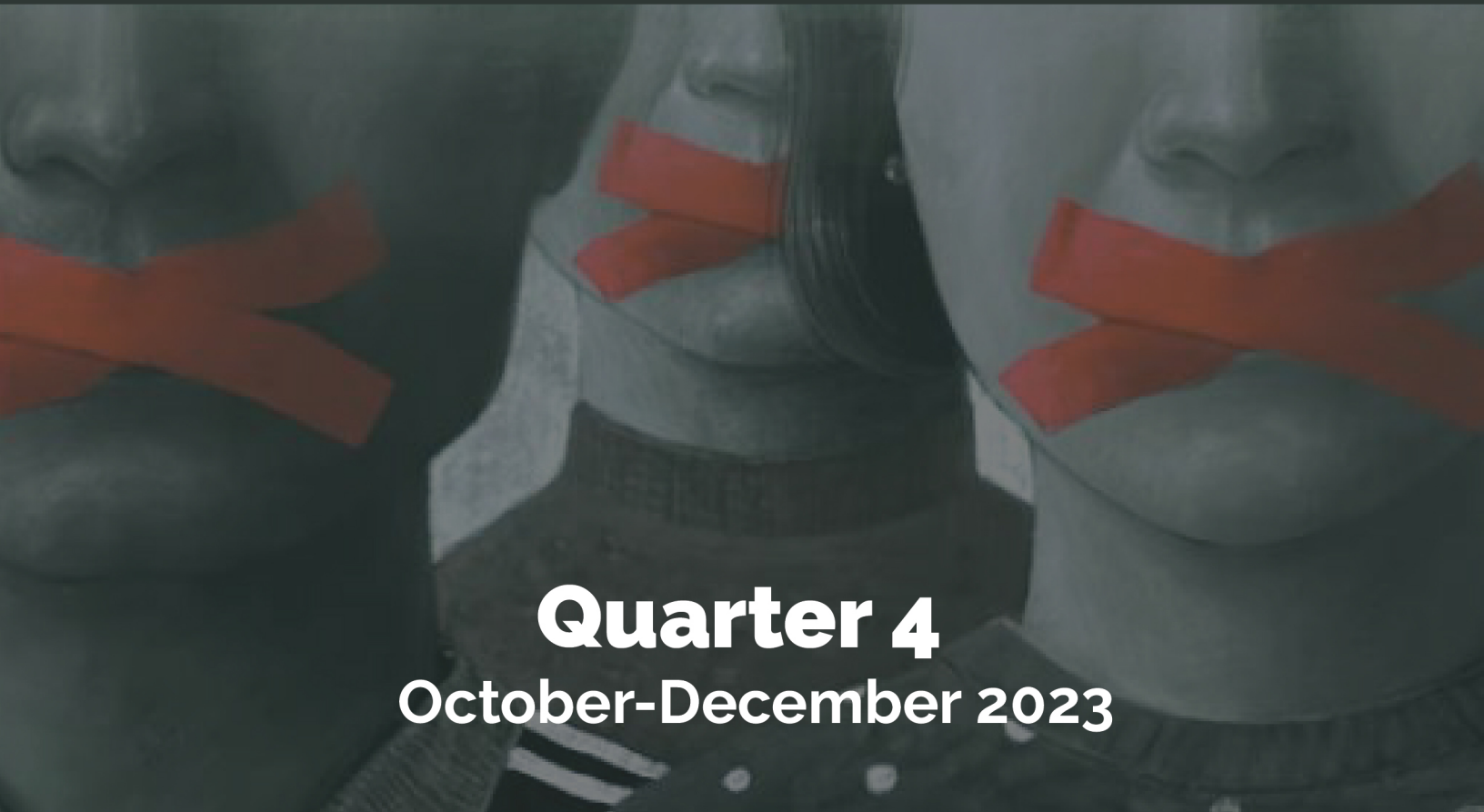




West Africa **Freedom of Expression Monitor**



Quarter 4
October-December 2023

WEST AFRICA FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION MONITOR

Quarter 4

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January 2024

Table of Content

Executive Summary	1
Introduction	2
Methodology	3
Countries and Incidents of Violations	4
Perpetrators of Violations	6
Targets/Victims of Violations	7
Digital Rights	8
Redress for Violations/Impunity	9
Other Key FOE Developments	9
Conclusion	11
Recommendations.....	11

Executive Summary

The Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) has been promoting press freedom and fostering media development, with the aim of enhancing the media's vital role in upholding good governance across the sub-region. As part of its press freedom programme, the MFWA monitors and reports on press freedom and freedom of expression issues. It systematically documents violations and potential threats to media freedom and the civic space, while actively engaging in advocacy to advance freedom of expression throughout West Africa.

