Written evidence from Reporters Without Borders (RSF) (GMF0039)

Introduction

1. Reporters Without Borders – known internationally as Reporters sans frontières (RSF) has developed this submission for consideration by the Foreign Affairs Committee in its inquiry into the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and global media freedom.

2. RSF is a non-profit organisation working to promote and protect press freedom around the world. Drawing on more than 30 years of experience, RSF alternates public interventions and effective behind-the-scenes actions. RSF works globally through its Paris headquarters and 14 country offices, its wide network of correspondents in more than 130 countries, and its consultative status at the United Nations, UNESCO and the Council of Europe. RSF opened its UK bureau in September 2016, and this submission draws on our experience working with the FCO since that time.

Threats to global media freedom

3. Media freedom is under greater attack than ever before. RSF’s data shows that 2018 was one of the deadliest years on record for media around the world, with a total of 80 journalists, citizen journalists and media workers killed in connection with their work. A further 60 journalists were held hostage, and three were missing at the end of the year.¹ Twenty-eight journalists have been killed so far in 2019.²

4. Alarmingly, such attacks are no longer confined to conflict zones or countries traditionally thought of as dangerous for media. Fifty-five percent of journalists killed in 2018 were in conflict zones, and the other 45 percent were in non-conflict zones. There is also a worrying increase in the deliberate targeting of journalists; 61 percent of those killed in 2018 were deliberately targeted for their work, and the other 39 percent were killed on the job.

5. This is part of a longer-term alarming trend. It is becoming increasingly dangerous to be a journalist anywhere. Over the past 10 years, more than 700 professional journalists alone have been killed around the world. In the vast majority of cases of murders of journalists, there is full or partial impunity. Even in the instance of lower-level arrests and prosecutions, very rarely are the masterminds behind such attacks ever identified and brought to justice, which leaves the door open for further violence.

² https://rsf.org/en/barometer
6. Violence is not the only means being used to silence the media. As of today, a total of 399 journalists, citizen journalists and media workers are currently jailed around the world.\(^3\) Around half of those are concentrated in just five countries: China, Egypt, Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia. A range of other pressures is also applied to media globally, including increased legal pressures, regressive legislation, and an overall shrinking space for critical voices in many parts of the world. There is a greater need for support for, and protection of, media freedom now than ever before.

7. On World Press Freedom Day this year, Reporters Without Borders pointed out that only nine percent of the world’s population currently live in countries where journalists enjoy a favourable environment and are able to practice their profession freely and independently.\(^4\) Worryingly, the press freedom situation in the other 91 percent of the world is categorised as “problematic”, “difficult” or “very serious” on the map that accompanies our World Press Freedom Index, an annual ranking of 180 countries in terms of their press freedom performance.

8. This year’s Index showed that hostility towards journalists expressed by political leaders in many countries has incited increased violence, fuelling an unprecedented level of fear and danger for journalists. Threats, insults and attacks have now become common occupational hazards for journalists in far too many places – and not just in authoritarian countries.\(^5\)

The reputation and capabilities of the UK in promoting global media freedom

9. As part of the global deterioration of media freedom, since 2016, RSF has noted a particular decline in democracies - countries that were once thought of as standard-setters. The UK is no exception, with a ranking of 33\(^{rd}\) out of 180 countries in our 2019 World Press Freedom Index.\(^6\) Although the UK rose seven places from its previous ranking of 40\(^{th}\) out of 180 countries – the lowest ranking the UK has ever held, which it maintained in the 2017 and 2018 Index – this was largely due to deterioration of other countries around the UK in the Index, rather than significant improvements in the UK’s media freedom climate. Some positive steps were taken in 2018, but at the same time worrying trends continued, in particular with relation to national security, surveillance and data protection.\(^7\)

