What does the FCO do, in terms of funding and diplomatic support or any other assistance, to help international media freedom?

Funding example: report on freedom of expression in Turkey

In 2017/18, English PEN received funding from the British Embassy in Ankara / FCO to research and publish our report ‘Turkey: freedom of expression in jeopardy’ on violations of the rights of authors, publishers and academics under the State of Emergency. Researched and written by leading experts in the field Dr Yaman Akdeniz and Dr Kerem Altiparmak, the report examines the impact of the Turkish government’s response to the failed coup on the publishing community and academia. Dr Akdeniz travelled to London to launch the report alongside Maureen Freely. The report revealed new information and statistics and was covered widely in Turkey. [https://www.englishpen.org/campaigns/turkey-freedom-of-expression-in-jeopardy/](https://www.englishpen.org/campaigns/turkey-freedom-of-expression-in-jeopardy/)

Diplomatic support example: arrest of Vice News journalists

In August 2015, two British journalists Jake Hanrahan and Philip Pendleton were arrested alongside Iraqi freelance journalist Mohammed Rasool while working for VICE News. Police interrogated them about alleged links to Islamic State and Kurdish militants before charging them with ‘working on behalf of a terrorist organisation’ on 1 September.

English PEN wrote to then Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond MP, to urge the immediate intervention of the British government in the case. The following day, the Foreign Office issued a statement declaring that they ‘would expect the Turkish authorities to uphold the obligations enshrined in [international] agreements.’ A day later, the two British journalists were released and returned to the UK. However, Rasool spent more than four months in detention before being released on bail. Once released, he was initially subject to a travel ban and required to report to his nearest police station twice a week. The ban has since been lifted and he has returned to his native Iraq.

In 2017, English PEN invited Rasool to London to take part in our residency programme for international writers. We were extremely disappointed that his visa application was denied on the grounds that he outstanding criminal charges against him.

What more the FCO could or should do?

The Vice News example is indicative of the influence and impact the Foreign Secretary, FCO and British government more generally can have, particularly on individual cases. We were recently invited to provide the FCO with a list of particular cases of concern to PEN but it would be helpful to better understand how and why the FCO chooses cases or countries in which to intervene, and to have more clarity on cases and countries where they might not.

We would also be interested to know to what extent the FCO and local Embassies support independent journalists on the ground. For example, we have been in touch with the FCO to raise security concerns for our current writer-in-residence Mimi Mefo. Mimi Mefo is an
award-winning Cameroonian journalist who established her own news platform, Mimi Mefo Info, in 2018. http://mimimefoinfos.com Working to provide Cameroonians information about the escalating violence and unrest in Cameroon’s western regions, Mimi has faced death threats, online harassment, physical surveillance, and the ongoing threat of arrest. Many of the threats against her, particularly those online, use misogynistic language. In November 2018, Mimi Mefo was arrested and imprisoned, after reporting on the killing of Wesco Trumann, an American missionary, by the military in the North West region of Cameroon. She was released four days later, but fears that she could be arrested again at any time. Mimi has spoken about how other journalists at risk have received diplomatic support, including from the American and French Embassies, and of how crucial such support can be. We would be interested to know more about how the FCO and local Embassies operate on the ground, and encourage them to explore other ways of supporting local, independent journalists in particular.

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