

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

Statement on World Press Freedom Day

May 1, 2009

World Press Freedom Day is annually observed on May 3 to remind us all of the vital importance of this core freedom. It is a day in which we celebrate the indispensable role played by journalists in exposing abuses of power, while we sound the alarm about the growing number of journalists silenced by death or jail as they attempt to bring daily news to the public.

Although World Press Freedom Day has only been celebrated since 1993, its roots run deep in the international community. In 1948, as people across the globe emerged from the horrors of the Second World War, nations saw fit to enshrine in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights the fundamental principle that everyone "has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."

Even as the world recognizes the central and indisputable importance of press freedom, journalists find themselves in frequent peril. Since this day was first celebrated some 16 years ago, 692 journalists have been killed. Only a third of those deaths were linked to the dangers of covering war; the majority of victims were local reporters covering topics such as crime, corruption, and national security in their home countries. Adding to this tragic figure are the hundreds more each year who face intimidation, censorship, and arbitrary arrest, guilty of nothing more than a passion for truth and a tenacious belief that a free society depends on an informed citizenry. In every corner of the globe, there are journalists in jail or being actively harassed, from Azerbaijan to Zimbabwe, Burma to Uzbekistan, Cuba to Eritrea. Emblematic examples of this distressing reality are figures like J.S. Tissainayagam in Sri Lanka or Shi Tao and Hu Jia in China. We are also especially concerned about the citizens from our own country currently under detention abroad, individuals such as Roxana Saberi in Iran and Euna Lee and Laura Ling in North Korea.

Today I lend my voice of support and admiration to all those brave men and women of the press who labor to expose truth and enhance accountability around the world. In so doing, I recall the words of Thomas Jefferson: "The basis of our governments being the opinion of the people, the very first object should be to keep that right; and were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter."

Categories: Statements by the President : World Press Freedom Day.

Names: Hu Jia; Lee, Euna; Ling, Laura; Saberi, Roxana; Shi Tao; Tissainayagam, J.S.

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