



# Association of Caribbean Mediaworkers

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## Press Association of Jamaica President's World Press Freedom Day Message

The Press Association of Jamaica (PAJ) joins media practitioners across the globe in celebrating World Press Freedom Day.

We are cognisant that much of the socio-political advancement achieved in many countries and societies were facilitated by the tireless and, often times, sacrificial work of journalists and writers who bravely challenged the status quo as well as shine the spotlight on corruption and discrimination.

Locally, the Press Association of Jamaica was founded nearly two decades before the country gained its Independence in 1962. Undoubtedly, the political stability and maturity of Jamaica's young democracy is due significantly to the pioneering work of generations of media practitioners.

The current generation stands on the shoulders of many of the early champions of press freedom. It is largely through their foundational work that Jamaica continues to enjoy a high ranking on the Press Freedom Index produced by international watchdog, Reporters Without Borders. On the 2008 index Jamaica ranked 21st, the highest in Latin America and the Caribbean, followed by Costa Rica at 22nd. The island improved on its 2007 ranking of 27th.

But these gains have to be protected. We have witnessed in recent times instances of the security forces obstructing media practitioners while carrying out their duties; the PAJ and the police high command have taken steps to nip this in the bud.

There are legislative barriers to be shattered. We call on legislators to move quickly to debate and pass into law proposals to reform Jamaica's anachronistic defamation and libel laws. It is ridiculous that in 21st Century Jamaica a journalist could be imprisoned –rather than being fined-- for defaming someone. It is absurd for persons to be granted millions of dollars in damages –valuing more than their lifetime earnings- in libel cases.

Such astronomical payments are a deterrent to the media carrying out its duty to protect the public interest and improve governance. The PAJ, therefore, calls on legislators to remove the power to decide damages in libel cases from jurors to a judge.

In addition, media practitioners require a reform of the law to require public officials to prove malice in order to successfully bring a libel case against the media. Such reforms can only serve to strengthen freedom of expression in Jamaica.



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On this day, we also stand in solidarity with colleagues in the region and across the world who are being persecuted for carrying out their duties; and we mourn with the associates of those who have sacrificed their lives to expose truth or to exercise the right to express themselves.

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Press Freedom Barometer 2009

Journalists killed –18

Journalists imprisoned –143

Media assistants imprisoned –9

Cyberdissidents imprisoned –66

Source: Reporters Without Borders

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President

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