Threats to human rights generally and particularly press freedom has become more pronounced in recent years. Armed rebellion and terrorist attacks in the Sahel zone of Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and northern Nigeria have led to the adoption of a raft of legislations that restrict the civic space and suppress press freedom. Furthermore, the overthrow of civilian governments by military forces in Mali, Guinea and Burkina Faso has produced a stifling context that restricts press freedom.

Since 2014, the MFWA has been collating and analysing the findings of its monitoring activities into quarterly publications titled, the West Africa Freedom of Expression Monitor. The monitoring and reporting are informed and guided by provisions in international, regional and sub-regional human rights frameworks to which most West African countries are parties and/or signatories.

This edition of the West Africa Freedom of Expression Monitor covers the findings from our monitoring and tracking of freedom of expression (FoE) violations and other notable developments recorded in the fourth quarter of 2023 (October-December 2023).

During the period under review, a total of thirty-nine (39) incidents of freedom of expression violations were recorded. The figure is eight per cent (8%) higher than that of the preceding quarter (July-September 2023) which stood at 36. Unfortunately, most of the violations reported had not been redressed in any way at the time of compiling this report.

Nigeria recorded twelve (12) violations, the highest number of violations during the quarter. Guinea followed with seven (7) violations, while Mali and Ghana recorded five (5) and four (4) violations respectively. Senegal and Sierra Leone recorded three (3)

violations each. Burkina Faso and The Gambia each recorded two (2) violations, while Togo recorded one (1) violation.

Seven (7) different types of perpetrators were responsible for the thirty-nine (39) violations. Security agents accounted for nineteen (19) violations, representing forty-nine per cent (49%) of the total. State/public officials and individuals carried out six (6) violations (15%) and seven (7) violations (18%) respectively. Political party affiliates, the courts and media regulatory bodies each accounted for two (2) violations (5%). The remaining violation was attributed to media owners/managers which recorded one violation (1) representing 3%.

Introduction

The boom in digital technology and internet penetration has brought about a corresponding explosion in the media sector across the world including West Africa. Adding to the favourable conditions for the growth and expansion of the media and civic space is the mass return to democratic governance which began in the early 1990s. By the year 2000, almost the entire West Africa sub-region had adopted multi-party democracy, in contrast with the situation in the 1960s-1980s when the military juntas monopolised political power in the sub-region.

With democracy have come sweeping reforms to the legal environment of the media. Many countries have adopted constitutions that guarantee press freedom. Criminal libel has been repealed and Access to Information laws passed in several countries, significantly reducing legal obstacles to press freedom and the right to information.

Moreover, all the countries in the sub-region are parties or signatories to several international treaties and covenants relating to the right to freedom of expression. Specifically, all 16 countries in the region are parties to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, both of which have provisions for safeguarding FoE and freedom of association and assembly rights. Article 9 of the African Charter, for instance, states that "every individual shall have the right to receive information" and "every individual shall have the right to express and disseminate his opinions within the law." In terms of the right

to freedom of association and assembly, Article 11 of the African Charter states *inter alia* that “every individual shall have the right to assemble freely with others.”

The MFWA’s monitoring and reporting, therefore, focus on the extent to which these international, regional and sub-regional safeguards, as well as FoE provisions in national Constitutions, are respected and upheld both in principle and in practice.

While the evidence does not show that these rights are fully upheld in practice, their consecration in the constitution provides a legal basis to challenge their violations. These violations come in multiple forms. Killings, threats, physical attacks, arbitrary arrests and detentions, and imposition of crippling fines, even in civil defamation suits, are among the repressive measures adopted by government officials, influential individuals, and security agencies to silence journalists as well as human rights and civil society activists. In recent times, digital surveillance, forensic search and hacking of journalists’ and activists’ digital devices have added to the repressive mechanisms.

The Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) has been monitoring and highlighting these developments demanding redress and providing documentary evidence to inform advocacy interventions.

This edition of the Monitor covers the fourth quarter of 2023 (October-December 2023), which recorded thirty-nine (39) violations. The three-month monitoring report presents the frequency of violations recorded, types of violations, perpetrators, and the countries in which the violations occurred.

