

# Media freedom and journalists under threat: Foreign Secretary's speech

Your Excellencies, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, on behalf of the United Kingdom and our co-host, the Government of Canada, I'm delighted to welcome you to this conference. And thank you Chrystia for your great support and enthusiasm for this conference, and for hopefully hosting it next year.

Just 2 months ago on 16 May, a 28-year-old Mexican reporter called Francisco Romero Diaz got a call before dawn about an incident at a nightclub in Playa del Carmen.

Romero specialised in exposing organised crime. He responded as any good journalist should by getting to the scene as quickly as possible.

In fact he was probably walking into a trap. As he arrived, Romero was ambushed and shot dead.

He would have known the risks he was taking. In the previous 2 months, he'd been detained by the police – allegedly for refusing to pay a bribe – and abducted by armed men. He'd been called anonymously by someone threatening to throw him off a bridge and claiming to know where his son went to school.

And yet despite every act of intimidation and harassment, Romero pressed on with reporting for the newspaper Quintana Roo Hoy and running a website focused on organised crime.

He was the sixth journalist to be shot in Mexico this year. Then just 1 month ago, a seventh, Norma Sarabia, was shot dead in Tabasco State.

Across the world, 99 journalists were killed last year – more than twice as many as a decade earlier – and another 348 were locked up by governments.

Few perpetrators of these crimes are ever held to account. Indeed even after 11 years, of the 46 journalists who suffered violent deaths in 2008, only 8 cases have been resolved.

Which is why our conference and this global campaign are so important. Our challenge is to honour the memory of Francisco Romero Diaz – and others like him – by protecting journalists and championing their work as a vital pillar of a free society.

My friend Chrystia, as she said herself a former journalist, and I are the first Foreign Ministers ever to convene an international conference on this subject and as Chrystia said, we want this to become an annual event around the globe.

Amid the bleak news, today we are joined by delegations from over 100 countries, including 60 ministers, and more than 1,500 journalists, academics

and campaigners. Never before have so many countries come together in this cause.

And today we send a resounding message that media freedom is not a Western but a universal value. At its best, a free media both protects society from the abuse of power and helps release the full potential of a nation.

In 1887, the historian and politician Lord Acton wrote his famous words: 'Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.'

The strongest safeguard against the dark side of power is accountability and scrutiny – and few institutions fulfil that role more effectively than a free media.

Real accountability doesn't emerge from the selective and theatrical 'crackdowns' on corruption mounted by authoritarian states, which mysteriously eliminate political opponents whilst leaving the biggest offenders untouched. Real accountability comes from the risk of exposure by a media that cannot be controlled or suborned.

And the evidence is very clear. Of the 10 cleanest countries in the world, as ranked by [Transparency International](#), 7 are also in the top 10 of the [World Press Freedom Index](#). Meanwhile, of the 10 most corrupt countries, 4 are in the bottom 10 for media freedom.

Powerful people value their reputations so the sunlight of transparency is the greatest deterrent to wrongdoing.

I am a politician and, like many members of my profession, I don't always enjoy reading what the media says about me. Indeed a politician who stands up for journalists might occasionally feel like a turkey voting for Christmas.

And of course, I need to say, it may be my only chance, newspapers also make mistakes. Journalists are not immune from the temptations of hyperbole or excess.

But those of us who are sometimes on the receiving end of criticism we should also reflect on the wisdom of Nelson Mandela, who said: "The media are a mirror through which we see ourselves as others perceive us, warts, blemishes and all... Such criticism can only help us to grow, by calling attention to those of our actions and omissions which do not measure up to our people's expectations."

So if we are wise, we politicians will treat the media as a critical friend. Our officials might tell us what we want to hear; the media tell us what we need to hear, providing unvarnished reality whether we wish it or not.

But a free media does more than just criticise failure and deter wrongdoing: it also nurtures and nourishes the progress of ideas. Throughout history, humanity has achieved its swiftest progress whenever we have allowed ideas to be freely debated, tested and challenged.

No discovery was ever achieved and no invention perfected by the suffocating

tools of suppression or censorship. The open exchange of ideas through a free media allows the genius of a society to breathe, releasing the originality and creativity of the entire population.

As the great thinker John Stuart Mill wrote: “The peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is that it is robbing the human race... if the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth; if it’s wrong, they lose what is almost as great a benefit: the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth produced by its collision with error.”

