



**STATEMENT BY HIS EXCELLENCY, DR. JULIUS
MAADA BIO, PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF
SIERRA LEONE AT THE FORMAL SIGNING OF THE
GLOBAL PLEDGE ON MEDIA FREEDOM - 22
NOVEMBER 2021**

Lord Tariq Ahmad of Wimbledon, Minister of State for South Asia and the Commonwealth,
Members of the Diplomatic and Consular Corps,
Ministers of Government,
Distinguished ladies and gentlemen,
Good morning.

1. Kindly accept my heartfelt appreciation for inviting me to participate in this formal ceremony to sign the Global Pledge on Media Freedom on behalf of Sierra Leone. Promoting and protecting free speech media freedom and are dear to my heart and central to my perception of good governance and participatory democracy.
2. Last year, I signed a repeal of Part V of the Public Order Act of 1965 - - criminal and seditious libel law -- that had criminalised the practice of any journalism perceived as unfavourable to successive governments.
3. Successive governments had not only refused to abolish that law, but they had used it actively to intimidate and imprison media practitioners, silence dissenting views, and threaten civil liberties.
4. To my mind, enforcing criminal and seditious libel laws contravenes our constitution's guarantee of free speech and all international treaties and conventions on free speech. At the time, it also ran counter to recommendations by our country's Human Rights Commission, the Constitutional Review Committee, and recommendations in the Truth and Reconciliation report of 2003. Development partners, rights and civil society groups had also consistently denounced it. Everyone could not be wrong on the criminal and seditious libel law.
5. I promised in my party's manifesto that as President, I would work to expunge that law. I have.
6. I had always argued that the repeal would unshackle free speech, expand democratic spaces, and consolidate our democracy. It would enhance professionalism and particularly support greater inclusion of women in the practice of journalism.
7. To me, therefore, a free, unfettered, and professional press is not incidental to democratic governance. It is a critical bulwark for good governance and democratic participation. More public scrutiny, not less, is good for greater transparency and accountability in governance.

8. So, my government is pleased to have signed up as a member of the Media Freedom Coalition. We are also pleased to be the 5th country in Africa to commit to the principles and values of the Media Freedom Coalition.

9. We are encouraged that we are recognised among the top five countries in Africa for facilitating and supporting freedom of expression. We are committed to doing even more.

10. A year on from signing the repeal, 130 registered newspapers, 165 registered radio stations, and 42 registered television stations continue to operate freely. There is no journalist in prison for the practice of journalism.

11. We have introduced progressive policies to support more pay and better working conditions for journalists. We are also working closely with the leadership of the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists, the Human Rights Council of Sierra Leone, Development Partners, and civil society to ensure more improvement.

12. In related legislation, the IMC Act of 2020, we have sought to support training and professionalism, reduce yellow journalism, regularise wages, and revise the media code of ethics.

13. We need more technical and other resource investments to further professionalise journalism in Sierra Leone. We are determined to protect journalists and their sources of information while respecting privacy and human dignity, provide greater access to public information, promote diversity in the practice of journalism, and achieve the needed balance between cybersecurity and freedom of expression.

14. As I formally sign the Global pledge on behalf of Sierra Leone today, I look forward to working closely with the Media Freedom Coalition to foster its core principles and work collaboratively to promote more media freedom both at home and internationally.

I thank you for your kind attention and I formally sign the global pledge on media freedom.