



All-Party Parliamentary Human Rights Group (PHRG)

Chair: Dame Diana Johnson MP

Email: johnsond@parliament.uk; Website: appg-humanrights.org.uk

Co-Chairs: Margaret Ferrier MP; Baroness Stern

Joint Vice-Chairs: Marsha De Cordova MP; Rt Hon The Lord Garnier QC;

Treasurer: Rt Hon Stephen Timms MP

All-Party Parliamentary Group on Media Freedom

**Chair: TBC; Vice-Chairs: Jeremy Hunt MP; Lord Foulkes of Cumnock; Sir Roger Gale MP;
Lord Black of Brentwood; Christian Matheson MP; Theo Clarke MP**

Email: blackgv@parliament.uk

28 April, 2020

Lord Ahmad
Minister of State
Foreign and Commonwealth Office
PSMinisterAhmadAction@fco.gov.uk

cc: Alastair King-Smith, Deputy Director of the Multilateral Policy Directorate, FCO,
Alastair.king-smith@fco.gov.uk

BY EMAIL

Dear Minister,

We are writing on behalf of the All-Party Parliamentary Human Rights Group (PHRG) and the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Media Freedom (Media Freedom APPG) to express our consternation about increased pressures and risks being faced by journalists worldwide during the Coronavirus pandemic, and to ask the FCO/UK Government, in its individual capacity, to issue a strong public statement of support on World Media Freedom Day on 3 May, to reinforce the statement on the Coronavirus issued with other members of the Media Freedom Coalition Executive on 7 April (7 April statement).

As underlined last week by Reporters without Borders, and the 7 April statement, the Coronavirus pandemic has served to draw attention to, amplify and increase challenges to media freedom. The impact of these challenges has even been viewed as an existential threat, with Filipino journalist Maria Ressa reflecting that the Coronavirus crisis is a potential extinction event for journalists.

As you are aware, Governments in many countries, including China, Hungary, Egypt, Turkmenistan, Cambodia, Thailand, the Philippines, Algeria, Bolivia, India and Honduras, have adopted disproportionate and/or unnecessary measures to increase their control over information disseminated to the public and silence those who question the official line. These measures take various forms, such as legislative provisions on fake news, internet restrictions, limitations on journalists' accreditation and access, and direct threats to journalists and whistleblowers. The chilling effect of such measures also fosters self-censorship.

In addition, many Governments already recognised as opponents of media freedom, such as Turkey, Egypt, China and Saudi Arabia, continue to keep journalists locked up despite global calls for low-risk and vulnerable prisoners to be released immediately during the pandemic. As highlighted by the Committee to Protect Journalists' #FreeThePress campaign, freedom is now more than ever a matter of life and death for jailed journalists in countries affected by the Coronavirus: they have no control over their surroundings, cannot choose to isolate and are often denied necessary medical care.

The on-going denigration of independent journalism and journalists by authorities, in countries such as Brazil and the Philippines, is also fuelling harassment and attacks on them. When carried out by democratic political leaders, such as US President Donald Trump, it reinforces the notion that journalists' probing is unlawful or unpatriotic. As Christina Lamb, Chief Foreign Correspondent for the Sunday Times, said at the joint PHRG, Media Freedom APPG and BGIPU event in Parliament in January on "*Media Freedom in the Commonwealth*": "When the US President denounces journalists as enemies of the state, that sets an example for other states."

Finally, lockdowns are often compounding pre-existing problems for the media sector in terms of its diminishing revenue streams, thereby further undermining its long-term financial sustainability.

In light of the above, and to continue building on the momentum generated by the UK and Canada's 2019 Global Conference for Media Freedom and the work of the Media Freedom Coalition, the PHRG and Media Freedom APPG are calling on the FCO/UK Government to issue a strong stand-alone public statement on World Media Freedom Day on 3 May, if that has not already been planned.

In that statement, the FCO/UK Government is urged to include the following:

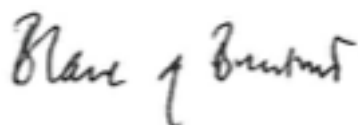
- Recognition of increased challenges to journalism and journalists in many countries during the Coronavirus pandemic, including to the long-term financial sustainability of the media sector, and the scale of those challenges;
- Reiteration of concern about disproportionate/unnecessary measures adopted during the Coronavirus pandemic which serve to undermine, intimidate and silence independent journalists, such as in Hungary, Cambodia, Thailand, Egypt, Algeria and Honduras;
- Expression of concern about the on-going denigration of journalists by authorities, fostering a climate in which they are seen as legitimate targets of harassment and attack, such as in Brazil, the US and the Philippines;
- Reference to specific cases of concern, such as those highlighting on-going impunity for murder and attacks, e.g., Jamal Khashoggi; continued detention, including in Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and China; and, apparent retaliation by officials for Coronavirus reporting, e.g., Abdiyaz Ahmed Gurbiye in Somalia, Elena Milashina and her colleagues at Novaya Gazeta for reports on Chechnya, Mahmoud al-Jaziri in Bahrain, Sovann Rithy in Cambodia, and Davinson Rojas in Venezuela;
- An update on activities in connection with the UK's on-going global campaign to defend media freedom, including any follow-up to the release of the Independent High-Level Panel of Legal Experts' first report urging a shift from the default of impunity to accountability for attacks against the media; the first meeting of senior officials of the Media Freedom Coalition in Geneva in January; and, the 7 April statement; and,
- A repeated call for countries to respect media freedom and protect the safety of journalists, as well as a specific call for the immediate release of journalists imprisoned for their work.

We look forward to hearing from you about the above.

Yours sincerely,



Dame Diana Johnson MP
Chair – All-Party Parliamentary Human Rights Group (PHRG)



Lord Black of Brentwood
Vice– Chair - All-Party Parliamentary Group on Media Freedom