

Remarks on World Press Freedom Day and an Exchange With Reporters
May 1, 2015

Well, as many of you know, Sunday is World Press Freedom Day, a day in which we reaffirm the vital role that a free press plays in democracy and shining a light on the many challenges, cruelties, and also hopeful stories that exist in countries all around the world.

Journalists give all of us, as citizens, the chance to know the truth about our countries, ourselves, our governments. That makes us better. It makes us stronger. It gives voice to the voiceless, exposes injustice, and holds leaders like me accountable.

Unfortunately, in too many places around the world, a free press is under attack by governments that want to avoid the truth or mistrust the ability of citizens to make their own decisions. Journalists are harassed, sometimes even killed. Independent outlets are shut down. Dissent is silenced. And freedom of expression is stifled.

And that's why I really appreciated and valued the opportunity to hear from three journalists who have been incredibly courageous under some very, very difficult circumstances. All three are from countries that severely restrict the freedom of the press. All three have been detained or harassed in the past. All three have sought refuge here in the United States. And we welcome them so that they can continue their important work.

Just very briefly, I want to mention them. We have Fatima Tlisova, who is from Russia. She reported on military operations in the North Caucasus region, as well as disappearances and corruption. She was attacked, kidnapped, tortured herself. Today, she reports for the Voice of America and most recently has spent time reporting on the Boston trials related to the Boston bombing. So we very much appreciate Fatima being here.

We also have Dieu Cay—that's his pen name—from Vietnam, a blogger who has written on human rights, including religious freedom, is a leading voice for greater press freedom in Vietnam. He spent 6 years in prison and was just released in October.

And finally, we have Lily Mengesha, is from Ethiopia. She helped to shine a light on the outrage of child brides. After her advocacy for a free press, she was harassed and detained. Today, she is with the National Endowment for Democracy.

So I heard firsthand, I think, from all of them the importance of all of us, including the United States Government, speaking out on behalf of the values of the freedom of the press. As I indicated to them, these are countries in which we are engaged and do a lot of business, and we think that engagement and diplomacy is absolutely critical to the national interest of the United States. But what's also important is that we speak out on behalf of the values that are enshrined in our Constitution and our Bill of Rights, because we believe those values are not simply American values, that certain core values like being able to express yourself and your conscience without danger is a human right, a universal right, and ultimately, makes the world better and stronger when individual conscience and a press that is free is allowed to function.

It's also a time for us to reflect and honor all those journalists who are languishing in jail as we speak right now, are being harassed, are in danger, and, of course, journalists whose lives were lost. That includes Steven Sotloff and James Foley and Luke Somers, those killed in Paris at Charlie Hebdo. We'll keep working for the release of journalists who are unjustly

imprisoned, including Jason Rezaian of the Washington Post, who is currently being held in Iran.

So once again, I want to thank the three journalists who are here for sharing with me in very clear and stark terms some of the challenges that folks are facing. I want everybody to understand that this will continue to be a priority for the United States in our foreign policy, not only because it's the right thing to do, but also because ultimately, I believe it's in the national interests of the United States.

So with that, since it's national—since it's World Press Freedom Day, I figure I'd better take at least one question. [*Laughter*]

Civil Rights Movement/Situation in Baltimore, MD/Law Enforcement Reform Efforts

Q. Will the charges against the police in Baltimore, sir, help to defuse things there?

The President. Before I answer your question, when we were discussing why I thought freedom of the press was so important, I actually used the example of Selma, the incredible courage of those marchers across the bridge, and I pointed out that had there not been good reporters like Mr. Bill Plante [CBS News] at that bridge that day, America's conscience might not have been stirred, and we might not have seen the changes that needed to be made. So that's just one example of why press freedom is so important.

Bill, the State's attorney had literally just walked to the podium as I was coming in here, so I have not had an opportunity to see the nature of the charges. I didn't watch the press conference that she engaged in. So let me just say this, building on what I said in the Rose Garden: It is absolutely vital that the truth comes out on what happened to Mr. Freddie Gray.

And it is my practice not to comment on the legal processes involved; that would not be appropriate. But I can tell you that justice needs to be served. All the evidence needs to be presented. Those individuals who are charged obviously are also entitled to due process and rule of law. And so I want to make sure that our legal system runs the way it should.

And the Justice Department and our new Attorney General is in communications with Baltimore officials to make sure that any assistance we can provide on the investigation is provided. But what I think the people of Baltimore want more than anything else is the truth. That's what people around the country expect. And to the extent that it's appropriate, this administration will help local officials get to the bottom of exactly what happened.

In the meantime, I'm gratified that we've seen the constructive, thoughtful protests that have been taking place, peaceful but clear calls for accountability; that those have been managed over the last couple of days in a way that's ultimately positive for Baltimore and positive for the country. And I hope that approach to nonviolent protest and community engagement continues.

And finally, as I've said for the last year, we are going to continue to work with the Task Force that we put together post-Ferguson. I'm actually going to be talking to mayors who are interested in figuring ways to rebuild trust between community and police and to focus on some of the issues that were raised by the Task Force right after this meeting. Our efforts to make sure that we're providing greater opportunity for young people in these communities, all those things are going to be continuing top priorities for the administration. And we'll probably have some more announcements and news about that in the days and weeks to come.

All right? Thank you very much, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:02 p.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Vietnamese journalist Nguyen Van Hai; Marilyn J. Mosby, State's attorney, Baltimore, MD; Freddie C. Gray, Jr., who died on April 19 from injuries sustained during his arrest by Baltimore, MD, police officers on April 12; and Caesar Goodson, Lt. Brian Rice, Edward Nero, William Porter, Sgt. Alicia White, Garrett Miller Baltimore, MD, police officers who were charged in connection with the death of Mr. Gray on May 1; and Attorney General Loretta E. Lynch.

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