



# Southern China International MUN

*Human Rights Council: On measures to ensure the protection of press freedom under targeted threats and violence.*

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## 1. Description of the Issue

### 1.1 History of the Issue

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) guarantees everyone the right to freedom of expression “without interference and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers”, forming the cornerstone for press freedom and accountable governance<sup>28</sup>. Journalists serve the public by reporting the truth with independence, accuracy, and accountability, and hold the power to reveal injustice and inequality. However, when press workers report on sensitive information such as government corruption, war, and illegal activities, they often face intentional attacks from those affected, aimed at silencing their work. These targeted threats and violence include but are not limited to direct assassinations, kidnapping, torture, arbitrary detention, and legal harassment<sup>24</sup>. Since these attacks can occur in any country, it is essential for states to develop comprehensive and effective solutions to protect press freedom and solidify the foundation of democracy and justice<sup>26</sup>.

The Swedish Freedom of the Press Ordinance of 1766 is often seen as the first legal protection for press freedom, as it abolished the previous censorship and provided Swedish citizens the access to public documents<sup>12</sup>. The First Amendment of the US Constitution (1791) also stated that the “Congress shall make no law... abridging the freedom of speech, or the press”<sup>6</sup>. This right is reaffirmed in court cases like *New York Times Co. v. United States*, where the Supreme Court eventually ruled for the newspaper, upholding press freedom against the Nixon administration’s censorship on the publication of the “Pentagon Papers”<sup>21</sup>. After World War II, the freedom of expression and press eventually earned global recognition and were enshrined in the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)**, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948 in Paris.

While many countries have treated press freedom as a common good, the censorship and targeted threats towards press workers have not completely disappeared. In the late 20th century, an increase in decolonization wars and ideological conflicts resulted in more journalists being targeted as enemies. Governments and their opponents persecuted journalists in order to suppress information with their propaganda, with examples like Argentina’s civic-military dictatorship killing “nearly a hundred journalists in an effort to impose Christian values” in the 1970s, and Algeria’s armed fundamentalist groups murdering “more than fifty reporters...in a campaign for Islamic rule” in the 1990s<sup>29 11</sup>. This period is marked by a rise in censorship, detention, and disappearances, and violence against press workers began to shift to politically strategic purposes.

The issue of press freedom gradually elevated from the national scale to the international crisis, revealing an insufficiency in legal protection, legal enforcement, and transparency. In consequence, international Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) such as but not limited to **Reporters Without Borders (RSF)** and **Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)** emerged, and were dedicated to defending media freedom. Reporters Without Borders, specifically, launched its **World Press Freedom Index** in 2002, and it soon became a leading international barometer of

press freedom<sup>1</sup>. This index evaluates 180 countries based on five indicators of political context, legal framework, economic conditions, sociocultural environment, and journalist safety, providing a useful reference for analyzing press freedom in the world.<sup>18</sup>

The United Nations had also cooperated with the governments, NGOs, media houses, and other stakeholders, and took noteworthy actions in combating press freedom violations. One key milestone was the implementation of the **UN Plan of Action on Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity** on 12 April 2012, which focused on six holistic approaches: raising awareness, standard setting and policy making, monitoring and reporting, capacity building, research, and coalition building<sup>25</sup>. Through addressing the 3 aspects of prevention, protection, and prosecution, the United Nations aimed to achieve **Sustainable Development Goal 16.10** with a high degree of accountability<sup>17 27</sup>. Moreover, multiple programs and initiatives have been executed, with instances of UNESCO taking the role of collecting and monitoring killings of journalists globally through the **Observatory of Killed Journalists**, and the UN initiating May 3rd as the World Press Freedom Day for public advocacy.

## 1.2 Recent Developments

New forms of violence and intimidation against journalists have evolved in the 21st century, showing a more sophisticated trend in combating the issue of loss of press freedom. A conspicuous issue in recent years is the **increase in journalist deaths and physical assaults in conflict zones**. According to RSF, Palestine is the most dangerous place for journalists and has the highest death toll over the past five years in the world. Media workers are no longer seen as neutral observers; they often face the same or even higher risks as the people they cover<sup>14</sup>. The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) has updated its final Killed list for 2025 and recorded a total of 128 media workers killed, with 56 of them occurring as a result of the conflict in Gaza. In the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, 9 journalists were killed in 2025, with a worrying trend of the use of drones in targeting journalists. A lot of those who engaged in such crimes went unpunished, which is an injustice to the victims' families, a provocation to further threats, and an obstruction to sustainable peace.

