

2 May - Westminster UNA co-hosts World Press Freedom Day meeting in parliament

To mark the thirtieth anniversary of World Press Freedom Day, Westminster UNA and the Centre for Freedom of the Media (CFOM) at the University of Sheffield, together with the Commonwealth Journalists Association and the Association of European Journalists, hosted a meeting in parliament titled 'Towards Press Freedom, new hope or false dawn?'

In his introduction the meeting's moderator William Horsley, CFOM's international director and UK Chair of the Association of European Journalists, referred to the historic anniversary to be marked at the UN in New York the following day. Meanwhile, here in the UK, he reminded his audience that the University of Sheffield also hosts the UNESCO chair for Media Freedom worldwide, underlying the UN-wide commitment to the safety and journalists and international recognition of the dangers of states assuming a sense of impunity.

Mr Horsley introduced Karuna Nundy, Advocate at the Supreme Court of India and a member of the High Level Panel of Legal Experts in Media Freedom set up in 2019 jointly by the governments of the UK and Canada to advise the then newly-formed the [Media Freedom Coalition](#) which today numbers fifty nations as members. In her recorded address, Ms Nundy spoke to the theme of human rights, noting that the right to know is the 'flip side' of the right of speech. She cited examples where the right to know is the test but warned that the freedom of speech is 'in crisis' because fake news and opinion had taken the place of 'edited fact that is as close to the truth as can be'. Truth tellers had been persecuted merely for doing their jobs as journalists, and that was why the UK and others had set up the Coalition of countries committed to defending media freedom and the rule of law four years ago. The High-Level Panel has published four Advisory Reports for the attention of states, which cover the use of targeted sanctions to protect journalists; strengthening consular support to journalists who face prosecution or jail abroad; providing safe refuge including emergency visas to journalists at risk; and promoting more effective investigations into unresolved killings and other abuses against journalists. The reports can be accessed [here](#). In concluding, she referred to her report on the need for reform or repeal of Blasphemy laws which was about to be launched in New York.

[Amberin Zaman](#), the UK-based Turkish-born international correspondent for Al-Monitor, named by the Coalition of Women Journalists as a press freedom Hero, reported graphically on efforts by the Turkish authorities to interfere with her work down the years. Last year, after she met Turkey's opposition party leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu in London, she was the target of a massive wave of online abuse, harassment and death threats on social media platforms. The widespread dissemination of death threats and explicit warnings of rape and sexual violence, accompanied by lurid and unfounded attacks on her reputation, raise acute fears for the journalist's personal safety. Amberin identified the explosion of threats of violence and hate speech directed against journalists on unregulated social media platforms as the most significant reason for the dramatic worsening of the environment for independent media reporting in recent years.

Maria Ordzhonikidze, Director of the Justice for Journalists Foundation, outlined the variety of ways in which independent media is silenced today, even in more civilised parts of the world. These include:

1] Disinformation that includes propaganda and the production of fakes and lies. She stated that social media platforms, with their algorithms programmed to show the content that is easy to monetise, over the one that is truthful but not as exciting, are the battlefields of this and other information wars.

2] SLAPPs (strategic litigation against public participation), a mighty tool to silence voices seeking to unveil corruption and other crimes by rich and powerful actors. London continues to be the most attractive jurisdiction for SLAPPers, effectively bullying into silence UK and international journalists.

3] Shutting down independent voices, limiting public access to alternative sources of information. This is done by the abuse of national security rhetoric as well as laws that allow to block foreign and independent media such as ‘foreign agent law’ or ‘undesirable organisations’. Maria Ordzhonikidze’s presentation can be read in full [here](#).

Kingsley Abbott, Director of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies and formerly Director of Global Accountability and International Justice for the International Commission of Jurists, focussed on the misuse of the law to suppress and criminalise free speech, and the misuse of the concept of the rule of law to justify it. As evidence, a recent survey revealed that 50% of nearly 500 journalists said that they or their media organisation were currently facing legal threats. In discussing these trends with Burmese lawyers, the junta’s actions were explained by its need for apparent legitimacy, both inside and outside the country, particularly in the face of upcoming elections. This, it argues, shows it is merely applying Burmese law in accordance with the rule of law. He cited cases in Thailand and Cambodia where the claimed exercise of the Rule of Law is no more than the Rule by Law. The “weaponization” of the law in this way is precisely the opposite of the Rule of Law.

His three recommendations were firstly, to use international human rights law to push back on this trend. Secondly, to strengthen justice sectors as we need to encourage states to ratify the key human rights treaties. And thirdly, to protect and support civil society which plays a key role in advancing human rights.

There followed lively conversation with members of the audience. The meeting was hosted by Lord Black of Brentford, Deputy Chairman of the Telegraph Media Group, and Chairman of the Commonwealth Press Union Media Trust.