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One Hundred and Twelfth Congress

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Statement of Rep. James P. McGovern

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing

“Worldwide Threats to Media Freedom”

2226 Rayburn HOB – Wednesday, July 25, 2012 – 1:00-3:00 P.M.

Good afternoon and welcome. Thank you for attending this important hearing on threats to media freedom worldwide.

I want to thank Danielle Johnson and the staff of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for organizing this hearing. I also want to thank our witnesses for testifying and for everything they do to support the right to free expression.

Media freedom is an invaluable component of an empowered democratic society. Our definitions of media are rapidly expanding, especially with the rise of social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter. No matter what kind of media they turn to, people are empowered when they have access to different sources of information and the ability to participate in a free exchange of ideas. People are also empowered when journalists and bloggers are allowed to expose injustices and abuses of power. Without these freedoms, people cannot hold their governments accountable and demand respect for their rights.

Unfortunately, the media is under attack in many places. Authoritarian regimes in countries including China, Russia, and Iran are developing increasingly sophisticated tools to keep the media under their control and to punish journalists who refuse to toe the official line. Even in some established democracies like Chile, Hungary, and Turkey, ruling parties have been cracking down on unfavorable press coverage. Simply for trying to report the truth, journalists are too often the targets of legal restrictions,

economic pressure, censorship, harassment, threats, unlawful detention, torture, and even murder. And too often, these violations go unpunished.

In this hearing we will examine threats to media freedom from a global perspective, and we will look in depth at three countries where journalists face especially difficult – though varying – conditions: Honduras, Russia, and Turkey.

I am deeply concerned about escalating violence against journalists in Honduras. According to Freedom House, Honduras is the second most dangerous country in the world for journalists, with 19 journalists killed since the 2009 coup. Those who oppose the current government or offend powerful interest groups are consistently targeted with death threats and assassinations. A pervasive culture of impunity facilitates this violence.

In Russia, a lack of accountability for killings of investigative journalists is also a serious problem, as is state control and censorship of most of the mainstream media. While the Internet is touted by the Russian government as a forum for free discussion, the Kremlin has repeatedly manipulated it by censoring content, hacking accounts, and engaging in cyber attacks. Against this backdrop, I am very troubled by Russia's new law on regulating the Internet, which gives Russian authorities even greater leeway to repress online opposition.

Turkish journalists do not generally face the same deadly dangers as journalists in Honduras or Russia, but Turkey has one of the highest numbers of imprisoned journalists in the world. In April, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe reported that 95 Turkish journalists are in jail. The threat of detention for criticizing the government has created a climate of self-censorship among Turkish journalists, undermining freedom of expression in a democracy that is often held up as a model for countries in the Middle East.

This hearing is an opportunity to examine the wide range of threats facing journalists and the media across the globe. Although journalists don't tend to think of themselves this way, they are among the world's most important human rights defenders, and the United States should strongly support their important but often dangerous work.

WITNESSES

I would now like to turn to our witnesses for this afternoon's hearing. Along with their oral testimony, I would like to submit into the Record any written testimony provided by our witnesses today.

I would like to welcome our first witness: Michael H. Posner, Assistant Secretary in the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor at the State Department.

Mr. Posner, you have been a strong defender of media freedom, and I am grateful to you and your colleagues at the State Department for your leadership on this issue.

Mr. Posner – if you would please begin.