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Anthony John Blinken
Secretary of State
Department of State
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW,
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21 August 2023

Dear Mr. Blinken,

Attacks on Africanist Press and threats to Press Freedom in Sierra Leone

I write to respectfully request your intervention in the situation between *Africanist Press* and the government of Sierra Leone. In particular, I am calling on the United States government to urge the government of Sierra Leone to investigate the death threats against me and to guarantee my right to return to Sierra Leone.

I am a citizen of Sierra Leone currently living in exile in the United States because of my work as a journalist and public intellectual advocating for human rights and accountable leadership in Sierra Leone. I am presently a Postdoctoral Fellow at Northwestern University's Charbraja Center for Historical Studies in Evanston, Illinois. In addition, I am also a journalist and I have worked in Africa for more than 20 years reporting on corruption and human rights. I am editor-in-chief of the *Africanist Press*, an independent media organization whose mission is to provide a platform for free speech, democracy, and accountable leadership in Africa.

Africanist Press journalists have campaigned against corruption and graft across three successive regimes in Sierra Leone. As a result of leading this work, *Africanist Press* and myself have experienced escalating threats from various sectors of the political groups in Sierra Leone and from the government of Sierra Leone.

Starting in March 2020, I have been receiving death threats related to my work as a journalist investigating and reporting on corruption and misuse of public funds in Sierra Leone. On 20th April 2021, for instance, the Bank of Sierra Leone wrote a complaint against me and *Africanist Press*, to the Attorney General and Minister of Justice, in which it alleged that *Africanist Press* illegally accessed and published information relating to banking transactions and details of President Julius Maada Bio's travel expenditures and budgetary allocations to the Office of the First Lady.

The Complaint stated that this amounted to theft of property from the Bank of Sierra Leone and asked that "necessary" criminal action be taken against me for the publication. The Bank also alleged that these actions had the potential to compromise the nation's relationship with international partners. It is unclear whether the Attorney General or Minister of Justice had launched any formal action related to this specific request to penalize me for the publication of information regarding matters of public interest. However, one year later in May 2022, a formal action was brought against the *Africanist Press* that related to its investigative work and publications more broadly.

To be specific, on 10 May 2022, the Office of National Security (ONS), a federal security agency, submitted a complaint, dated 4th May, 2022, to the Independent Media Commission, the country's media regulator, in which it stated that "most of the Africanist Press publications have been inherently inflammatory, either causing disaffection amongst the public or inciting them against the government."

The ONS noted, in particular, that the *Africanist Press* had published information about the salaries and allowances of public sector workers which showed that the military was paid less to their peers in other

sectors of the Sierra Leone civil service. The agency asked the Commission to dissuade *Africanist Press* from continued publication of so-called “inflammatory” articles. This matter is still pending before the Independent Media Commission.

Almost immediately after this request, on 23 May 2022, a Facebook group called the General Kalokoh Media Team posted that the *Africanist Press* should face prosecution for cybercrimes. In its Facebook profile, the group stated that its purpose is to “promote the interest of the president,” an apparent reference to President Julius Maada Bio. The posts on the page are consistent with this purported mission. On that same day, a member of the ruling party and chairman of the board of directors for the government-owned Sierra Leone Cable, also published an op-ed stating that the government should treat *Africanist Press* as having committed treason. This individual was recently appointed as Board Chairman of Sierra Leone’s National Civil Registration Authority (NCRA).

Most recently, on 7 December 2022, in the course of investigations, we identified patterns consistent with national security agencies having used surveillance operations against *Africanist Press*, including apparent attacks on our website and direct interference with my communication, including hacking attempts of my social media pages. These cyber-related attacks are still ongoing, and they now include direct disruptions of our online civic meetings on various media platforms, including Zoom.

It must be underlined that governments have a duty to promote the exercise of the right of freedom of opinion and expression as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and recognized under the International Covenant on Civil and Political rights, to which Sierra Leone is a State Party.

