



Committee to Protect Journalists

April 9, 2020

OHCHR-UNOG  
8-14 Avenue de la Paix,  
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Switzerland

*Attn: Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, Experts of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health*

Dear Esteemed Special Mandate Holders,

The Committee to Protect Journalists, which holds consultative status with the U.N., is an independent, nonprofit organization that defends the rights of journalists to report the news worldwide without fear of reprisal. CPJ reports on and mobilizes against hundreds of attacks on the press each year such as killings, nonfatal assaults, restrictive legislation, imprisonment, media closures, online harassment, and other threats used to silence journalists and the media.

The novel coronavirus pandemic has become central to the public discourse on global health, the economy, access to essential medicines and medical resources, and freedom of movement. Less discussed, however, is the insidious and crippling effect that COVID-19 and the government responses it elicits have on press freedom, freedom of expression, and the safety of journalists.

As governments declare states of emergency and impose restrictions on movement, journalists are often exempted because they provide an essential public service. The public relies on the free flow information to make informed decisions.

While CPJ has been active in supporting journalists still carrying out their work, we are fearful for those journalists currently imprisoned, who are unable to take necessary precautions. The U.N. and its special mandate holders must take action on behalf of this particularly vulnerable group. Incarcerated journalists are frequently held in cruel, degrading, and inhumane conditions. They have been subject to torture, abuse, and denial of access to medical treatment. And as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to sweep the globe, CPJ is deeply concerned by the danger this virus poses to journalists held in government custody.

Recognizing the gravity and urgency of the situation, CPJ has launched a campaign called [#FreeThePress](#), with an [open letter](#) to world leaders calling on governments to release all journalists from their prisons immediately and unconditionally. These are political

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prisoners. They are nonviolent offenders, they pose no imminent danger to society, and their freedom is now a matter of survival.

The World Health Organization [states](#) that “People deprived of their liberty, and those living or working in enclosed environments in their close proximity, are likely to be more vulnerable to the COVID-19 disease than the general population.” Imprisoned journalists have no control over their surroundings, cannot choose to isolate, and according to the CPJ’s research, are often denied access to necessary medical care or even food.

In addition to releasing all jailed journalists, CPJ also puts forward the following recommendations.

All governments should:

- Refrain from arresting or otherwise targeting journalists in retaliation for critical coverage of COVID-19 or government responses to it.
- Ensure that any surveillance measures adopted to address the pandemic be lawful, necessary, and proportionate, and incorporate accountability protections and safeguards against abuse.

UN Special Mandate holders should:

- Release statements echoing the call for the immediate release of jailed journalists in light of the coronavirus pandemic.
- Publicly urge governments to respect press freedom and freedom of expression, and to treat these essential workers humanely, with dignity, and with respect for their right to life and health amid the current crisis.

Each year, CPJ publishes a global census of [jailed journalists](#), listing every known case of a journalist in government custody at midnight on December 1st of that year. As part of this annual special report, CPJ publishes updated capsules about each individual, and any changes or developments to their circumstances, including advancing legal proceedings, health deterioration, evidence of torture, and denial of access to family, medical treatment, or legal representation.

The most recent prison census, released in [December 2019](#), found at least 250 journalists in jail, spread across 33 countries. This marked the fourth consecutive year in which CPJ documented at least 250 journalists behind bars. Among the notable findings:

- China is the leading jailer with 48 cases, followed by Turkey with 47, and Egypt and Saudi Arabia with 26 cases each. All countries have reported COVID-19 outbreaks.
- Of the journalists behind bars, 66% face “anti-state” charges and 12% have been charged under “false news” related legislation, amounting to politically motivated charges. Of all cases, 8% were women journalists.
- At least 149 out of the 250 journalists were cases of arbitrary detention.

Collectively, this prison-related research forms the basis of CPJ’s regular and ongoing advocacy to secure the release of each of these journalists. This advocacy is conducted both at the state level, through direct engagement with authorities and representatives, and at the

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institutional level, through bodies like the U.S. Congress, the Council of Europe, and various bodies of the United Nations.

CPJ also uses this research as the foundation for individual-level advocacy, where direct action is taken to try and secure the freedom of a single journalist either because of a particular inflection point or opportunity, or because of the emblematic nature of the case. This individual advocacy regularly involves complaint submissions to U.N. Special Procedures, and the advocacy on their behalf can last over several years.

However, at a time where every jailed journalist faces potential mortal danger, the need for sweeping and decisive action is now. Every jailed journalist must be freed, and the authorities responsible for their detention must release them without condition. Bodies tasked with upholding human rights must echo this refrain as loudly as possible.

In addition to our fear for the fate of jailed journalists, CPJ is also concerned about the extent to which government efforts to respond to the virus undermine press freedom, either deliberately or indirectly. Increasing attacks on journalists, censorship of newspapers and online information including through internet shutdowns, the proliferation of misinformation, and the adoption of new surveillance technologies all pose serious threats to press freedom both in the short and long terms.

For journalists still at work, the threat posed by the virus is one that must be taken into account in the context of their work and workplace, just as with any other essential worker. Therefore, CPJ has been working to regularly disseminate up-to-date [coronavirus safety information](#) for working journalists. This information has been made available in more than 35 languages.

Our chief concern, however, is the immediate fate of all jailed or recently arrested journalists, and your help in securing their freedom is vital.

While responding to a staggering global pandemic like COVID-19 requires a nuanced and far-reaching approach, one thing remains clear: journalism must not carry a death sentence. Governments must recognize that in the interest of public health, it is not only humane, but essential that all jailed journalists be freed immediately. A global threat that targets human life indiscriminately must not be used as a pretext to undermine free expression, endanger journalists, or erode the fundamental role of a free press. Without question, lives depend on it.

Sincerely,

Courtney C. Radsch

Advocacy Director

Committee to Protect Journalists

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