

House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Briefing
on
IMPRISONED WRITERS

Monday, November 14, 2022 – 1:30 p.m.
2255 Rayburn House Office Building and Virtual via Cisco WebEx

Statement of Nadine Farid Johnson
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PEN America

Good afternoon everyone. We are grateful to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission and the Senate Human Rights Caucus for sponsoring and organizing this briefing on imprisoned writers and the right to freedom of expression. And we are thankful to you Chairman and your co-chairman Congressman Smith as well as the Senate Human Rights Caucus Senator Coons and Senator Tillis for hosting this briefing and for your unwavering support for human rights.

As the Congressman mentioned, my name is Nadine Farid Johnson. I'm the Managing Director of PEN America in Washington and Free Expression Programs. PEN America stands at the intersection of literature and human rights to protect free expression in the United States and worldwide. Our mission is to unite writers and our allies to celebrate creative expression and defend the liberties that make it possible.

We are commemorating this year, the 42nd Day of the Imprisoned Writer. On this day, we highlight the cases of writers who are imprisoned or at risk and we call for urgent international action on their behalf. Each commemoration is marked by an empty chair symbolizing a writer who is imprisoned which prevents their attendance, and as the Chairman noted, today's empty chair is commemorating Alaa Abd El-Fattah, who remains imprisoned in Egypt and is on day 226 of a hunger strike.

The trend of detaining writers for their free expressions continues upward and our work at PEN America has shown that as of this year, there are at least 277 writers that are imprisoned by 36 different countries. By detaining writers, governments not only deprive them of their individual rights of free speech but also rob the broader public of access to their innovative and influential voices of dissent, criticism, creativity, and conscience, which of course is the point of seeking to silence them. As the world confronts the backsliding of democracy and civil liberties, mobilization by civil society and free governments, to defend writers' free expression is all the more imperative.

As Russia continues to wage an unprovoked war of aggression in Ukraine, PEN America and the Lantos Commission are seeking a sponsoring member for 14 journalists from Crimea who were imprisoned for their activities following Russia's illegal annexation of the peninsula as part of the Defending Freedoms Project and we look forward to hopefully securing a sponsor soon.

Today, we are delighted and honored to welcome three eminent writers who have joined us to discuss their experiences of state repression even at the hands of US allies, the ongoing threats to writers' freedom of expression in their homelands, and the steps democratic governments can take to counter these threats. Award winning Zimbabwean novelist Tsitsi Dangarembga, Ukrainian writer and journalist, Stanislav Aseyev, and Indian-American columnist, Aatish Taseer.