

RSF statement for Helsinki Commission hearing

Thursday, July 23, 2020

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) would like to thank the U.S. Helsinki Commission for holding this hearing, “Human Rights at Home: Media, politics, and the safety of journalists,” which comes at a pivotal moment in the United States, amid a global pandemic, a wave of protests for racial justice, and a crucial election year.

The police killing of George Floyd during an arrest in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on March 25 prompted protests against racial injustice that quickly spread across the United States. These demonstrations have since been characterized by tensions and physical altercations between authorities and authorities, as well as more than 500 press freedom violations, [according to the data reported by the U.S. Press freedom Tracker](#), of which RSF is a founding steering committee member. Omar Jimenez, a Black reporter working for *CNN*, and his news crew were on the ground in Minneapolis on May 29 covering the protests when they were [arrested by Minnesota state police](#) on live television. After that, reports of journalists being arrested, pushed and shoved, pepper sprayed, and hit with rubber bullets or projectiles, often despite clearly identifying as the press, became rampant. The majority of the incidents have been physical attacks, and the assailants predominantly law enforcement, according to the Tracker. On May 30, freelance photojournalist Linda Tirado was [permanently blinded when a police officer shot her in the eye with a rubber bullet](#) in Minneapolis. Charges brought against Des Moines Register reporter Andrea Sahouri, who was [pepper sprayed and arrested](#) covering protests in Des Moines on May 31, [have still not been dropped](#). The violations have affected foreign correspondents, too. After Australian journalists Amelia Brace and Tim Myers of *7 Network Australia* were [physically assaulted by U.S. Park Police](#) in front of the White House on June 1, the Australian government [opened an investigation](#) into the incident. Canadian journalist Anna Slatz, a reporter for *Rebel News*, was arrested in New York on June 2 and [held in police custody for two days](#) while awaiting her arraignment. Though the attacks were most prevalent in the early days of the protests, journalists have continued to report arrests and attacks through this week.

Meanwhile, the new CEO of the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM), Michael Pack, has [ousted leadership](#) at the news outlets overseen by the agency, and has [signalled that he would not renew J-1 visas for at least 70 journalists](#) working for the USAGM outlet *Voice of America* (VOA). This outlet relies heavily on the work of international journalists in order to carry out its mission of producing independent reporting on global issues in more than 40 languages. The recent moves by Pack, a conservative filmmaker and Trump appointee, has RSF concerned about the future independence of USAGM outlets and the safety of its international journalists. Many of these journalists have left nations without independent media and governments that are incredibly hostile toward journalists, and forcing them to return to these countries could put their safety and security at risk.

These latest stories highlight RSF's concerns regarding the United States' retreat from its traditional role as a leader in press freedom, both at home and abroad. The United States is [currently ranked 45th out of 180 countries](#) in RSF's 2020 [World Press Freedom Index](#). Although the United States [rose three places in the 2020 Index](#) after three years of consistent falls, this improvement should not indicate substantial progress, as the United States remains at the bottom of countries considered to have a "satisfactory" situation for the media. It continues to have some of the strongest press protections in the world, but in recent years the United States has suffered from hostility, physical attacks and arrests like those taking place now, as well as access denials, legal orders and subpoenas, and whistleblower prosecutions that threaten journalists' ability to do their jobs. The anti-press rhetoric that was popularized since the election of President Donald Trump has deepened and intensified, and few attacks are as vitriolic as those that come from the president. These rhetorical attacks chip away at the public's trust in the media, fostering an environment where disinformation can and often does spread widely. This is particularly dangerous at a time when local news outlets are facing an unprecedented financial crisis across the country, providing fewer Americans with reliable news from trusted sources.

2020 is a critical year for press freedom in the United States. It is an opportunity for a nation that considers the free press as foundational to its democracy to restore and fortify that pillar. As the 2020 general election approaches, it is likely there will be another increase in hostility and attacks against journalists that will arise alongside the primaries, conventions, voting and coverage of the campaigns. Now is the time to take action in order to change the tide.

RSF recommends the following action items to ensure the state of press freedom in the United States improves:

- 1) Federal, state and local authorities must immediately halt arrests and assaults on members of the press. Law enforcement agencies and departments must take steps to ensure every police officer is adequately trained on the First Amendment rights of journalists and commit to ensuring the safety of journalists—including professional reporters as well as community and citizen journalists—during protests and in all other interactions with law enforcement.
- 2) Federal, state and local authorities must comply with international press freedom obligations, as guaranteed by Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.
- 3) The U.S. Agency for Global Media should ensure the independence of all USAGM broadcasters and entities, as protected by the agency's statutory "firewall," and should renew visas for all international journalists working for agency outlets in the United States.
- 4) Presidential and congressional candidates should commit to abiding by the [recommendations](#) RSF has published for the 2020 US elections. These recommendations call on the US president to publicly address the importance of the press in his first 100 days, for lawmakers to commission reports on issues related to assessing the state of US press freedom, and for the US government to pass a federal

shield law protecting confidential journalistic sources and strengthen foreign policy to ensure the safety of journalists overseas, among other recommendations. You can find the full list [here](#).