Methodology

This report is compiled using data from the monitoring reports received from the MFWA’s correspondents in various West African countries. To ensure that other violations not captured by our correspondents are factored into the analysis, information published by the MFWA’s partner organisations in all the West African countries and Mauritania are integrated into the report.

Findings from the daily monitoring are published as Alerts to draw attention to the issues identified for remedial action. The Freedom of Expression Monitor (The Monitor), a quarterly publication which collates and analyses the alerts into a report.

It also highlights other significant developments regarding democratic freedoms in the region. The Monitor has since been serving as an advocacy material for the promotion, defence and protection of media and FoE rights.

The report is guided by the UNESCO Journalists’ Safety Indicators. Specifically, the safety and impunity statistics indicators informed the coding of the violations. The findings are presented below under the following areas: incidents of violations, countries and incidents of violations, perpetrators, and targets of violations. The report also highlights some other important developments which occurred during the quarter. It concludes with several recommendations that will facilitate the nurturing of a progressive media landscape in the region.

Countries and Incidents of Violations

Thirty-nine (39) violations were recorded in the course of the MFWA’s monitoring of the FoE landscape in West Africa over the period of October to December 2023. Eleven (11) different types of violations were recorded in nine (9) countries. Arrests/detentions and physical attacks were the dominant types of violation, occurring sixteen (16) and nine (9) times respectively.

Table 1 below illustrates the types and number of violations recorded in each country.

Table 1: Countries and Types of Violations

Country	Types of Violations											Total
	Physical Attack	Arrest/ Detention	Suspension	Sentence	Killing	Kidnapping	Seizure/ Destruction of Property	Internet Shutdown	Censorship	Media Shutdown	Repressive Law	
Nigeria	3	6					3					12
Guinea	1	1						1	3	1		7
Mali	1	2			1	1						5
Ghana	3								1			4
Senegal		3										3
Sierra Leone	1	1		1								3
Burkina Faso			1								1	2
The Gambia		2										2
Togo		1										1
Total	9	16	1	1	1	1	3	1	4	1	1	39

The quarter was marred by a wave of arrests and detentions, physical attacks, and censorship in the subregion. The most serious incidents of violations occurred in Mali where a deadly attack on a convoy of journalists left one dead, another kidnapped and others injured. Another grievous violation was recorded in Guinea with the internet heavily restricted on social media platforms in the country. *Below are highlights of some of the major incidents:*

On November 7, 2023, unidentified gunmen [attacked](#) a vehicle carrying four radio presenters on the Ansongo-Gao route in northern Mali, killing one and kidnapping two. The dead was identified as Abdoul Aziz Djibrilla from Radio Naata in Labbezanga, a locality on the border with Niger. Saleck Ag Jiddou, director of Radio Coton in Ansongo, and his host Moustaph Koné, were reported missing, while Harouna Attini, host of Radio Alafia in Ansongo, escaped with injuries.

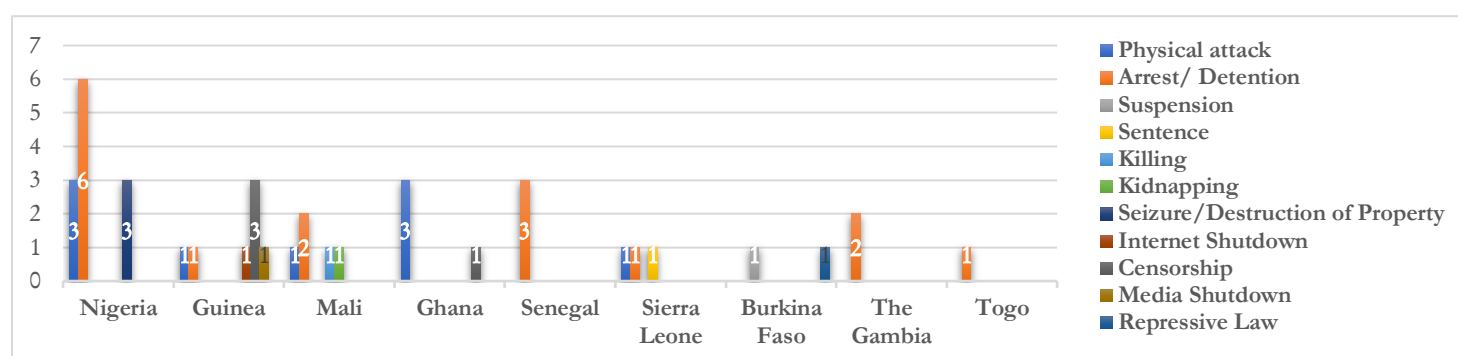
On November 24, 2023, the Niger State Commissioner of Homeland Security, Major General Bello Mohammed Abdullahi [assaulted](#) Journalist Mustapha Batsari, a reporter for *Voice of America* (VOA). The incident occurred when the reporter approached the commissioner at the Government House in Minna for details regarding a crisis in Beji, Bosso Local Government Area.