Governments are increasingly using laws against the media, and authoritarian countries like China and North Korea continue to repress the independent press. For instance, SLAPPs (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation) have increased since 2015, aiming to silence journalists through harassment, intimidation, and a drain on financial resources during legal proceedings. Governments also prosecute journalists for “fake news,” especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, claiming disinformation<sup>22</sup>. **Counter-terrorism and national security laws** further target critical journalists, particularly those covering mass separatist movements and ethnic minorities<sup>22</sup>. Such laws inflict severe physical, emotional, and financial harm on journalists, stifling independent reporting.

As the internet and social media become more advanced, control over the ideas of media professionals on digital platforms is gradually increasing. Cases of online surveillance by state and non-state actors on journalists' online activities have been seen, which can cause psychological pressure and lead to **self-censorship** of journalists<sup>9</sup>. **Spyware attacks** are used to download content spy communications from journalists' digital devices, and governments utilize it for national security and law enforcement, without public accountability. As a result, journalists are increasingly unable to report on national security-related issues in secure and private environments<sup>23</sup>. In many authoritarian regimes and weakening democracies, journalists' online activities could be subjected to offences including “cyberterrorism” and “online hate speech”, which threaten media workers to continue their work. Cybercrime legislations likewise grant investigators extensive powers, resulting in limited procedural safeguards for journalists.

Apart from physical dangers, media workers are also dealing with **online harassment**, such as

trolling, doxing, mass harassment campaigns, and even death threats through their social media platforms. Women journalists and journalists of color are at particular risk. According to UNESCO, “73 percent of women journalists surveyed said they had been threatened, intimidated and insulted online in connection with their work”<sup>24</sup>. Some of these attacks directly involve the journalists’ underage relatives and post private information like home addresses, further creating an unsafe media working environment. These online threats have now crossed beyond national borders on digital platforms. While each individual negative comment may not violate the legislation, its cumulative effect causes serious physical and mental harm to journalists.

Furthermore, there has been an increase in threats towards foreign journalists. Visas are often denied in authoritarian states like China, North Korea, Iran, and Vietnam, and severe limitation was proposed recently in the United States under the Trump administration<sup>5</sup>, restricting the reporting areas of journalists. Foreign correspondents’ families are also targeted by threats. As a case in point, Iran is escalating its persecution of the families of BBC’s Persian staff, including interrogations, travel bans, and passport confiscations<sup>15</sup>. In conflict zones like Gaza, international journalists are denied access or only allowed to report under supervised excursions, which ineffectively document the entirety of the war<sup>3</sup>. These transnational repressions are direct assaults on press freedom, and recent developments have demonstrated that threats to press freedom have become more frequent, complex, and worldwide.

### **Key Terms**

**Public sphere** – The public sphere is a space in social life where individuals come together to freely discuss and identify societal problems, thus forming public opinion. This communication should be as free as possible and not restricted by the state. The media mostly play a crucial role in supporting and sustaining communication in the public sphere, allowing diverse ideas to be discussed and heard. Without press freedom, the public sphere will lose its public engagement and accountability, ultimately undermining the concept of democracy<sup>8</sup>.

**Self-censorship** – According to the Cambridge Dictionary, self-censorship refers to the idea of controlling what one individual says or does in order to avoid annoying or offending others, but without being told officially that such control is necessary<sup>4</sup>. In the context of press freedom, self-censorship happens when media workers voluntarily alter or suppress their own reporting, out of fear of the negative consequences like legal action or job loss, therefore hindering vital information from reaching the public.

**Chilling Effect** – Similar to self-censorship, chilling effect describes the phenomenon where individuals (journalists) refrain from engaging in certain information and expressions, due to the fear of negative consequences. These negative consequences are usually associated with vague or overly-broad laws<sup>13</sup>.

**Impunity** – Impunity in press freedom means that crimes against journalists are free from punishment, harm, or losses, as a result of weakening institutions, which enables further violence to silence reporting.

**Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation (SLAPP)** – SLAPP is used when private individuals or entities sue journalists on grounds of defamation or data protection laws. Its objective is not the result of the lawsuit but to silence voices through harassment, intimidation, pressure, and the expensive costs to address the legal filings. This method typically takes advantage of a power disparity between the plaintiff and the defendant<sup>22</sup>.

