



## **PRESS RELEASE**

### **Press Freedom Declines in Asia, Ex-Soviet Region and Latin America, Study Finds; Warns of Growing Internet Restriction**

New York, May 1, 2007 – Press freedom suffered continued global decline in 2006, with particularly troubling trends evident in Asia, the former Soviet Union and Latin America. A major study of the state of media freedom released today by Freedom House also warned of a growing effort to place restrictions on internet freedom by censoring, harassing, or shutting down sites that provide alternate sources of political commentary.

The study, *Freedom of the Press 2007: A Global Survey of Media Independence*, showed mixed trends in Africa, as well as a continuation of a longer-term pattern of decline in press freedom in Latin America and the former Soviet Union.

Among the most critical setbacks singled out by Freedom House this year were:

- setbacks in Asia—notably Thailand, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, the Philippines and Fiji—stemming from coups, political upheaval, insurgency or states of emergency;
- setbacks in Venezuela, Argentina, Brazil and other Latin American countries, in some cases due to state action, in others due to a deteriorating security environment;
- aggressive efforts by the Russian government to further marginalize independent media voices, punctuated by plans to regulate the internet;
- stagnation in the Middle East/North Africa region, bringing to a halt several years of modest progress.

Jennifer Windsor, Freedom House’s Executive Director, expressed serious concern at the study’s findings. “Press freedom is like the canary in the coal mine,” she said. “Assaults on the media are inevitably followed by assaults on other democratic institutions. The fact that press freedom is in retreat is a deeply troubling sign that democracy itself will come under further assault in critical parts of the world.”

The report also warned of expanded restriction of the internet. It highlighted China, Vietnam, and Iran, which continue to convict and imprison large numbers of journalists and “cyberdissidents,” and indicated that this trend has spread to other countries with restrictive media environments, including Russia, where the administration of President Vladimir Putin has announced plans to establish a mechanism to regulate internet content, as well as several countries in Africa.

The report, released in advance of World Press Freedom Day on May 3, pointed to improvements in several countries. Italy’s rating was raised to Free; it had been the only European Union member state in the Partly Free category. Several countries, notably

Nepal, Colombia and Haiti, registered status improvements due largely to greater overall political openness and an improved security environment, Cambodia and the Central African Republic improved due to enhanced legal protections for journalists.

A complete package of charts and tables including a global table, regional tables and charts and graphs; an overview essay; a special report on long-term decline in the former Soviet Union; the survey methodology; and detailed draft country narratives are all available online at <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report-types/freedom-press>.

The survey, launched in 1980, assesses the degree of print, broadcast, and internet freedom in every country in the world. It assigns each country a numerical score from 0 to 100 which in turn determines a category rating of Free, Partly Free or Not Free. Ratings are determined by examining three broad categories: the legal environment in which media operate, political influences on reporting and access to information, and economic pressures on content and the dissemination of news. The survey, which analyzes events during the 2006 calendar year, bases its ratings not just on government actions and policies but on the behavior of the press itself in testing boundaries, even in more restrictive environments.

## **Global Trends**

Out of the 195 countries and territories examined, 74 (38 percent) were rated Free, while 58 (30 percent) were rated Partly Free, and 63 (32 percent) were rated Not Free.

In terms of population, 18 percent of the world's inhabitants live in countries that enjoy a Free press, while 39 percent have a Partly Free press and 43 percent have a Not Free press.

The study also noted a longer-term trend of press freedom decline or stagnation in a number of crucial countries and regions, particularly the Americas and the former Soviet Union. In assessing country trends over the past five years, the survey found that Venezuela had suffered the largest single decline in media independence. Other important countries which registered major declines were Thailand, the Philippines, Russia, Argentina, Ethiopia and Uganda.

“The records of Venezuela and Russia are appalling, all the more so because of those countries’ impact on their regions,” said Karin Karlekar, managing editor of the press freedom survey. “But we are also disturbed by the level of press freedom decline in what we had assumed were established democracies.”

There is a complex series of reasons for the decline of global press freedom, some of which derive from broad political trends, while others are specific to the media environment:

1. **Pushback against Democracy:** A growing drive to neutralize or eliminate all potential sources of political opposition has materialized in a number of crucial countries, with the press as a principal target.
2. **Political Upheaval:** Coups and states of emergency brought on by political unrest or civil war have taken place in a growing number of formerly democratic settings, especially in Asia, with a damaging impact on press freedom.
3. **Violence Targeting Journalists:** The tragic murder of crusading Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya is but one of the latest examples of what has become a disturbing global trend. The killing and physical harassment of reporters is a particular problem in Latin America, where Mexico has recently replaced Colombia as the most dangerous environment, as well as in South and Southeast Asia, Russia, and Iraq.
4. **Legislation Prohibiting Blasphemy, Hate Speech, Insult, and “Endangering National Security”:** Governments have increasingly resorted to legal action in efforts to punish the press for critical reports on the political leadership, as well as for “inciting hatred,” commenting on sensitive topics such as religion or ethnicity, or “endangering national security.”

## **Regional Trends**

**Americas:** In the Americas, 17 countries (48 percent) were rated Free, 16 (46 percent) were rated Partly Free, and 2 (6 percent) were rated Not Free in 2006. Countries of particular concern continue to be Cuba, which has one of the most repressive media environments worldwide, and Venezuela, where the government has further intensified its efforts to control the press.

