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Workshop for community radio journalists held in Gbarnga

(*Monrovia, Liberia*) – In collaboration with the Press Union of Liberia (PUL), the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) sponsored a six-day Community Radio Journalism Skills workshop in Gbarnga, Bong County last week. Representing more than half of the community radio stations in the country, 34 journalists from 17 radio stations in Bong, Grand Bassa, Lofa and Nimba Counties attended the workshop.

The workshop, which was held 13-18 December, was the first UNMIL-sponsored media training course exclusively for community radio stations. The workshop focused on journalism ethics and skills, and covered political reporting as well as conflict reporting. The participants wrote, edited and produced stories on security, health, local administration and education. The stories were broadcast on the two local community radio stations, Radio Heritage and Radio Gbarnga.

At the closing ceremony on Saturday, UNMIL Sector III Bangladeshi Contingent Commander, Brig.-Gen. Fazla Akbar, said that community radio stations had played an important role in educating the public when UNMIL deployed in the region last year. He said that a community radio station must involve the community in all of its activities. “Without community involvement and participation, community radio stations cannot exist,” he added.

The PUL’s newly inducted president, Ms. Elizabeth Hoff, told participants that the Liberian media was beset by political, economic, technical and social constraints. “Journalists [in Liberia] often become vulnerable and sometimes compromise their profession by accepting bribes,” she acknowledged. “Therefore, it is important for the media to have a clear picture of its role in the development of the country.”

“A strong, independent media is the lifeblood of freedom and liberty. You are the voice of the people and the cure for ignorance,” said the UNMIL Public Information Section Officer-in-Charge James Boynton. “Enlighten your audience by reporting solid facts.”

Mr. Boynton added that UNMIL “strongly believes the media has a vital role to play in the 2005 elections. Community radio stations have a responsibility to provide balanced political reporting. In doing so, the community radio stations can play a historic role in ensuring free and fair elections.”

“The training of journalists from rural radio stations is essential at this time...information dissemination will now be decentralized to allow rural dwellers to also be informed about happenings both at the national and community level” said Deputy Minister for Information, Culture and Tourism Bernard Waritay.

“As you [the participants] leave from here, we expect you to plan your programs to be broadcast in the local vernaculars of your communities. This will enhance the understanding of events by the local residents.”

The workshop received additional support from the NGO Mercy Corps, which played a key role in the planning and facilitation of the workshop, and the United Nations Integrated Regional Information Network. The U.S. Embassy's Office of Public Affairs donated a mini-cassette tape recorder to each of the radio stations that were represented at the workshop.

UNMIL has now provided training to over 180 journalists in Liberia.
