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Worldwide Press Freedom Index 2006

NORTH KOREA, TURKMENISTAN, ERITREA THE WORST VIOLATORS OF PRESS FREEDOM

The United States and Japan slip further Seven Asian countries among the bottom 20

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.

China (163rd) has dropped four places. The country’s media outlets are more numerous and aggressive now, but repression, carried out jointly by the government departments of propaganda and public security, has increased. The government of the world’s most populous country stresses that it wants to keep its monopoly on all news, mainly through the state-run *Xinhua* news agency. Censorship has been stepped up, penalties increased, many news websites shut down and physical attacks have escalated. One journalist was killed by police.

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.

Asia trails behind

Seven Asian countries are in the bottom 20 in the Index and none in the top 20.

The continent's dictatorships stepped up their repression over the past year. Burma (164th) slipped another place, with seven journalists imprisoned, 11 arrested and prior censorship maintained. Pakistan (157th), despite fairly outspoken media outlets, saw kidnappings of journalists and physical attacks by police or intelligence agents. Vietnam (155th) moved up three places, though it continued to stifle freedom of expression online. Laos (156th) remained in the same position, with its media obeying the information ministry's orders.

Some of the worst-ranked countries fell even lower. Singapore (146th) slipped six places because of new legal action by the government against foreign media. The Philippines (142nd) was three places down with continuing murders of journalists and increased legal harassment, including by President Gloria Arroyo's husband. Bangladesh (137th) moved up slightly, with fewer journalists killed, though more than 80 cases of censorship were recorded.

The young democracies of East Timor (83rd) and Mongolia (86th) tumbled some way down the Index due to physical attacks and threats against journalists.

The continent's best performers

New Zealand (18th), South Korea (31st) and Australia (35th) scored best in the region, but Australia lost ground because of anti-terrorist laws potentially dangerous for journalists.

Taiwan (43rd) continues to move up and is now just behind Spain. Hong Kong (58th) fell back though some of its media continued to be very free and the Internet is not censored at all. Vandalism against the daily paper *Epoch Times* and a parcel bomb sent to a journalist made some fear further attacks.

Bhutan (98th) rose furthest (44 places) with the appearance of the small kingdom's first privately-owned newspaper.

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. 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).

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).

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.

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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