The region did have some noteworthy positive developments in 2006, as both Haiti and Colombia moved into the Partly Free category. However, these moves were overshadowed by negative trends in a number of countries, including Argentina, Peru, Bolivia, Brazil, Paraguay and the Dominican Republic. In Mexico, improvements in the legal sphere were outweighed by an appalling level of violence against journalists. Although the United States continues to be one of the better performers in the survey, there were continuing problems in the legal sphere, particularly concerning cases in which legal authorities tried to compel journalists to reveal confidential sources or provide access to research material in the course of criminal investigations.

**Asia-Pacific:** The Asia-Pacific region as a whole exhibited a relatively high level of freedom, with 16 countries (40 percent) rated Free, 10 (25 percent) rated Partly Free, and 14 (35 percent) rated Not Free. Nevertheless, Asia is home to two of the five worst-rated countries in the world, Burma and North Korea, which have extremely repressive media environments, as well as several other poor performers such as China, Laos and Vietnam, all of which use state or party control of the press as the primary tool to restrict media freedom.

Several bright spots worth noting include Nepal, where wide-ranging political change led to a dramatic opening in the media environment, and Cambodia and Indonesia, which also featured positive movement. Asia saw many negative developments in 2006,

however, continuing the downward regional trajectory noted in last year's survey. Coups and military intervention led to the suspension of legal protections for press freedom and new curbs imposed on media coverage in Fiji and Thailand. Intensified political and civil conflict during the year contributed to declines in Sri Lanka, East Timor and the Philippines. Heightened restrictions on coverage, as well as harassment of media outlets that overstepped official and unofficial boundaries, negatively impacted press freedom in Malaysia, China and Pakistan.

**Central and Eastern Europe/Former Soviet Union:** For the combined CEE/FSU region, 8 countries (28 percent)—out of a new total of 28 countries, after Montenegro's independence—remain classified as Free, 10 (36 percent) are rated as Partly Free, and 10 (36 percent) as Not Free. While many countries in Central and Eastern Europe rank firmly in the Free category, the repressive media landscape in the former Soviet Union is illuminated by the fact that 10 of the 12 non-Baltic post-Soviet states are ranked Not Free.

Most trends in the region were negative. Kyrgyzstan saw backsliding in 2006 due to an increase in censorship and attacks against journalists. Russia's worsening score reflected negative developments in the legal sphere coupled with heightened impunity, epitomized by the lack of prosecutions of increasingly frequent crimes and attacks against journalists.

**Middle East and North Africa:** The Middle East and North Africa region continued to show the lowest regionwide ratings, with just one country (5 percent) rated Free, two (11 percent) rated Partly Free, and 16 (84 percent) rated Not Free in 2006. Of particular and long-standing concern are Libya, Syria, Tunisia and the Israeli-Occupied Territories/Palestinian Authority, where media freedom remained extremely restricted. The deteriorating security situation in Iraq made it highly dangerous for the media, with several dozen journalists and media workers, mostly Iraqis, killed during the year.

In 2006, improvements noted in the survey over the last several years reversed course, with several countries that had previously shown numerical improvement stagnating or moving in a negative trajectory. Conditions in Saudi Arabia and Iran deteriorated, while media in Egypt, Jordan and Algeria hampered constrained by legal restrictions. The use of legal harassment against independent journalists increased in Morocco, with a highly influential editor forced to leave the country due to the threat of crippling fines in a defamation case.

**Sub-Saharan Africa:** Overall, 8 countries (17 percent) were rated Free, 19 (39 percent) were rated Partly Free, and 21 (44 percent) remain rated Not Free. In 2006, Cape Verde was upgraded to Free as a result of a decrease in the legal harassment of and attacks on journalists. Changes in the legal sphere contributed to the Central African Republic's upgrade to Partly Free, and to numerical improvements in Angola, Sierra Leone, and Mozambique.

Meanwhile, conditions in one of the world's worst performers, Eritrea, deteriorated further to a numerical score of 94 as a result of tightened restrictions for foreign reporters

traveling inside the country. Several countries which have registered a significant longer-term negative trend—The Gambia, Ethiopia, and Uganda—continued to move in the wrong direction in 2006.

**Western Europe:** Western Europe continued to boast the highest level of press freedom worldwide; in 2006, 24 countries (96 percent) were rated Free and one (4 percent) was rated Partly Free. However, increasing threats from far-right and Islamist groups during the year resulted in modest declines for a number of top-performing countries, particularly those in Scandinavia and northern Europe. A dramatic rise in legal harassment was noted in Turkey, where almost 300 journalists and writers were prosecuted for “insulting Turkishness.” However, in a major positive move, Italy was upgraded in 2006 to resume its Free status primarily as a result of media magnate Silvio Berlusconi’s exit as prime minister.

### **Worst of the Worst**

The five worst-rated countries continue to be Burma, Cuba, Libya, North Korea, and Turkmenistan. In these states, which are scattered across the globe, independent media are either nonexistent or barely able to operate, the press acts as a mouthpiece for the ruling regime, and citizens’ access to unbiased information is severely limited. The numerical scores for these five countries have barely changed in relation to the previous year, reflecting a level of extreme repression and stagnation for the media. Rounding out the bottom 10 most repressive media environments are two countries in the former Soviet Union—Belarus and Uzbekistan—and three countries in Africa—Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, and Zimbabwe—where media are heavily restricted.

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Freedom House makes a difference.*  
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