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Worldwide Press Freedom Index 2006

FRANCE, THE UNITED STATES AND JAPAN SLIP FURTHER ; HAITI MAKES RAPID PROGRESS

North Korea, Turkmenistan, Eritrea: the worst violators of press freedom

New countries have moved ahead of some Western democracies in the fifth annual Reporters Without Borders Worldwide Press Freedom Index, issued today, while the most repressive countries are still the same ones.

"Unfortunately nothing has changed in the countries that are the worst predators of press freedom," the organisation said, "and journalists in North Korea, Eritrea, Turkmenistan, Cuba, Burma and China are still risking their life or imprisonment for trying to keep us informed. These situations are extremely serious and it is urgent that leaders of these countries accept criticism and stop routinely cracking down on the media so harshly.

"Each year new countries in less-developed parts of the world move up the Index to positions above some European countries or the United States. This is good news and shows once again that, even though very poor, countries can be very observant of freedom of expression. Meanwhile the steady erosion of press freedom in the United States, France and Japan is extremely alarming," Reporters Without Borders said.

The three worst violators of free expression – North Korea, bottom of the Index at 168th place, Turkmenistan (167th) and Eritrea (166th) – have clamped down further. The torture death of Turkmenistan journalist Ogulsapar Muradova shows that the country's leader, "President-for-Life" Separmurad Nyazov, is willing to use extreme violence against those who dare to criticise him. Reporters Without Borders is also extremely concerned about a number of Eritrean journalists who have been imprisoned in secret for more than five years. The all-powerful North Korean leader, Kim Jong-il, also continues to totally control the media.

Northern European countries once again come top of the Index, with no recorded censorship, threats, intimidation or physical reprisals in Finland, Ireland, Iceland and the Netherlands, which all share first place.

Deterioration in the United States and Japan, with France also slipping

The United States (53rd) has fallen nine places since last year, after being in 17th position in the first year of the Index, in 2002. Relations between the media and the Bush administration sharply deteriorated after the president used the pretext of "national security" to regard as suspicious any journalist who questioned his "war on terrorism." The zeal of federal courts which, unlike those in 33 US states, refuse to recognise the media's right not to reveal its sources, even threatens journalists whose investigations have no connection at all with terrorism.

Freelance journalist and blogger Josh Wolf was imprisoned when he refused to hand over his video archives. Sudanese cameraman Sami al-Haj, who works for the pan-Arab broadcaster *Al-Jazeera*, has been held without trial since June 2002 at the US military base at Guantanamo, and *Associated Press* photographer Bilal Hussein has been held by US authorities in Iraq since April this year.

France (35th) slipped five places during the past year, to make a loss of 24 places in five years. The increase in searches of media offices and journalists' homes is very worrying for media organisations and trade unions. Autumn 2005 was an especially bad time for French journalists, several of whom were physically attacked or threatened during a trade union dispute involving privatisation of the Corsican firm SNCM and during violent demonstrations in French city suburbs in November.

Rising nationalism and the system of exclusive press clubs (*kishas*) threatened democratic gains in Japan, which fell 14 places to 51st. The newspaper *Nihon Keizai* was firebombed and several journalists physically attacked by far-right activists (*uyoku*).

Fallout from the row over the "Mohammed cartoons"

Denmark (19th) dropped from joint first place because of serious threats against the authors of the Mohammed cartoons published there in autumn 2005. For the first time in recent years in a country that is very observant of civil liberties, journalists had to have police protection due to threats against them because of their work.

Yemen (149th) slipped four places, mainly because of the arrest of several journalists and closure of newspapers that reprinted the cartoons. Journalists were harassed for the same reason in Algeria (126th), Jordan (109th), Indonesia (103rd) and India (105th).

But except for Yemen and Saudi Arabia (161st), all the Arab peninsula countries considerably improved their rank. Kuwait (73rd) kept its place at the top of the group, just ahead of the United Arab Emirates (77th) and Qatar (80th).

Newcomers to the top ranks

Two countries moved into the Index's top 20 for the first time. Bolivia (16th) was best-placed among less-developed countries and during the year its journalists enjoyed the same level of freedom as colleagues in Canada or Austria. But the growing polarisation between state-run and privately-owned media and between supporters and opponents of President Evo Morales could complicate the situation.

Bosnia-Herzegovina (19th) continued its gradual rise up the Index since the end of the war in ex-Yugoslavia and is now placed above its European Union member-state neighbours Greece (32nd) and Italy (40th).

Panama (39th) is enjoying political peace which has helped the growth of a free and vigorous media and the country moved up 27 places over the year.

War, the destroyer of press freedom

Lebanon has fallen from 56th to 107th place in five years, as the country's media continues to suffer from the region's poisonous political atmosphere, with a series of bomb attacks in 2005 and Israeli military attacks this year. The Lebanese media – some of the freest and most experienced in the Arab world – desperately need peace and guarantees of security. The inability of the Palestinian Authority (134th) to maintain stability in its territories and the behaviour of Israel (135th) outside its borders seriously threaten freedom of expression in the Middle East.

Things are much the same in Sri Lanka, which ranked 51st in 2002, when there was peace, but has now sunk to 141st because fighting between government and rebel forces has resumed in earnest. Dozens of Tamil journalists have been physically attacked after being accused by one side or the other of being biased against them.

Press freedom in Nepal (159th) has shifted according to the state of the fighting that has disrupted the country for several years. The “democratic revolution” and the revolt against the monarchy in April this year led immediately to more basic freedoms and the country should gain a lot of ground in next year’s Index.

Disparities in the Americas

Three journalists were killed in each of Colombia (131st) and Mexico (139th). A Mexican reporter also disappeared along the US border, where drug-traffickers threaten the media. Cuba (165th) remains the world’s second biggest prison for journalists, with 24 in jail, and still does not allow an independent media.

The other surprise, along with Bolivia’s good position, was the slipping of Brazil (to 75th place) and Argentina (to 76th). One journalist was killed in Brazil over the past year and physical attacks on local media are still numerous. Relations between Argentina’s national media and the presidency are still very bad and cutting off state subsidies is no longer the only way used to cow media outlets. Suspensions and dismissal of journalists are sometimes the result of direct pressure by politicians. The atmosphere is still tense in Peru (113th) and in Venezuela (115th), where the consequences of the “media war” between supporters of opponents of President Hugo Chávez persist.

Changes of ruler are sometimes good for press freedom, as in the case of Haiti, which has risen from 125th to 87th place in two years after the flight into exile of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide in early 2004. Several murders of journalists remain unpunished but violence against the media has abated.

Except for Guatemala (90th), Central America as a whole has good rankings despite the gap between countries such as Costa Rica (29th), Panama (39th) and El Salvador (41st), and Honduras (64th) and Nicaragua (69th). The few physical attacks on journalists also shows that self-censorship is at work.

Reporters Without Borders compiled the Index by asking the 14 freedom of expression organisations that are its partners worldwide, its network of 130 correspondents, as well as journalists, researchers, jurists and human rights activists, to answer 50 questions about press freedom in their countries. The Index covers 168 nations. Others were not included for lack of data about them.

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