

REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS

FOR FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

February 15, 2018
Washington, DC

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) Testimony before Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing: Defending Prisoners of Conscience

By Margaux Ewen, North America Director

I'd first like to thank Congressmen McGovern and Hultgren, and all the members of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for their outstanding work on behalf of prisoners of conscience. As you know, Reporters Without Borders, also known under its French name Reporters Sans Frontières or RSF, is an international non-profit organization defending freedom of information around the world since 1985. Thanks to a local network of correspondents investigating in 130 countries, 12 offices (Paris, Vienna, Brussels, Helsinki, Berlin, Stockholm, Madrid, London, Rio de Janeiro, Taipei, DC) and a consultative status at the UN and UNESCO, RSF is able to have global impact, gather on-the-ground information, conduct major advocacy campaigns, and assist and defend news providers all across the world.

As the great Burmese journalist and politician Win Tin told us after he was released from 19 years in prison for his views, "press freedom is the freedom that allows us to verify the existence of all other freedoms."

At the time of this hearing, a total of 324 journalists, citizen journalists, and media assistants are currently behind bars, according to RSF's figures. Around half of the total number of imprisoned journalists are being held in just five countries. China and Turkey are still the world's two biggest prisons for journalists, followed closely by Syria, Iran, and Vietnam.

The Commission's work, through the Defending Freedoms Project, shines a much-needed light on the imprisonment of news providers around the world. It raises awareness on their case to not only the American people, but to the people of other countries and their governments too,

in the hope that pressure from the United States government will ultimately facilitate their release. RSF must stress that in the current climate of declining press freedom not only in the world's worst authoritarian regimes but also in its democracies, the role of this Commission is more vital now than ever, especially given the current White House's anti-press rhetoric. The world needs to know that the US government still believes in defending press freedom.

RSF has identified several repressive countries across the globe that are currently underrepresented in the project's list of prisoners of conscience.

In the former Soviet Union, we recommend that journalists from Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Russia, and Uzbekistan be added to the list; in the Middle East and North Africa we recommend adding prisoners from Iran, Egypt, and Morocco; in Africa we recommend that Sudan be included; in Asia we recommend adding journalists in Myanmar, Cambodia, and China; and in Latin America, we recommend including Venezuela and Cuba.

Below are some individual cases by country we recommend adding to the Project's list:

Azerbaijan

- RSF proposal: **Seymur Khazi & Afgan Mukhtarly**
 - [Khazi](#), a reporter for the opposition daily *Azadlig*, was arrested on August 29, 2014 and sentenced to five years in prison for "aggravated hooliganism." He was a nominee for RSF's 2016 press freedom prize.
 - [Mukhtarly](#), an investigative journalist and activist, was kidnapped in Georgia on May 29, 2017 where he was exiled and forcibly taken back to Azerbaijan where he was immediately imprisoned. He was accused of "smuggling", "illegal crossing of the border" and "refusal to obey the police". He is diabetic and suffering from hypertension.

Kazakhstan

- [RSF proposal](#): journalist **Yaroslav Golyskin**, has been in prison since May 14, 2015 because he was accused of "blackmail" and "extortion of funds" by the governor of the Pavlodar region, Kanat Bozoumbaev. He was investigating a rape perpetrated in the governor's residence. He decided not to publish his story pending further confirmation and in order to prevent harm to the victim, but this didn't keep him from getting arrested.

Turkmenistan

- [RSF proposal](#): **Saparmamed Nepeskuliev**, a journalist for *Alternative Turkmenistan News*, *RFE / RL*, disappeared on July 7, 2015 and was found three weeks later in a detention center. He was sentenced to three years in prison in a case of drug possession. The trial was closed to the public and Nepeskuliev was denied a lawyer. He is currently the target of a slander campaign by state media, which is responsible for accrediting alleged charges of drug possession against him.

Russia

- RSF proposal: **Igor Rudnikov, Aleksandr Sokolov, and Zhalaudi Geriyev**
 - [Rudnikov](#), editor of *Novye Kolesa*, was arrested on Nov. 1, 2017 and charged with "extortion". Despite a video showing agents of the FSB (Russian secret service) assure their superior that they had hit the reporter, no investigation was conducted on the violence suffered during his arrest. He has been behind bars for over 100 days.
 - Investigative reporter, [Sokolov](#)'s conviction of three-and-a-half years in prison for "extremism" was upheld on appeal on December 21, 2017. Sokolov was arrested on July 27, 2015, guilty of "pursuing the activities of a banned extremist organization".
 - [Geriyev](#), a contributor for the independent news website *Kavkazsky Uzel*, was arrested on April 16, 2016 and was sentenced to three years in prison for "drug possession". The supreme court was given no evidence to support the charge aside from the "confession" that Geriyev made under duress at the time of his arrest and immediately retracted. Geriyev told the court that he was abducted by three men who took him to the woods where they beat him, tortured him and interrogated him. They then confiscated his backpack and took him to a cemetery in the village of Kurchaloi, where they finally extracted his "confession" and placed him under arrest. The attack was dismissed with no action.

Uzbekistan

- RSF proposal: **Yusuf Ruzimuradov & Bobomurod Abdullaev**
 - [Ruzimuradov](#), a journalist for *Erk*, is now one of the longest held journalists in the world since he was arrested in 1999. He was jailed on [anti-state charges and reportedly tortured before his trial](#).
 - [Abdullaev](#), an independent journalist, disappeared on Sept. 27, 2017. Two days later he was found in a detention center, accused of wanting to "overthrow the constitutional order." He is facing up to 20 years in prison.