**Spyware** – Spyware is malware designed to access an electronic device without authorization, and seize its information and online activities<sup>23</sup>. When used on journalists, spyware can act as a method of online surveillance by governments and put journalists’ sources at risk of exploitation, eventually leading to self-censorship.

**Transnational repression** – Transnational repression occurs when some governments reach across their borders to silence, intimidate, harass, or harm their diasporas and exiles, through means such as assassinations, illegal deportations, and family intimidation<sup>7</sup>.

## **2. Emphasis of the Discourse**

## **2.1 Right Wing Approach**

Although some states may lean toward either right- or left-wing approaches, there is no clear, distinctive line that distinguishes whether a country is entirely liberal or conservative. Most governments instead reflect a blend of political beliefs, influenced by different priorities and contexts.

Traditionally, right-wing countries emphasize ideas like national identity and security, traditional values, sovereignty, and established hierarchies. They support responsible journalism through strong legal frameworks and government oversight, and worry that unregulated media can spread misinformation. Press freedom groups often criticize right-wing approaches as favoring pro-government news outlets and starving public independent media, but this could be triggered by situational contexts. This perspective can be seen in certain European countries, like Hungary, where independent medias are regulated by Orban's administration to protect national interests<sup>20</sup>. In the end, the right-wing approach does not directly reject press freedom but prioritizes state security.

## **2.2 Left Wing Approach**

Leftist approach, on the other hand, emphasizes equality, social justice, and protection from state violence. It often roots freedom of expression as an unchangeable human right. A classical liberal interpretation of press freedom is that "media should serve to protect the individual from the abuses of the state"<sup>16</sup>, advocating for a diverse and independent media landscape instead of state-censorship. Left-wing governments often enact policies to break up large media corporations to foster pluralism, increase local news, and prevent the media from being unduly influenced by specific groups and the government.

Left-wing approaches also tend to acknowledge the financial vulnerabilities of news industries and give out financial support or public subsidies to sustain quality reporting. According to RSF, "economic pressure is also a major, more insidious problem" in 2025, prompting liberalist governments to fund public news outlets in order to counter commercial pressures. Additionally, the left-wing approach also advocates for the construction of the "safety net" for journalists through robust legal frameworks and continuous efforts in combating impunity. This approach is reflected in Nordic countries like Norway, where press freedom is constitutionally protected, and politicians generally avoid influencing editorial boards<sup>19</sup>.

Critics, however, argue that left-wing state funding may increase the media's reliance on governments and become a method of state control. Another criticism is that insufficient oversight will allow disinformation and "fake news" to spread, leading to a loss of public trust. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that there is no inherently right or wrong viewpoint but just the beliefs of two contrasting political ideologies.

## **2.3 Stance of International Organizations**

The United Nations, specifically the branch of UNESCO and OHCHR, has been playing a crucial role in leading the protection of press freedom. The UN has acknowledged that "journalism is fundamental for sustainable development, human rights protection and democratic consolidation", and therefore developed a global strategy named the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity, coordinated by UNESCO, to promote the "free flow of information"<sup>17</sup>. Notable features of this plan include its emphasis on monitoring and reporting, its focus on capacity building, and its commitment to combating impunity. According to the United

Nations, “impunity rate down by 9 percentage points from 95% to 86% in ten years” since the first adoption, illustrating the long-term effectiveness of this plan<sup>17</sup>.

Moreover, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has been mandated to promote the rights of journalists and media workers. It has established the Special Rapporteur to protect press freedom in accordance with international human rights law and standards, and submits an annual report to the Council. At the same time, non-governmental organizations uphold their mission to defend freedom of information. Among them, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) monitors abuses, advocates for policy reform, and raises awareness through its press freedom indices, which have proven beneficial in informing both policymakers and the public.

## **2.4 Stance of developed countries**

Developing countries, indicated by high quality of life, developed economy, and advanced infrastructure, usually take the stance of advocating for press freedom and journalist safety on an international scale, but struggle to solve the arising threats domestically. There have been ongoing debates over the expansion of disinformation and online regulation. One characteristic trend for developed countries is the government’s increase in funds towards the technology sector, which results in massive GDP growth and job creation. Financial instability in newsrooms, therefore, led to shutdowns and reduced local coverage, thus creating more “news deserts”<sup>10</sup>. Another aspect is that developed countries have noticed the influx of fake news, primarily driven by the use of social media. Fake news has dismantled public trust and worsened the environment for independent journalism, raising concerns over digital governance.