Societies which embrace free debate make a disproportionate contribution to the advance of human knowledge. The 10 nations with the freest media in the world have produced 120 Nobel Laureates between them – 3 times as many as Russia and China combined.

Norway, with only 5 million people, has won 13 Nobel Prizes. With great respect to my Norwegian friends, Norwegians are no more pioneering or inventive than anyone else. They have flourished because their open society and free media – ranked the freest in the world – have created the very best setting for their talents to thrive.

## **The challenges faced by journalists**

In other countries life is tougher – but journalists are succeeding against the odds. In Venezuela, we just heard from Luz Mely Reyes, who has defied the Maduro regime by co-founding an independent news website, Efecto Cocuyo.

In Kazakhstan, Gulnara Bazhkenova runs the website Holanews, which exposed how fish stocks in the Ural river had been devastated by poisoning.

In Peru, Gustavo Gorriti of IDL Reporteros has brought to light a series of corruption scandals involving business, the government and the judiciary.

But sadly in many countries the situation continues to deteriorate. In China, automated censorship and the Great Firewall block access to thousands of news websites, with millions of people employed to censor content, fake social media posts and manipulate online debate.

The first person to establish a website in China focused on human rights was an activist called Huang Qi. He was jailed in 2016 and nothing has been heard from him since a secret trial in January, though he is in poor health. We have raised his case with the Chinese authorities and I urge them again to disclose Huang Qi’s fate and provide any medical care he may need.

In Vietnam, Tran Thi Nga produced video evidence of police brutality, only to get a 9-year prison sentence in 2017. So today I call on the Vietnamese authorities to release her.

In a world where a Washington Post columnist, Jamal Khashoggi, was murdered inside a Saudi diplomatic property – and a talented young journalist, Lyra McKee, was shot dead by dissident republicans in Northern Ireland – it would

be easy to succumb to fatalism.

But we must resist that. Because if we act together we can shine a spotlight on abuses and impose a diplomatic price on those who would harm journalists or lock them up for doing their jobs.

So today, I want to announce 5 practical steps the British government will take alongside our partners.

Firstly, we will join other governments to establish a new Global Media Defence Fund, to be administered by UNESCO. This will take forward the [UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists](#).

Among the aims will be to help fund legal advice for journalists and safety training for those venturing into conflict zones. Britain will provide £3 million to the Fund over the next 5 years – and we invite others to contribute.

Secondly, we will establish an international task force to help governments to deliver their commitments on media freedom, including by developing national action plans. Every year at the UN General Assembly, we will meet to review progress of the task force, commending those countries where media freedom is getting better and agreeing what should be done where it is not.

Thirdly, my special envoy, Amal Clooney, has convened a panel of experts to advise countries on how to strengthen the legal protection of journalists. I would encourage all governments to draw on the advice of the panel and respond to its recommendations.

For our part, the British government will ensure that whenever we propose or amend a law, we will consider the potential impact on press freedom. Earlier today, my colleague, Minister Harriett Baldwin, announced that our Department for International Development will spend up to [£15 million on new programmes to promote media freedom across the world](#).

Fourthly, Chrystia Freeland and I will bring together a contact group of likeminded countries to lobby in unison when media freedom comes under attack. Our aim is for this to be a rapid response mechanism, helping foreign ministers and ambassadors to react as one when abuses take place.

Finally, I invite every country represented here to sign the Global Pledge on media freedom, resolving that we will work together as a coalition to promote this cause and meet again next year.

## **Conclusion**

Colleagues, the struggle for media freedom is being waged day after day, not in conference centres like this but by independent journalists in authoritarian states; by vigilant bloggers who expose corruption; and by courageous activists who publish the evidence of human rights abuses.

There is no place for neutrality in this struggle.

We are on the side of those who seek to report the truth and bring the facts to light. We stand against those who suppress or censor or exact revenge.

After the killing of Francisco Romero Diaz, his newspaper carried the headline: 'Pain, Fear and Impotence,' and declared: 'The voice of a journalist has been silenced.'

In the end we all face a choice.

Ignore the threats and we tolerate the stifling of independent voices and the dangers of unaccountable power. But defend our values and nations will flourish from the free exchange of ideas.

By coming to this conference, each and every 1 of the 1,000 people here has made that choice.

We have pledged to do what it takes – and no less – to ensure that instead of being silenced, the plural and varied voices of a free media are nurtured and encouraged as the most important contribution to the open societies that are the foundation of human progress.