

Society of Editors

www.societyofeditors.org

From the Executive Director

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon
Minister for the Commonwealth and UN
Foreign and Commonwealth Office
King Charles Street
Whitehall
Westminster
London
SW1A 2AH

1 April 2020

Dear Lord Ahmad,

I hope you are well at this time.

I wanted to write to you to acknowledge the publication yesterday of the government's official response to the Foreign Affairs Committee's 2019 report on "*Media freedom is under attack*": *The FCO's defence of an endangered liberty*". The Society welcomes the UK's renewed commitment to the promotion and protection of human rights. I also wanted to voice the Society's concerns on recent developments concerning press freedom in Hungary and Turkey.

In relation to the publication of the government's response yesterday, we were pleased to see the inclusion of an update on secondary legislation in relation to a global sanctions regime. Following the publication of the High Level Panel of Legal Experts on Media Freedom's report on *The Use of Targeted Sanctions to Protect Journalists* in February 2020, the Society welcomed the recommendations against those complicit in the killing or imprisonment of journalists. Whilst it goes without saying that the ultimate sanction against those who murder journalists should be that they are brought to justice, the application of targeted sanctions against individuals or regimes that themselves target journalists, would send a powerful signal.

The Foreign Office's commitment to raising challenging human rights issues at all levels is a welcome one. In particular we were pleased to see an ongoing objective in relation to how to continue lobbying and raising individual cases of human rights abuses in a systematic way. In this area in particular we know that you have worked hard to highlight many attacks against journalists and we welcomed your assurances earlier this year in the House of Lords that the UK continues to work closely with the United States on pressing the South Sudanese authorities in relation to the Christopher Allen case.

As you will no doubt agree, freedom of the press is essential in any democratic society and, at this time of national uncertainty, accurate news and information has never been more important. The Society has welcomed the UK government's acknowledgement of the vital role that the media here must play during the coronavirus crisis and we were pleased to see the designation of all journalists as key workers.

President

Alison Gow

Chairman

Ian MacGregor

Executive Director

Ian Murray

Board of Directors

Kamal Ahmed
Martin Breen
Paul Clarkson
Peter Clifton
Polly Curtis
Oliver Duff
Charles Garside
Ceri Gould
Jonathan Grun
Donald Martin
Eleanor Mills
Ian Murray
Sue Ryan
Moira Sleight
Caroline Waterston
Sarah Whitehead
Doug Wills
Joy Yates

Past Presidents

Nick Turner
Doug Wills
Ian Murray
Jonathan Grun
Fran Unsworth
Robin Esser
Donald Martin
Nigel Pickover
Simon Bucks
Paul Horrocks
Charles McGhee
Keith Sutton
Neil Benson
Jonathan Grun
Liz Page
Edmund Curran
Neil Fowler
Geoff Elliott

Fellows

Ian Beales
Simon Bucks
Peter Cole
Andrew Colman
Edmund Curran
Geoff Elliott
Maurice Frankel
Phil Harding
David Meara
Bob Pinker
Alan Rusbridger
Richard Tait

University Centre, Granta Place, Cambridge, CB2 1RU

Telephone: 01223 304080 Fax: 01223 304090 Email: info@societyofeditors.org

www.societyofeditors.org

A company limited by guarantee incorporated in England. Registered No. 304 7323. Vat No. 653 5446 28

Society of Editors

www.societyofeditors.org

From the Executive Director

Despite the UK government's recognition of the important role of journalists during this crisis, the Society has raised concerns recently that other countries are using the pandemic as a means to clamp down on the freedom of the press and to censor the media in an attempt to control the narrative around Covid-19. You may have seen that this week we have highlighted our disquiet over actions taken towards journalists and moves against freedom of speech in Hungary.

Over recent years democratic norms in Hungary have gradually been eroded and the new powers, passed this week allowing the government to impose jail terms of up to five years for those deemed to be "distorting" the facts and spreading misinformation around Covid-19, raises legitimate concerns that the measures could be used against journalists critical of the government. The indefinite nature of the new powers also present a real risk that this clampdown will outlive the current health emergency. If not now, the laws could be used in the future to stifle criticism and debate. Hungary now risks setting a dangerous precedent for other countries worldwide who may be considering using similar powers to clamp down on freedom of expression during this crisis.

The Society is also concerned that while Turkey prepares to grant amnesties to up to one third of the country's prison population in order to combat the coronavirus pandemic, jailed journalists and human rights activists will not be among those considered for early release. Amid growing concerns over the spread of Covid-19 in prisons, it is essential that those who have been imprisoned for exercising their rights to freedom of speech are unconditionally released.

Given the Foreign Office's stated commitment to raising human rights abuses on the global stage, I would welcome any update on what action the government is taking in relation to Hungary and the fact that Turkey still considers journalists as enemies of the state.

As I am sure you will agree, it is essential that all countries continue to provide the media with timely and accurate news and information during this time and that the current global pandemic is not used as a pretext by which governments restrict information on behalf of the public. At this time of crisis, the public interest must be placed at the centre of all responses to fighting Covid-19 and the media has a crucial role to play.

Yours sincerely,



Ian Murray
Executive Director
Society of Editors

University Centre, Granta Place, Cambridge, CB2 1RU

Telephone: 01223 304080 Fax: 01223 304090 Email: info@societyofeditors.org

www.societyofeditors.org

A company limited by guarantee incorporated in England. Registered No. 304 7323. Vat No. 653 5446 28