



**Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
&
The Senate Human Rights Caucus**

Briefing

**Press Freedom in Ethiopia, Paraguay, Malaysia, and Syria:
A Dialogue with CPJ's 2015 International Press Freedom Awardees**

Thursday, November 19, 2015

10:00 AM – 11:00 AM

2255 Rayburn House Office Building

BIOGRAPHIES



Candido Figueredo Ruiz works for *ABC Color*, one of Paraguay's largest national dailies, and reports from Pedro Juan Caballero, a small town on the border with Brazil. The journalist, who has lived under 24-hour police protection for more than two decades, says he has lost track of the number of death threats he has received for covering organized crime and drug trafficking, two of the most dangerous beats in Latin America.

The porous border between Paraguay and Brazil is known for harboring smugglers who deal everything from cocaine and marijuana to cigarettes, guns, and electronics. The region has a history of lawlessness and contraband activities. Figueredo's coverage of drug trafficking, contraband, and the collusion between politicians and drug traffickers has made him one of the most respected journalists in Paraguay.

In 2012, police officials confirmed that they had intercepted a phone call between two criminal figures who discussed killing Figueredo. Authorities believed the threats stemmed from a series of articles the journalist published in *ABC Color* that investigated secret tunnels used for smuggling drugs on the Brazilian side of the border, the daily reported. After the articles were published, the local Brazilian police's anti-drug unit destroyed the tunnels and arrested several people involved in the trafficking. Medina had received numerous death threats in response to his coverage of drug trafficking on the border. While Figueredo has become more cautious as a result of the constant threats that he receives, he still reports on sensitive issues and denounces wrongdoing. His work has helped shine a light on press freedom violations in the dangerous border region.



Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently is a Syrian citizen journalist collective and one of the few independent news sources that continues to report from inside the Islamic State's self-proclaimed capital. In April 2014, around 17 Syrian activists set out to document the abuses of Islamic State after the militant group took over and declared the northern city of Raqqa to be the caliphate's capital.

The activists, working anonymously for their safety, formed a group, Raqqa Is Being Slaughtered Silently (RBSS), which is one of the few reliable and independent sources of news left in the Islamic State stronghold. The group's Raqqa-based members secretly film and report from within the city and send the information to members outside of Syria, who transfer the news to local and international media. Since its inception, RBSS has publicized public lashings, crucifixions, beheadings, and draconian social rules, thus providing the world with a counter-narrative to Islamic State's slickly produced version of events. RBSS has been declared an enemy of God by Islamic State, and at least one RBSS member has already paid the price with his life. Al-Moutaz Bellah Ibrahim was kidnapped by Islamic State and murdered in May 2014. In July 2015, Islamic State released a highly produced video, showing two men saying they worked for RBSS. The men are then strung up on trees and shot. One of the founders of RBSS later told CPJ that the two men did not belong to the group.

While RBSS was formed to document the atrocities of Islamic State, its members have also reported critically on the Assad government's bombings, other rebel forces, and civilian casualties caused by U.S.-led airstrikes. The group has established itself as a credible source among Syria monitors and journalists globally. On October 30, 2015, Ibrahim Abd al Qader, a founder and executive director of R.B.S.S., who had been arrested and tortured by ISIS and who later fled to Turkey and his friend Fares Hamadi, a journalist with a Syrian media collective called Eye on Homeland, were found slaughtered in their house in Urfa, in southeastern Turkey.



Zone 9 Bloggers was formed in May 2012 in response to the evisceration of the independent press and the narrowing of space for free expression. The name, "Zone 9," is derived from the zones in Kality Prison, the main jail where Ethiopia's political prisoners, including several journalists, are held. While Kality Prison is organized into eight different zones, the bloggers refer to the entire country as "Zone 9" because of Ethiopia's lack of democratic freedoms, one of the bloggers told CPJ. The collective is made up of nine bloggers: Abel Wabella, Atnaf Berhane, Mahlet Fantahun, Natnail Feleke, Zelalem Kibret, Befekadu Hailu, Soleyana S Gebremichael, Endalk Chala, and Jomanex Kasaye, all of whom are in exile.

The initial charges against the group included working with international human rights organizations and taking part in email encryption and digital security training. The group was subsequently charged with terrorism. With the motto "We Blog Because We Care," the Zone 9 collective has voiced concerns over domestic issues, including political repression, corruption, and social injustice. The collective's posts were frequently blocked inside Ethiopia, but gained a following with Ethiopians in the diaspora, according to local reports. Their posts on Facebook solicited some 12,000 responses a week, reaching 200,000 during a four-part "campaign" they ran on Facebook.



Zulkiflee Anwar Ulhaque ("Zunar") is best known for his provocative cartoons that lampoon issues of high-level abuse of government power and corruption. His portraits are published both in books and on the *Malaysiakini* news website, one of the country's few independent news publications. Malaysian police and authorities have claimed on several occasions that Zunar's cartoons are "detrimental to public order" and run afoul of the country's sedition law.

The latest legal threat against Zunar comes amid a government crackdown on dissent, a heavy-handed response to the long-ruling United Malays National Organization's waning popularity and legitimacy, a theme that Zunar's cartoons have frequently portrayed. The cartoonist has been temporarily detained twice--in 2010 and 2015--on accusations of sedition in relation to his cartoons. At least five of his cartoon books, compilations of original contents and his work previously published online, have been banned or confiscated by authorities. His Kuala Lumpur-based office and those of the printers who produce his volumes have been raided several times.

Despite these threats, Zunar continues to draw, challenging the same forces that seek to silence him. He currently faces nine counts of sedition and up to 43 years in jail in connection with nine critical tweets, including one with an embedded cartoon portrait of Prime Minister Najib Razak acting as a court judge, that he posted on February 10, 2015, in connection with a court decision to jail the country's main opposition leader on sodomy charges. Zunar's sedition trial is scheduled for late 2015.