10. Unfortunately, despite the improved ranking in the 2018 Index, violations of media freedom have continued – and in some areas, accelerated – in the UK in 2019. On 18 April, journalist Lyra McKee was killed in the line of duty in Londonderry, Northern Ireland, marking the first case of a journalist killed in the UK that RSF has included in its barometer of press freedom violations.\(^8\) Two new laws were adopted in February that have negative implications for media freedom, the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act,\(^9\) and the Crime (Overseas Protection Orders) Act.\(^10\) More recently, RSF

---

\(^3\) https://rsf.org/en/barometer  
\(^6\) https://rsf.org/en/ranking/2019  
has condemned the Home Office’s decision to greenlight the US request to extradite WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange\textsuperscript{11} and a threat by London’s Metropolitan Police to treat the publication of leaked information as a criminal matter.\textsuperscript{12}

11. The UK continues to play an important international standard-setting role when it comes to media freedom, and working to address these domestic shortcomings in parallel to promoting media freedom abroad will set a positive international example. RSF encourages the FCO to work with other parts of government to ensure a consistent approach to media freedom.

**The role of the FCO**

12. We were encouraged by the launch by former Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt of an \textit{FCO global campaign for media freedom}, and have been working in collaboration with the media freedom campaign team since November 2018. We have welcomed better access to, and a more consistent dialogue with the FCO on global media freedom issues, and have noticed an increased use by the FCO of RSF’s data and materials during this time. We also viewed it as positive that following the launch of the media freedom campaign, the UK finally joined the Group of Friends on the Protection of Journalists at the United Nations, and we would warmly welcome the additional step of the UK supporting RSF’s campaign to establish a UN Special Representative for the Safety of Journalists.\textsuperscript{13}

13. In recent months however, the media freedom campaign team’s efforts were largely focussed on the \textit{Global Conference for Media Freedom} that was co-hosted by the UK and Canada in London from 10 to 11 July.\textsuperscript{14} RSF was extensively involved in stakeholder consultations in the run-up to the conference, and although we welcomed the chance to provide input, aspects of this process were frustrating and time-consuming, and we have separately given feedback to the FCO on improvements that could be made in the organisation of next year’s conference, expected to be held in Canada.

14. We also questioned the need for the creation of an additional international structure and newly defined commitments to media freedom, as numerous structures and commitments already exist. Implementation of these commitments remains the core problem, and much more is needed in terms of concrete international action to enforce these commitments, which is often ultimately a question of political will.

15. However, we felt that overall, the conference was a positive moment for media freedom, and an opportunity has been created for states to use real leverage to hold other states accountable for their media freedom obligations. We hope that the newly established Media Freedom Contact Group will prove to be an active, effective means of ensuring concrete action from the states that have committed to the Global pledge.


\textsuperscript{13}\url{https://rsf.org/en/protector-journalists}

\textsuperscript{14}\url{https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/global-conference-for-media-freedom-london-2019}
15. We also wish to highlight a longer-term issue we have experienced in working with the FCO on global media freedom issues over the past three years, since opening our UK bureau. One major shortcoming we have noticed in implementation of the UK’s stated commitment to media freedom is an inconsistent approach country to country. Too often the UK seems to turn a blind eye to the media freedom situation in countries with which it enjoys cooperation in other areas, and too often, these countries are among the worst offenders when it comes to media freedom violations.

16. One clear example is Saudi Arabia, which holds one of the world’s worst records on media freedom, with a current ranking of 172nd out of 180 countries on RSF’s World Press Freedom Index. Despite the horrific murder of Saudi columnist Jamal Khashoggi inside the Consulate of Saudi Arabia in Istanbul on 2 October 2018, as well as the continued detention of at least 30 journalists and citizen journalists in Saudi Arabia, the UK continues to enjoy overall positive relations with Saudi Arabia, including through arms sales, whilst remaining largely silent – at least publicly – on these cases and other areas of serious concern. Although former Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt stated in the immediate aftermath of Khashoggi’s murder that “shared values” were important in the UK’s relations with Saudi Arabia, there have been no apparent policy changes to support this claim.

