

Monday 23 October 2006

## Worldwide Press Freedom Index 2006

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

#### **France, the United States and Japan slip further Gaps widen inside the European Union**

---

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 168<sup>th</sup> place, Turkmenistan (167<sup>th</sup>) and Eritrea (166<sup>th</sup>) – 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 recorded 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 (53<sup>rd</sup>) has fallen nine places since last year, after being in 17<sup>th</sup> 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 (35<sup>th</sup>) 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 51<sup>st</sup>. 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 (19<sup>th</sup>) 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 (149<sup>th</sup>) 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 (126<sup>th</sup>), Jordan (109<sup>th</sup>), Indonesia (103<sup>rd</sup>) and India (105<sup>th</sup>).

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

### **Gaps widen inside the European Union**

The first 15 countries in the Index are all members of the European Union (EU), except for Norway (6<sup>th</sup>) and Switzerland (8<sup>th</sup>), and most of the leaders are still northern European states.

Among the 25 EU member-countries, Poland (58<sup>th</sup>) remains in lowest position because of an increase in censorship. Prison sentences and fines for defamation and insults to a person's dignity or religious feelings are common. An attempt to punish the newspaper *Tageszeitung* for "publicly insulting a state institution" after it printed a satirical article about President Lech Kaczynski is typical of the efforts to control the media by the Catholic/conservative coalition that came to power in November 2005.

Poland shared 58<sup>th</sup> place with Romania, whose rise in the Index shows that present or future membership of the EU is having a good effect on freedom of expression in Eastern Europe. Romania decriminalised defamation in June 2006.

Germany fell to 23<sup>rd</sup> place after a series of incidents, including admission by the state intelligence service of its illegal surveillance of the media for more than a decade, prosecution of two journalists of the magazine *Cicero* for "revealing confidential information," death threats to a cartoonist on the newspaper *Tagesspiegel* and problems of access to data since passage of a freedom of information act (*Informationsfreiheitsgesetz*). Switzerland (8<sup>th</sup>) slipped seven places, mainly due to prosecution of two media outlets under article 293 of the criminal code that punishes "publication of secret official debates."

The end of the Berlusconi era saw a slight improvement in Italy's position (to 40<sup>th</sup>), mainly due to repeated criticism of the then prime minister's abuse of broadcasting time during the April 2006 parliamentary election campaign. Spain fell one place (to 41<sup>st</sup>) due to passage by the Catalanian government of a restrictive broadcasting law.

### **Repressive trend in former Soviet bloc countries but methods vary**

The ex-USSR performs worst for press freedom among European countries. The situation in Russia (147<sup>th</sup>) and Belarus (151<sup>st</sup>) has not improved. Russia, which suffers from a basic lack of democracy, continues slowly but steadily dismantling the free media, with industrial groups close to President Vladimir Putin buying up nearly all independent media outlets and with passage of a law discouraging NGO activity.

Each year several journalists are murdered in Russia with complete impunity. The person who ordered the July 2004 killing in Moscow of Paul Klebnikov, editor of the Russian edition of *Forbes* magazine, remains publicly unknown. The murder of investigative journalist Anna Politkovskaya in early October 2006 is a poor omen for the coming year.

In Central Asia, President Islam Karimov continues to rule Uzbekistan (155<sup>th</sup>) Soviet-style more harshly than ever since the May 2005 uprising in Andijan. It has been hard for foreign journalists to get entry visas since the regime began classing them as troublemakers or terrorists in February 2006 and the offices of correspondents for the *BBC* and *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty* were closed. Beatings and arrests continued and independent journalist Djamshid Karimov, the president's nephew, was put in a mental hospital in Samarkand without explanation and without being allowed visits from his family.

### **Newcomers to the top ranks**

Two countries moved into the Index's top 20 for the first time. Bolivia (16<sup>th</sup>) 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 (19<sup>th</sup>) 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 (32<sup>nd</sup>) and Italy (40<sup>th</sup>).

Ghana (34<sup>th</sup>) rose 32 places to become fourth in Africa behind the continent's three traditional leaders – Benin (23<sup>rd</sup>), Namibia (26<sup>th</sup>) and Mauritius (32<sup>nd</sup>). Economic conditions are still difficult for the Ghanaian media but it is no longer threatened by the authorities.

Panama (39<sup>th</sup>) 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 56<sup>th</sup> to 107<sup>th</sup> 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 (134<sup>th</sup>) to maintain stability in its territories and the behaviour of Israel (135<sup>th</sup>) outside its borders seriously threaten freedom of expression in the Middle East.

Things are much the same in Sri Lanka, which ranked 51<sup>st</sup> in 2002, when there was peace, but has now sunk to 141<sup>st</sup> 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 (159<sup>th</sup>) 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.

### **Welcome changes of regime**

Changes of ruler are sometimes good for press freedom, as in the case of Haiti, which has risen from 125<sup>th</sup> to 87<sup>th</sup> 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.

Togo (66<sup>th</sup>) has risen 29 places since the death of President Gnassingbe Eyadema in February 2005, the accession to power of his son and internationally-backed efforts to make peace with the opposition.

A coup in Mauritania in August 2005 ended the heavy censorship of the local media and the country has risen to 77<sup>th</sup> position after being 138<sup>th</sup> in 2004, one of the biggest improvements in the 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.*

5 rue Geoffroy-Marie - 75009 Paris – Tel : 33 1 44 83 84 84 – Fax : 33 1 45 23 11 51  
europe@rsf.org – For more:  [www.rsf.org](http://www.rsf.org)