## **2.5 Stance of developing countries**

In contrast to developed countries, developing countries may have a more complicated approach to the issue of protecting press freedom against targeted threats, according to their political environments and economic conditions. They often face challenges such as weak institutions, conflict, and poor infrastructure, due to immaturity in economics and historical exploitation. Governments also fear that in certain post-conflict states, sensitive media could inflame tensions again, acknowledging the fragility of press freedom.

The stance of developing countries usually highlights the need for gradual reforms, taking small steps at a time. This would ensure that local conditions are taken into account when policies are implemented, instead of boldly following international standards. Developing countries also emphasize the need for technical assistance or monetary resources from more developed nations or international bodies, in order to fully catch up with the rapidly changing world.

## **3. Possible Solutions**

### **3.1 In Favor of Developed Countries**

Developed countries, usually with a solid economic and political foundation, could be in favor of solutions that strengthen international protection for journalists. They could publicly champion support for the UN Plan of Action and the UNESCO monitoring mechanism, and advocate for stronger reporting standards. Developed countries could also take on the leadership roles and host regular discussions on journalist safety.

Additionally, developed nations could divide their financial resources to fund journalist safety

training. This includes training judges to investigate legal cases closely and educating news workers on how to respond to online harassment. The financial resources could also be used to support digital security tools aimed at combating the rising issue of online harassment.

Finally, understanding the appropriate role of the state in regulating media without undermining freedom of expression is important to developed countries. Therefore, another solution would be to review domestic surveillance laws and counter-terrorism legislation, and ensure that these laws are only used for the right purpose. This would effectively assist in the developed countries' credibility in promoting press freedom internationally.

### **3.2 In Favor of Developing Countries**

For developing countries, gradual and flexible solutions are more favorable. One of the solutions could be legal policy reforms and institutional development. Establishing judicial independence is crucial, as it prevents governments vulnerable to corruption or polarization from influencing the media. Judicial reform also ensures that violence against journalists is thoroughly investigated and prosecuted, thereby reducing impunity<sup>30</sup>.

Moreover, developing countries may reach out to international cooperations or developed countries to receive assistance on capacity building and technical infrastructure. Voluntary partnerships could include the United Nations or other regional press freedom bodies. This approach grants developing countries access to safety trainings, funding, and best practices, which would generate economic benefits and slowly close the gaps with developed countries.

It must be noted that while economic development influences state behaviour, the ultimate difference in approaches lies in how democratic a country's government is. Democratic governments are generally more open to protect journalists and support press freedom, whereas less democratic governments often prioritize control, directly shaping the type of solutions they are willing to implement.

### **4. Keep in Mind the Following**

When researching your country's stance on this topic, make sure to investigate the domestic media landscape and legal framework governing press freedom at a national level. Then, expand the analysis to the international scale and consider how your country engages with international efforts to protect journalists. Lastly, evaluate the practical limitations and challenges different countries may face when implementing press freedom measures, such as in the contexts of political instability and economic constraints. Some questions to guide you through your research are the following:

1. *What legal protections for press freedom exist in your country, and how effective have they been in reality?*
2. *Does your country have existing policies addressing threats and violence against journalists, and what measures have been taken to ensure accountability and combat impunity?*
3. *What challenges does your country face when strengthening the protection of press freedom?*
4. *In what ways are your country's domestic policies aligning with some existing international frameworks on press freedom protection established by intergovernmental organizations?*
5. *What preventive measures does your country support to reduce threats against journalists before they occur?*
6. *How does your country define the appropriate balance between the state's national*

## **5. Evaluation**

Protection of press freedom under targeted threats and violence has been an increasingly urgent issue over the years and still faces new challenges. While freedom of expression has been recognized as a universal human right, physical assaults, legal intimidation, and digital harassment in the new era persist across conflict and non-conflict states. Although all countries are affected by this issue in varying degrees, it is especially troubling for developing countries, which are often in political instability and lack legal frameworks and transparency. Addressing this issue will require the delegates to form a careful balance that respects state regulations and safeguards press freedom.

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