

Three journalists beaten by Sierra Leone presidential bodyguards

On September 8, 2019, bodyguards of Sierra Leone President Julius Maada Bio attacked three journalists who were covering a football match in Freetown, the capital, according to the journalists, who spoke to CPJ, and news reports.



Police officers are seen in Freetown, Sierra Leone, on March 26, 2018. Presidential bodyguards recently attacked a group of journalists in Freetown. Credit: CPJ/Reuters/Olivia Acland.

During the match, which the president attended, a group of five bodyguards entered a press area in the stadium and told all journalists there to leave, citing possible threats to the president, according to Frances Barnard, a reporter with the government-owned Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation, who spoke to CPJ via messaging app.

When Barnard refused to leave, two of the guards hit her with their hands and guns, while another pulled her out of the room, causing her to fall down a staircase.

The bodyguards also slapped and beat Esther Marie Samura, a Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation reporter, after she brought deputy sports minister, Kai Lawrence Mbayoh, to the scene to stop the guards' attack on Barnard, Samura told CPJ via messaging app.

Mbayoh told CPJ via messaging app that he tried to stop the bodyguards from hurting Samura, but they ignored him.

The bodyguards also beat Alimmany Kamara, a freelance journalist who was covering the match, according to those news reports. When CPJ reached Kamara via phone, he confirmed that he had been attacked but said he did not want to elaborate further, citing an agreement with the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation not to speak to media while the case is investigated.

Following the attack, Barnard was held for 15 days at a local hospital for a “shifted backbone”, she told CPJ. She said she might need to go to Ghana for corrective surgery. Samura told CPJ she was not hospitalised, but has back pain following the attack. Kamara declined to provide details of his injuries to CPJ.

On September 12, the Sierra Leone Ministry of Information and Communications opened a committee to investigate the incident, according to a statement from the ministry that was seen by CPJ. On October 17, the committee issued a report with 13 recommendations, including financial compensation for the journalists and the removal of one bodyguard who was under the influence of “an unknown substance” at the time of the attack, according to a copy of the report seen by CPJ.

Barnard told CPJ on October 29 that she had not received any direct communication from government officials regarding the recommendations from the committee's report.

Presidential spokesperson Keketorma Sandi did not respond to calls and messages from CPJ seeking comment.

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