PRESS STATEMENT

May 5, 2020

1. The Independent National Commission on Human Rights (INCHR) commends all Liberians for their resilience during these trying times in our collective fight against the deadly COVID-19 pandemic.

2. The Commission attention have been drawn to non-adherence of the health protocols including social distancing and the current lock-down by some citizens and residents. Commission warns that in these difficult times all Liberians and residents must understand that the best solution to this health crisis is everyone to observe all measures as it is in other countries in order to defeat this deadly diseases.

3. Additionally, the Commission detests reports of attacks on law enforcement officers as an act of callous disregard for rule of law at this time. The Commission calls on citizens to desist from these unwarranted acts.

4. Meanwhile the Commission has observed with grave concern, the perennial brutality and the display of inhumane treatment exhibited by law enforcement officers. Reports from the counties speak of excessive callousness on the part of those who supposed to enforce the law. The Commission cites few of the incidences as:
   a. The brutality and inhuman treatment exhibited by member of the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) on 20 April in Slipway Community. In that incident, a 39 year old woman and a 54 year old man were maltreated in their own community. While the Commission appreciates the intervention of the AFL High Command, it looks forward to a speedy investigation and prompt action.
   b. In another event in Thinkers’ Village, a 36 year old man was severely beaten, tortured and handcuffed for several hours at the Thinkers’ Village Police Depot.
The victim filed a complaint at the Professional Standards Division (PSD) but was told that due to the COVID-19 operation, PSD was not in the position to investigate incidence of police misconduct.

c. In similar instance in Mount Barclay, Police has gone to disperse a congregation of the Saint Assembly. The occasion was characterized by violence. LNP informed INCHR Monitors that in the process to dispersing the congregation of the Saint Assembly, members of the LNP were attacked and therefore responded with ‘minimum force.’ Victims were seeing with bruises and injuries on their bodies, which they allegedly suffered as a result of LNP operation.

d. On 20 April a 3 years old boy was burnt to death in the Township of West Point, Monrovia when a group of police officers engaged petty traders who were in violation of the curfew restrictions. According to INCHR Monitor, a female officer while dispersing a group of sellers allegedly kicked a hot water which burnt the boy. The boy died shortly after being admitted at the John F. Kennedy Hospital.

e. On 27 April at 12 midnight, the Chief of Operation of the LNP Detachment in Zwedru, Grand Gedeh County Lexington Beh broke into the house of 50 year old resident and severely tortured and maltreatment the man and two other persons under the guise that they were in violation of the curfew. After the incidence, several personal properties of the victims were taking away.

f. On the same date, a woman on Dehsuah Street, Zwedru City was also manhandled by group of LNP officers and her properties including mattress and chairs burnt. When INCHR Human Rights Officers contacted the County Commander, he admitted sending the officers and promised to do more than what has happened. Similarly, on 1 May, at 11 am, group of PSU officers with their commander in Zwedru assaulted a 28 year old woman and her 7 year old child. In most of these occurrences, personal properties of the victims were taking without justifiable reason.

g. These incidences have been brought to the attention of the local authorities who have promised to conduct an investigation.
h. In similar development, the Commission has received reports that accessing public health facilities in the wake of the COVID-19 has been extremely difficult by Liberians and foreign residents. Those with pre-existing medical problems have found it difficult to access health facilities. In other health facilities, malaria and other basic treatment have been reportedly absent. Maternity wards in some instances remain closed. At the JFK Medical Center, the nation biggest referral hospital, the Maternity ward was closed for few days without alternative for women in maternal conditions.

i. The Commission believes that despite the COVID-19 pandemic, medical facilities ought to be opened and appropriate mechanism put in place to give users the confidence that there safety are guaranteed from infection from corona virus disease.

5. The Commission is also alarmed by the rise in the cases of domestic violence in the country. With the lock-down measures, there has been an increase in gender based violence which is worrisome. In one incidence, a 28 year old women was brutality assaulted by her spouse on 14 of April in Paynesville City. In that incidence, the woman eyes were severely damaged. The perpetrator escaped the scene and is still at large. Similarly, a 68 year old woman in Buchanan was assaulted and manhandled by her husband on 27 April because she advised the husband against the drinking of alcohol.

6. Meanwhile the Commission is appalled regarding recent statement made by the Solicitor General of Liberia regarding the suspension of basic fundamental rights due to the State of emergency. The Commission says not all rights can be derogated from during the state of emergency. The Commission avers that even where some rights are suspended that must be proportionate to the health crisis, be necessary for protecting and responding to the threat faced by the nation.

7. The Commission reminds the Government that right to freedom of expression is a constitutionally guaranteed that cannot be derogated from even in emergency.

8. The Commission states that there is no threshold for what is a false or true information. The Commission cautions the Government, that whenever statement or criticism is directed towards a government and government officials or are
spoken by persons of special status, such as public figures deserves a higher degree of tolerance than others.

9. The Commission calls on official of Government to refrain from comments that suggest that Liberia is sliding into days of the past when right to free expression and other fundamental rights were unreasonably and unlawfully restricted by Government.

The Commission recommends the following:

a. The incidences of brutalities be investigated and appropriate action taken without delay
b. That per the Constitution, the Government must make it clear that rights that are suspended as a result of the state of emergency as well as communicate with the UN Secretary General on those rights consistent with Liberia human rights obligation under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.
c. That health facilities be made accessible, secured from infection by the appropriate measures and make available basic treatment drugs and all maternity wards throughout all the hospitals and clinics
d. To ensure the battle against COVID-19 is won, Government must de-securitized the fight against this deadly disease and ensure that scientists and health practitioners take the lead.