On November 25, 2023, many media outlets in Guinea have experienced a series of [disruptions](#), with radio stations being jammed, and major social media platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok becoming inaccessible without a VPN. *FIM FM* and *Djoma FM*, reported that their signals were jammed on the same day.

On December 2, 2023, the authorities in Burkina Faso [suspended](#) all channels of *Le Monde* broadcasts indefinitely. The suspension followed an article in the magazine of the media outlet about a rebel attack on government forces. According to the government, the article seemed to discredit the government's account of the incident which occurred on November 26, 2023. Therefore, the government accused *Le Monde* of sympathizing with terrorists in its coverage of the Djibo attacks

The summary narrative of all the violations recorded during this quarter can be read [here](#). *The number of violations recorded in each country is presented in figure 1 below:*

Figure 1: Countries and number of violations recorded



Perpetrators of Violations

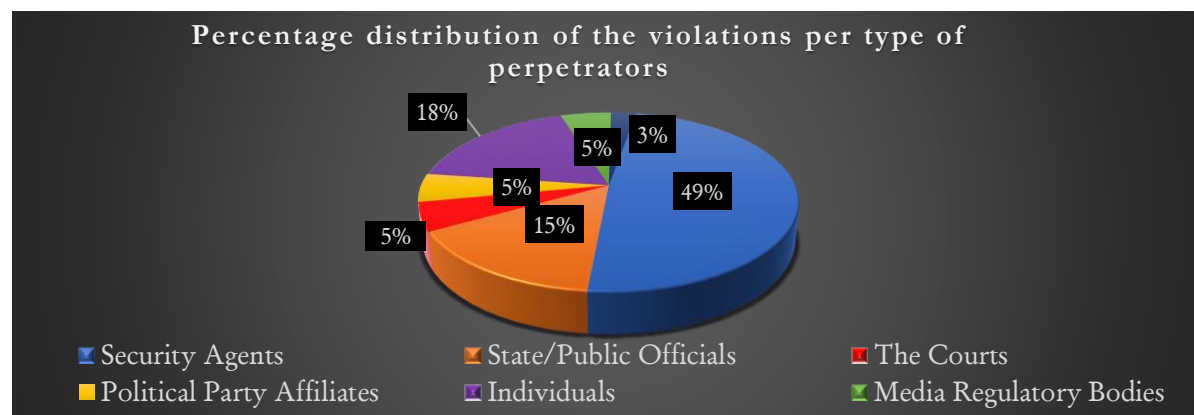
The thirty-nine (39) violations were perpetrated by seven (7) types of perpetrators. Security agents accounted for nineteen (19) violations, representing forty-nine per cent (49%) of the total violations for this quarter. State/public officials carried out six (6) violations (15%) and seven (7) violations (18%) respectively. Political party affiliates, the courts and media regulatory bodies each accounted for two (2) violations (5%). The remaining violation – 1 (3%) – was attributed to media owners/managers. *Table 2 below provides more information on the types of perpetrators and the number of violations recorded against them in each country.*

Table 2: Countries and Types of Perpetrators

Country	Perpetrator Type							Total
	Security Agents	State/Public Officials	The Courts	Political Party Affiliates	Individuals	Media Regulatory Bodies	Media Owners/Managers	
Nigeria	7	1	1		3			12
Guinea	2	3				2		7
Mali	2				3			5
Ghana	1			2			1	4
Senegal	3							3
Sierra Leone	1		1		1			3
Burkina Faso		2						2
The Gambia	2							2
Togo	1							1
Total	19	6	2	2	7	2	1	39

Figure 2 below shows the percentage distribution of violations per type of perpetrators.

