



STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE ROBERT MENENDEZ

May 1, 2019

Statement on World Press Freedom Day

Mr. President. Freedom of the press is a fundamental human right, a foundational pillar of democracy, and an indispensable check on authoritarian overreach. Today, press freedom is under assault across the globe—including in the United States. As journalists fight to advance truth and objectivity, far too many governments and non-state actors are targeting them, seeking to thwart their efforts to promote transparency and accountability and expose abuses of power. Their focus on attacking journalists indeed serves to highlight their critical work.

Since 2009, 659 journalists and media workers have been killed in connection with their efforts to report and disseminate news and information. Stories of abuses of government power, of human suffering, of environmental disasters, and stories of the remarkable

resilience of people abused and oppressed. 2018 marked the worst year on record for deadly violence and abuse toward journalists, with murders, imprisonment, hostage-taking, and enforced disappearances all on the rise.

Slovak journalist Jan Kuciak and his partner Martina Kusnirova were gunned down in their home after investigating organized crime in his country and in alleged retaliation for his reporting of tax fraud on a businessman with close ties to Slovakia's ruling party, a stark reminder of the danger reporters sometimes face when investigating corruption at the highest levels.

Just over a year ago, in the deadliest day for Afghanistan's media since the start of the war, nine journalists were killed in a second-wave suicide bombing in Kabul, and another was shot dead in the eastern city of Khost, a sign of the constant threat against the fundamental elements of a free, secure, and democratic Afghanistan.

Last October, at the Saudi Arabian consulate in Istanbul, Washington Post columnist and U.S. resident Jamal Khashoggi was brutally murdered by a group of Saudi operatives at the behest of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, showing the reach of political oppression and the silencing of dissent.

In many cases, crimes carried out against the media go unpunished—this includes murder, the ultimate form of censorship. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, in nine out of 10 cases where a journalist has been targeted for murder, the perpetrator goes free, reflecting widespread impunity in this space.

In 2018, across the world 251 journalists remained imprisoned on charges related to their reporting. Last month, Burma's Supreme Court upheld the conviction and prison sentence of Pulitzer Prize-winning reporters Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, who were arrested after exposing the massacre of ten Rohingya men in a village in Rakhine State. In Nicaragua, Miguel Mora and Lucía Pineda Ubau, directors of the

country's only 24-hour cable news network, were jailed on charges of fomenting hate, spreading fake news, and terrorism, falling victim to President Daniel Ortega's widespread crackdown on dissent and freedom of expression. While in different countries, these ongoing imprisonments are in countries with degrading records on human rights and fundamental freedoms more broadly.

In the last year, governments have ramped up similar attempts to silence the press in places like Turkey and the Philippines. Beyond threats to journalists themselves, governments across the world from Poland to Sudan continue to pursue legislative efforts to restrict media freedom and free expression, ultimately weakening the ability of citizens to hold their governments accountable. In Bangladesh, photojournalist and human rights advocate Shahidul Alam faced torture and spent 107 days in prison for violating a law that forbids criticism of the government on digital platforms in his native Bangladesh. One of several journalists who were named Time's Person of the Year in 2018 for being one of "the guardians" in the face of the "war on truth," he

expressed, “The world over, journalism is under threat. Whether you’re a teacher, a dancer, a painter, or a journalist, each one of us needs to be constantly fighting.”

But the threat to press freedom isn’t limited to foreign lands—it is something we’ve had to increasingly contend with here at home in the United States. President Trump continues to employ dangerous rhetoric in targeting the media, referring to the free press as the “enemy of the people,” and fostering an environment of hostility toward journalists. Moreover, he refuses to hold autocratic world leaders accountable as they attack press freedom in brazen ways, including targeting American journalists in places like Egypt. This only adds to the deterioration in free expression throughout the world. As a recent report from Reporters Without Borders highlights, “The number of countries regarded as safe, where journalists can work in complete security, continues to decline, while authoritarian regimes continue to tighten their grip on the media.”

In spite of the unprecedented assault on the free press, journalists continue to take significant risks in the pursuit of truth and transparency. Journalists from Radio Free Asia have relentlessly covered the Chinese government's gross human rights abuses against the country's Uyghur minority, including mass internment and surveillance in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). If not for the work of these courageous reporters – many of whom are Uyghurs themselves, having to report on abuses exacted against their families and friends – Chinese authorities would be able to commit such abuses largely in secrecy. Instead, those who champion human rights will be able to use the reporting in order to hold this repressive government to account.

Over 200 years ago, our Founding Fathers had the foresight to recognize the importance of a free press to a fledgling democracy, enshrining it in our first amendment. Today, that importance cannot be overstated. Recognizing that societies where informed citizens can hold their governments accountable are more stable, secure, and prosperous, we have a responsibility to stand up for the fundamental right of free

expression and free press. I join the international community in honoring and defending freedom of expression and the brave journalists seeking to tell a story that deserves to be told. In fact, the very fact the repressive governments, autocrats, and thugs continue to attack journalists is a tragic testament to the critical work they do. Just yesterday, the Maduro government in Venezuela took CNN off the air while the network was broadcasting live video of protestors being run over by military vehicles in Caracas, a transparent attempt by a criminal regime to silence journalists telling the story of brave Venezuelans standing up for their democratic aspirations.

This week, I introduced a resolution commemorating World Press Freedom Day. The resolution highlights increasing threats to freedoms of the press and expression worldwide, reaffirms the centrality of a free and independent press to the health of democracy, and reiterates freedom of the press as a priority of the United States in promoting democracy, human rights, and good governance. On this World Press Freedom Day,

I call on the Trump administration to reverse course and recommit to advancing press freedom—both at home and abroad.”

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