

OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media: UK statement

The United Kingdom welcomes the Representative on Freedom of the Media, Mr Harlem Desir, back to the Permanent Council and we thank you for your continued work to promote and defend media freedom since your last report.

Let us first put on record our support for you and your team's dedicated work to hold all OSCE participating States to account, and in doing so to support us as we implement our commitments on media freedom.

The content of your report demonstrates the need for greater attention to media freedom, and reminds us of the foresight of our predecessors, when they created the Representative on Freedom of the Media over twenty years ago.

Despite the achievement of securing the Milan Decision on Safety of Journalists in 2018, it is clear that all states must remain vigilant regarding threats to journalists and media actors across the OSCE region. We remain concerned over the number of attacks, threats and harassment of journalists in a wide number of States, as well as the use of legal threats to intimidate or silence journalists.

We also remain concerned over the specific and distinct threat that women journalists face when their work and their gender intersects. We therefore appreciate the efforts of your office, over a number of years, to understand and respond to the gender-related aspects of safety of journalists. We look forward to the forthcoming publication of the Resource Guide on Safety of Female Journalists Online.

More recently, we appreciate the vigilance of your office during these unprecedented times, and welcome the joint statement on COVID-19 issued together with the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression, and the Organisation of American States Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression, calling on states to promote and protect access to, and the free flow of, information during the pandemic.

In this context, we are concerned by the increase in measures to criminalise content, including by the use of defamation laws, or the introduction of new legislation. As your March joint statement said "Any attempts to criminalise information relating to the pandemic may create distrust in institutional information, delay access to reliable information and have a chilling effect on freedom of expression." In this context, we also call on States to support public service broadcasting and to ensure that journalists have access to information.

As we said in March, a free press is crucial for a comprehensive response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Their work serves to keep societies informed, to promote proper health measures and to counter false or misleading information. It allows people to access credible information to protect their

health and that of their communities. It allows people to recognise problems that must be addressed and to hold their governments to account.

Mr Chairman, one year ago, the United Kingdom, together with Canada, launched the Media Freedom Coalition. To date, 36 countries are members of the coalition of which 25 are OSCE participating States. The first full meeting of Senior Officials of all Coalition members met in Geneva in January, and we are grateful that a member of your team was able to participate in this meeting.

Since its launch the Media Freedom Coalition have reaffirmed members' commitment to media freedom through our statement on World Press Freedom Day and highlighted the continued importance of Media Freedom during the coronavirus pandemic. We look forward to upcoming events such as the postponed World Press Freedom Day conference in December, and more immediately, your event on artificial intelligence and free speech this month. Such events provide an opportunity for Coalition members to work with your team to take this important work forward to protect and promote media freedom.

The RFOM is a critical institution. And it is important that the RFOM is able to carry out their mandate in an impartial, independent and objective manner. Just as you have done Mr. Desir.