Figure 2: Percentage distribution of the violations per type of perpetrators



Targets/Victims of Violations

In terms of distribution, twenty-five (25) of the violations were targeted at journalists and media workers, while nine (9) were targeted at media organisations. Four (4) of the violations were directed at citizens with one (1) targeted at an activist. *Table 3 below illustrates the violations/victims distribution.*

Table 3: Types of victims and number of violations

Country	Types of Victims and Number of Violations suffered				Total
	Journalists/Media Workers	Citizens	Activists	Media Organisations	
Nigeria	11			1	12
Guinea	2	1		4	7
Mali	4	1			5
Ghana	3			1	4
Senegal	2		1		3
Sierra Leone		2		1	3
Burkina Faso				2	2
The Gambia	2				2
Togo	1				1
Total	25	4	1	9	39

In absolute terms, the thirty-nine (39) violations were perpetrated against at least sixty-six (66) victims. Of this, forty-seven (47) were journalists and media workers, fifteen (15) were media organisations, three (3) were citizens, and one (1) was an activist. It is to be noted that one violation can target more than one victim while one entity can be victim of multiple violations. Sometimes, the exact number of victims of violations such as crackdowns on protests, internet and social media shutdowns, cannot be established.

Digital Rights

On November 28, 2023, the National Stakeholders' Forum on Women's Online Rights in Ghana [concluded](#), highlighting the consensus that the internet's inaccessibility, unattractiveness, and unproductiveness for women result from various stakeholders' failure to promote good digital citizenship. Participants cited the government's shortcomings in expanding reliable internet access to rural areas and reducing the cost of data and mobile devices. Additionally, participants pointed out violent and irresponsible gendered behavior towards women online. The stakeholders called for collective efforts to rectify these issues and enhance women's online presence. The forum, hosted by the Media Foundation for West Africa, included participants from civil society organizations, women's groups, the media, academia, and government.

From December 12-15, 2023, the Africa Digital Rights Hub (ADRH) in collaboration with partners organised the Data Protection Africa Summit in Accra. The three-day international conference, themed "Building Bridges for Oversight and Accountability," assembled over 200 delegates from Africa and other regions participating. Key thematic areas included Generative Artificial Intelligence, Data Transfers across Africa, Data Protection and Identification Systems in Africa, Digital Trade, Data Protection, and the African Continental Free Trade Agreements. The summit aimed to address current challenges and foster cooperation for secure data flows across Africa, particularly concerning national biometric digital identity systems.

Redress for Violations/Impunity

While the UN Plan of Action for the Safety of Journalists emphasizes preventive mechanisms, the authorities' response to violations of press freedom is an equally important indicator of commitment to promoting the safety of journalists. Unfortunately, violations against press freedom often go without any redress.

However, some positive developments were recorded in this regard during the monitoring period.

On October 10, 2023, journalist Alhagie Bora Sisawo from *Kerr Fatou* was [released](#) on the orders of Justice Ebrima Jaiteh on grounds that the journalist was kept beyond the constitutional limit of 72 hours in detention. Sisawo had spent 7 days in police custody since his arrest on October 4, 2023. He was arrested after he was told his bail was revoked. The incident occurred within 24 hours after President Adama Barrow's declaration that individuals facing charges could be rearrested, even if granted bail by a court of law. Alhagie Bora Sisawo was initially arrested on August 13, 2023, for comments he made about President Adama Barrow, the Inspector General of Police Abdoulie Sanyang, and the military coup in Niger.

On October 13, 2023, journalist Samira Sabou was [released](#), putting an end to several days of detention incommunicado. She had been arrested on September 30, 2023, without any reason being given and her whereabouts remained unknown. Samira Sabou has been very active on social networks, reporting in real time on events linked to the crisis in Niger since the coup d'état on July 26, 2023.

Other Key FOE Developments

Mr. Gabriel Idibia, the head of the *Daybreak Nigeria* newspaper bureau in Kaduna, [revealed](#) on October 16, 2023, that he had to flee and go into hiding after being falsely accused of blasphemy. The accusation stemmed from his sharing of a viral video featuring Mosab Hassan Yousef, the son of a prominent figure in Hamas, addressing religious intolerance. Gabriel, intending to spark a healthy debate among journalist

colleagues, was surprised to find himself removed from the Kaduna journalists' WhatsApp group on October 13, 2023, facing threats over alleged blasphemy.

On November 6, 2023, the Burkinabe junta led by Captain Ibrahim ordered the [conscription](#) two prominent journalists, Issaka Lingani and Yacouba Ladji Bama, for military training and deployment in counter-terrorism operations. Lingani is a regular guest on *BF1 TV*'s political programme, while Bama has been living abroad for months following threats linked to his critical writing about the junta. Over a dozen citizens, including politicians, journalists, human rights activists, and government critics, have received similar conscription summons, raising concerns that the government was targeting dissenting voices. Other notable figures targeted include Ablassé Ouédraogo, Dr. Daouda Diallo, Rasmane Zinaba, and Gabin Korbéogo.

