



**Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission  
and  
The United States Senate Human Rights Caucus**

**Imprisoned Writers**

**Monday, November 14, 2022**

**1:30 – 2:30 p.m.**

**2255 Rayburn House Office Building and Virtual via Cisco WebEx**

**As prepared for delivery**

Good afternoon and thank you for joining us today to mark the Day of the Imprisoned Writer.

I am Jim McGovern, Co-Chair of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission. Today's briefing on imprisoned writers is co-hosted by the Commission and the Senate Human Rights Caucus.

Each year November 15 is set aside to recognize and honor all writers around the world who stand up against repression and defend the fundamental human rights of freedom of expression and the right to information.

Here in the United States, the freedom of speech and of the press is guaranteed in the 1<sup>st</sup> amendment to the constitution.

The right to speak up and speak out is a defining characteristic of our political system that is deeply engrained in our national imagination – even as we sometimes struggle over its limits.

But in many parts of the world, speaking up and speaking out can get people into very serious trouble.

PEN America is one of several organizations that track the unjust detention or imprisonment of writers. During 2021, PEN found that at least 277 writers, academics, and public intellectuals in 36 countries, all around the world, were unjustly held in detention or imprisoned in connection with their writing, their work, or related advocacy. The 10 worst offenders: China, Saudi Arabia, Burma, Iran, Turkey, Egypt, Belarus, Vietnam, India and Eritrea. Many of these countries are considered to be U.S. allies.

Scholars at Risk tracks attacks on communities of higher education. In their report *Free to Think 2021*, they found 111 case of wrongful prosecution or imprisonment of scholars or students between August 1, 2020 and August 31, 2021.

The Committee to Protect Journalists identified [294 journalists](#) imprisoned as of December 1, 2021.

The written word is a powerful thing. It shapes how we see and understand the world.

Writing structures our thinking and makes it possible to debate the critically important issues the world is facing, including the rise of authoritarianism.

Every time a writer gets thrown in jail for doing their work, it's a blow against all of us.

Any time we see a government or a political leader try to control or criminalize speech, it is a sign of that government's or that leader's weakness and fear.

We cannot and must not let repression of writers stand.

Today we are joined by three writers who, unfortunately, can speak from experience about various forms of government retaliation for their work:

- Aatish Taseer of India,
- Tsitsi Dangarembga of Zimbabwe, and
- Stanislav Aseyev of Ukraine.

Alaa Abdul Fattah, from Egypt, we hoped could have been with us today, but he is imprisoned, and we call on the government of Egypt to release him immediately. In the interim, we call on the government of Egypt to make sure he has access to his attorney.

It is outrageous that he or any of you have had to deal with the persecution of the governments of your homelands.

I look forward to hearing their ideas about what more we can all do to support writers threatened with repression.

And I hope that someday soon all of them will be able to live and work in their countries without the fear of unjust imprisonment.

Nadine Farid Johnson, who is the Managing Director of PEN America, will facilitate this discussion. I again want to thank PEN America for their leadership, their advocacy and for shining a light on what is so unjust and cruel and awful in terms of the attacks on journalists and academics. I will now turn this over to Nadine and thank you very much for being here.