17. RSF has experienced significant difficulty with the FCO in relation to the case of Daphne Caruana Galizia, an investigative journalist assassinated by a car bomb in Malta on 16 October 2017. Despite the shocking nature of a murder of a journalist taking place in an EU state, and despite the UK being well placed to influence the Maltese government, the UK has done little to date to raise Caruana Galizia’s case or to press the Maltese authorities on the need for justice. Even our requests for working-level meetings on Caruana Galizia’s case have proven difficult, both with the British High Commission in Malta and with the FCO in London. The FCO’s reluctance to address this case is significant given that there is still impunity for Caruana Galizia’s assassination nearly two years on, and journalists working in Malta remain at great risk. We again urge the FCO to support the call for a public inquiry into Caruana Galizia’s assassination, a measure which has now been given a three-month window for implementation by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

18. At times this inconsistent approach is not necessarily country-specific, but certain cases are not given the serious attention they merit. One example is the case of Christopher Allen, a dual UK/US national journalist who was killed whilst reporting on media freedom—but as it stands, the composition of the group, and the list of countries that have signed the pledge, have not yet been disclosed.
on the civil war in South Sudan on 26 August 2017.\textsuperscript{22} Despite Allen’s British citizenship, and despite the gravity of a journalist being killed in the line of duty, nearly two years on, his family has had extremely little assistance or support from the FCO – a fact that is both disappointing and worrying. RSF believes that more robust FCO involvement in Allen’s case from the start could have made a significant difference to his family’s pursuit of answers and justice for his killing, and encourages the FCO to remedy this inaction now.

20. Such inconsistency, regardless of whether intentional, only serves to erode confidence in the UK’s commitment to media freedom, and to undermine any positive efforts being taken elsewhere. Eliminating that inconsistency, and ensuring that media freedom and human rights more broadly are clear and significant factors in UK foreign policy, would send a strong signal that the UK is serious about its commitments and cares deeply about these fundamental values – even if it means having uncomfortable conversations with certain states or curtailing trade with the worst offenders.

21. At present, it remains unclear whether the new Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab, will fulfill his predecessor’s commitment to champion global media freedom beyond the July conference, and beyond the initial one-year campaign period, as Jeremy Hunt intended. We encourage the Foreign Secretary – and indeed the new Prime Minister – to fulfil this commitment, and to ensure that the increased attention to media freedom initiated through this campaign is not only sustained, but that the UK significantly broadens and deepens its work to promote and protect global media freedom at all levels, from individual casework to bigger picture decisions about the UK’s bilateral and multilateral relations.

Recommendations

22. In light of the analysis above, we have developed a set of recommendations for the FCO to move forward with its efforts to promote global media freedom. We urge the FCO to:

- Ensure a consistent approach in its work promoting media freedom globally, and refrain from turning a blind eye to difficult issues and cases with the worst offenders, and with countries the UK cooperates with in other areas.
- Enable FCO ministers, ambassadors, and other spokespersons to take a firmer position in their public comments on specific cases. Murders of journalists should be swiftly and resolutely condemned, and calls for release should be included along with expressions of concern in cases of jailed journalists.
- Continue to improve communications with civil society organisations such as RSF, and ensure a consistent and constructive dialogue both on relevant cases and developments, but also in sharing information about actions taken by the FCO, especially in relation to cases that the FCO has raised privately with foreign governments. Ensure consistency throughout the FCO in this regard, including among country desks and in-country missions.

\textsuperscript{22}https://www.cjr.org/special_report/christopher-allen.php
- Ensure that the new Foreign Secretary fulfils his predecessor’s commitment to champion global media freedom. Give the media freedom campaign real policy weight, beyond simply increasing communications activities and holding a media freedom conference in London. Expand the depth and breadth of the UK’s work to promote and protect media freedom at all levels.
- Hold states to account for the commitments reaffirmed in the Global pledge on media freedom and ensure meaningful follow-up to the London conference, through concrete action by states involved in the new Media Freedom Contact Group.
- Work with other parts of the UK government to ensure a consistent approach to addressing domestic media freedom shortcomings in parallel to the FCO’s work to promote media freedom abroad.

August 2019