On November 18, 2023, Mauritanian police [arrested](#) blogger Mohamed Vall Ould Abdallah after he posted on his Facebook a publication deemed to amount to calling for the overthrow of President Mohamed Ould Ghazouani. Ould Abdallah subsequently deleted his post and apologised.

On December 4, 2024 a group of armed men [went](#) to the national radio and television stations and ordered all the workers to leave while the stations played only music. But to play music the stations needed some technicians to stay on duty, which the soldiers refused, and therefore, got the transmissions turned off for almost the entire day. The Director of the national radio, Baio Danso, has been summarily dismissed and replaced by Mama Saliu Sane, the former director who was himself removed after the opposition won the June 2023 legislative elections.

On December 7, 2023, a court in Nouakchott [sentenced](#) blogger Mohamed Vall Abdallahi to one year in prison, 11 months suspended, for “offense and insult to the person of the President of the Republic.” Mohamed Vall Ould Abdallah was also ordered to pay a fine of one million ouguiyas (about USD2384) to the public treasury. Vall Ould Abdallah had been arrested by the police in November following a post on his Facebook account which was considered subversive and in which he called for the impeachment of President Mohamed Ould Ghazouani.

On December 11, 2023, the Syndicat des Professionnels de la Presse de Guinée (SPPG) and other media associations in Guinea declared [a press-free](#) day in response to perceived repressive actions by the ruling junta. Television screens and news websites displayed the message “press in danger,” while radio stations observed symbolic silence from 5 am. The move aimed to draw attention to the deteriorating state of press freedom in Guinea. The SPPG, communicating through social media, called for a united response to the

challenges faced by the Guinean press, emphasizing the profession's threat of extinction. The junta's intensified repression included a December 9, 2023, order from the media regulator, Haute Autorité de la Communication (HAC), for Canal+ to suspend channels, citing national security, following similar actions against *Djoma* radio and television on December 6, 2023.

Conclusion

The thirty-nine (39) violations recorded in nine (9) countries translate into some four (4) violations in each of the countries featured in the report. The previous quarter (July-September 2023) recorded 36 violations. The level of hostility against journalists and the media as well as citizens expressing themselves either online or offline is alarming and poses a threat to freedom of expression, a key pillar of democracy and participatory governance.

Arrests and detentions, followed by media and internet shutdowns, and physical violence against journalists are the dominant types of violations. These violations severely attack the physical integrity and morale of the victims. A further cause for concern is the near absolute impunity with which the violations were perpetrated. This state of impunity often fuels further attacks on the media and critical activists, with the risk of creating a vicious cycle that could lead to widespread self-censorship.

The fact that state actors such as the security forces and public officers are among the lead perpetrators calls for further reflection on media-state relations. In this regard, the media, governments and civil society in West Africa must work more collaboratively to address the freedom of expression and freedom of assembly issues in the region. To this end, the MFWA wishes to make the following recommendations for improving the freedom of expression environment in the region.

Recommendations

To Media Organisations and Journalists

- Work with high standards and professionalism at all times.
- Media managers must commit to using all legal means to ensure justice for media persons whose rights are violated in the line of duty.

To Governments in West Africa

- Ensure that both state and non-state actors respect and protect the FOE rights.
- Promote the safety and protection of journalists and media organisations.
- Train security agents to appreciate the work of the media in democratic societies and to collaborate with them.
- Continuously train security agents and provide them with the appropriate crowd control equipment to enable them to control violent crowds without panicking and using lethal force.

To ECOWAS

- Hold accountable culprits (both state and non-state actors) of freedom of expression violations through criminal, civil, administrative, or other sanctions to combat impunity.
- Encourage member states to “ensure respect for the rights of journalists” as stated in Article 66 of the ECOWAS Revised Treaty.
- Impose and enforce sanctions on Member States that persistently flout statutory obligations.
- Work with the military authorities in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Guinea to ensure respect for FOE rights and a return to constitutional order within the shortest possible time.

To the African Commission Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information

- Encourage all Member states, particularly Senegal, Nigeria, Mali and Burkina Faso, to take steps to end the serial violation of FOE rights in these countries.

To the UN Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion

- Call on the governments in West Africa, where severe violations have been recurring to respect and protect freedom of expression rights.
- Include more West African countries in fact-finding missions.



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