Thus, the Government of Sierra Leone has a duty to be accountable and transparent to its citizens, which involves keeping people informed about government budgets, public expenditure, and development projects as well as listening to the voices of its citizens and using citizen feedback to shape and improve its policies and programs. The Cybersecurity and Crimes Act, enacted by the Sierra Leone Parliament and signed into law by the President in November 2021, is ostensibly intended to prevent the “abusive use of computer systems [and] to provide a timely and effective collection of electronic evidence for the purpose of investigation and prosecution of cybercrime...”

Unfortunately, this law has already been weaponized by authorities to silence critics. We are deeply concerned that there have been public calls for the use of this law against me and the *Africanist Press* for our reporting on matters of public interest, which is a type of expression that should be afforded the highest level of protection under international and national human rights law in Sierra Leone.

It goes without saying that governments have a duty to protect the right to life by law of its citizens. The right to life is inherent and shall not be arbitrarily deprived of any individual. The death threats that I continue to receive are a potential threat to my right to life, and by extension a threat to my family and other *Africanist Press* writers.

In addition to these death threats, I am being constantly warned not to return to Sierra Leone because leaders of political groups in the country, and government officials, have also threatened me with criminal prosecution should I return. I have continued to live in the United States with the fear that I will not be able to return to Sierra Leone, or elsewhere in the West African region, without risking arbitrary detention and criminal charges related to my work. Last year, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) issued a statement calling on the Sierra Leone government to investigate the threats and potential charges against me. These requests have been ignored by government agencies the CPJ contacted and there has been no change in that case to date.

In light of the escalating intimidation and concerns about the ease with which the new cybercrime law will lend itself to the prosecution of those who, like me, have published information of public interest about state actions, I am writing to respectfully request that your office intervene and engage directly with the Sierra Leonean government and political leader to: (1) confirm my right to return to Sierra Leone and continue my work without fear of reprisals or criminal prosecution related to my work including my freedom of speech; and (2) remind the government of its obligation to investigate and address threats made against me and determine what, if any, steps, the government has taken in regard to the reported threats.

The United States, as a leading partner of the government of Sierra Leone, has an obligation to ensure that its continuous engagement with the government of Sierra Leone involves safeguarding the

fundamental rights of Sierra Leonean citizens, including the right to free speech and freedom of the press.

I include below weblinks to press coverage on the issues I have mentioned above to help provide additional clarity:

1. Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) statement on my situation: <https://cpj.org/2022/05/sierra-leone-publisher-chernoh-alpha-bah-threatened-with-death-charges-of-treason/>
2. Statement from the European Union-based Civil Forum for Asset Recovery: <https://cifar.eu/statement-in-support-of-sierra-leone-journalist-chernoh-bah/>
3. Evidence showing Sierra Leone government efforts to silence Africanist Press: <https://africanistpress.com/2022/08/24/sierra-leone-new-evidence-shows-governments-ongoing-efforts-to-silence-africanist-press/>
4. President's Office takes steps to stop Africanist Press publications: <https://africanistpress.com/2022/05/10/sierra-leone-presidents-office-takes-steps-to-stop-publication-of-africanist-press-articles-critical-of-bios-regime/>
5. History and the Future of Sierra Leone: <https://africanistpress.com/2023/08/15/history-and-the-future-of-sierra-leone/>

Your intervention in this matter will be greatly appreciated. I have taken the liberty to copy press freedom organizations and democratic institutions in this correspondence in the interest of public transparency.

A copy of this correspondence will also be published on the *Africanist Press* website and our various social media platforms. I want to thank you for your attention and look forward to your assistance in this regard.

Sincerely,

Chernoh A.M. Bah

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Copy:

1. Committee to Protect Journalists
2. Civil Forum for Asset Recovery
3. Consortium for Investigative Journalists
4. Global Investigative Journalism Network
5. United States Embassy in Freetown, Sierra Leone
6. National Democratic Institute
7. International Republican Institute
8. American Bar Association
9. National Endowment for Democracy



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