Iran

- RSF proposal: **Narges Mohammadi + Soheil Arabi**
 - [Mohammadi](#) has been in prison for over 1,000 days. She is a journalist and a spokeswoman for the Center for Human Rights Defenders in Iran. Imprisoned since May 5, 2015, Mohammadi has been sentenced to five years imprisonment for "meeting and conspiracy against the Islamic Republic", one year imprisonment for "propaganda against the regime" and ten years imprisonment for collaborating with the Legam association, which campaigns for the gradual abolition of the death penalty in Iran, a prohibited cause in the country. The journalist must therefore spend 10 years behind bars, despite her very poor state of health because of a lack of access to health care.
 - [Arabi](#), an Iranian photographer and citizen-journalist who was awarded the RSF Press Freedom Prize in 2017, has been held for the past four years for his alleged role in creating a Facebook network that "blasphemed" Islam and criticized the

regime. After being sentenced to three years in prison and 30 lashes, he was retried a few months later and was sentenced to death. The death sentence was eventually overturned and in 2015 he was finally sentenced to seven and a half years in prison. What with being mistreated and recently taking a hunger strike for 52 days, he is now in very poor physical and psychological health.

Egypt

- RSF proposal: **Ismail Alexandrani** and **Shawkan**
 - [Ismail Alexandrani](#) is an independent investigative reporter and researcher who was [arrested on Nov. 29, 2015](#). For two years, his detention has been systematically renewed every 45 days, reaching the limit set by Egyptian law; charges against him were not finalized during the beginning of his detention. He was accused of having published "false information" and belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood. He was nominated for RSF's 2016 Press Freedom Prize.
 - [Mahmoud Abu Zeid](#), also known as Shawkan, a 30-year-old photojournalist, is facing the death penalty for covering the violent dispersal of pro-Morsi protesters on Rabaa al-Adawiya Square by Egyptian law enforcement on August 14, 2013. Shawkan has been in prison for four and a half years as his trial continues to drag on. He urgently needs medical help as he suffers from hepatitis C.

Morocco

- [RSF proposal](#): **Hamid El Mahdaoui**, journalist and director of the Badil.info news site, was arrested on July 25, 2017. He was prosecuted for "instigating a banned demonstration" and sentenced to one year in prison on Sept. 12, 2017 with a fine. Hamid el Mahdaoui is also being prosecuted for "failure to report a crime violating State security" in a Casablanca court. For this count, he faces a sentence ranging from two to five years in prison. He has also faced a second trial for "undermining state security" and started a 14-day hunger strike.

Sudan

- [RSF proposal](#): **Amal Habani**, an award-winning journalist and a reporter for the *Al-Taghyir* news website, was arrested on January 16 by National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) agents while covering a protest in Khartoum against an increase in the price of bread. During the arrest, the agents beat her, causing her to suffer palpitations and breathing problems, and to lose consciousness. She has not been allowed to see a lawyer, although multiple human rights lawyers filed a constitutional appeal describing her arrest and detention as illegal. Members of her family have been allowed to see her but unable to ask about her state of health or if she's been given medicine for her high blood pressure.

Myanmar

- [RSF proposal](#): Two *Reuters* journalists, **Wa Lone** and **Kyaw Soe Oo**, are facing the possibility of 14 years in prison. They were arrested on December 12 2017 for being "in

possession of important secret government documents related to Rakhine State and security forces". They were arrested immediately after receiving documents from mysterious policemen in a restaurant, under the Secrets of State Act. They were attempting to report on the most recent developments in the country's Rohingya crisis.

Cambodia

- [RSF proposal](#): After the arrests of two former *Radio Free Asia (RFA)* journalists, Uon Chhin and Yeang Sothearin, in Phnom Penh on November 14, interior ministry spokesman Kieu Sopheak accused them of trying to improvise a studio in order to send news to RFA's Washington headquarters. "The court is checking to find the crime," the spokesman added, referring to the Phnom Penh municipal court's uncertainty as to what they would be charged with.

China

- [RSF proposal](#): **Huang Qi**, a leading civil rights journalist, was arrested at his home on November 28, 2016. He is detained under alarming health conditions, such as mistreatment and physical violence. His arrest was apparently prompted by what he had written about Sichuan police violence against local petitioners. Eighteen days after his arrest, he was formally detained on the catch-all charge of "illegally providing state secrets abroad," which in extreme cases is punishable by death. He is the winner of RSF's 2017 press freedom prize.

Venezuela

- RSF proposal: **Braulio Jatar, Antonio Medina, and Alberto Cabrera**
 - Jatar is a lawyer and a journalist, as well as the director of the website *Reporter Confidencial*. He was held on September 3, 2016 and been put under house arrest since May 2017. Authorities claimed he was in possession of \$25,000 USD in cash, which they claimed was to be used to fund a planned terror attack during the September 13, 2016, summit of the Non-Aligned Movement on the island. It is assumed that authorities planted the money on Jatar, punishing Jatar for publishing the protest video on his website after Maduro became president. Jatar has very chronic high blood pressure.
 - Medina and Cabrera are journalists who worked with a municipal deputy, and were both arrested at the same time while covering a protest on July 26, 2017. They are still being detained in a military center to date.

Cuba

- [RSF proposal](#): **Yoeni de Jesús Guerra García**, an independent blogger from the agency *Yayabo Press*, was sentenced to 7 years in prison in March 2014 on charges of illegally slaughtering cattle. He claimed that the charges against him were fabricated due to his reporting. Yoeni has repeatedly been the victim of violence and possible torture by prison staff. RSF advocated for his release as part of the amnesty preceding Pope Francis' visit to Cuba last September, yet Yoeni still languishes in prison.

