



Foreign, Commonwealth
& Development Office

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Chair
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26th March 2024

Dear Alicia,

I have enclosed the latest annual update on the FCDO's media freedom work, covering 2023.

This fifth report reflects our response to the continuing impact of Russia's war in Ukraine on media and the information space, as well as the impact of the Israel-Hamas conflict on journalist safety. It covers our continued support for the Media Freedom Coalition, our work at the UN, OSCE, and with UNESCO and the activities of our global network.

The report reflects commitments in the Integrated Review Refresh and the International Development White Paper to defend universal human rights including free speech and the role of independent media.

I hope the content of the report will be helpful for the Committee.

Yours,

David

Government response to the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee report “Media freedom is under attack”: The FCO’s defence of an endangered liberty.

Summaries of the Committee’s recommendations are in bold, and the Government’s responses are in plain text. This report covers the period January-December 2023.

Overview of Progress of the Campaign

In these times of increasing authoritarianism, media freedom continues to be the ‘canary in the coalmine’ - the first indicator of democracy and human rights under attack because it ensures individuals remain informed and able to exercise their rights or hold power to account. Media freedom and sustainability, including an open and interoperable internet, and tackling foreign interference and information manipulation are in our national security interest, part of our commitment to an open international order and we remain committed to defend it.

This commitment is an enduring one given the fact that according to UNESCO, at least 66 journalists and media workers were confirmed killed in 2023 *in the exercise of their profession*, over a third of those (24) in the Middle East crisis, and that impunity for crimes against journalists remains too high at 86%, almost nine out of 10 cases¹. Journalists and media workers held in detention in connection with their work also remained at a record high, at 549 according to Reporters Without Borders (RSF)². China, Myanmar, Iran, Belarus and Turkiye jailed the most journalists and media workers between 2022 and 2023: 45% of the world’s imprisoned journalists in the period and 24% of these were women.

Article 19’s 2023 Global Expression report³ found that 80% of the world’s population, have less freedom of expression than ten years ago. Only 13% of people are living in open societies. Threats to journalists come from autocratic governments, from legislation and law enforcement including in democratic societies, from changing business and media environments, from conflicts, and from organised crime. Moreover, where these interests overlap, journalists are particularly endangered⁴.

Media freedom and the ability of information to flow freely also continue to be undermined by politically motivated internet shutdowns, which have increased. As of 19 May 2023, Access Now had preliminarily identified at least 80 internet shutdowns across 21 countries, 18 of which were ongoing since 2022 and nine of which took place in the month of May⁵. This prevented people having access to information that could help them hold those in power to account.

¹ <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000386433?posInSet=1&queryId=43207a73-ebfe-462b-884c-6ede2ae68bb0>

² Reporters without Borders Barometer: <https://rsf.org/en/barometer>

³ ARTICLE 19, Global Expression Report 2023: <https://www.article19.org/resources/the-global-expression-report-2023/>

⁴ [Insights and analysis: Data for change - GxR23 \(globalexpressionreport.org\)](https://www.globalexpressionreport.org/)

⁵ Internet shutdowns in 2023: a mid-year #KeepItOn update (accessnow.org): <https://www.accessnow.org/publication/internet-shutdowns-in-2023-mid-year-update/>

Freedom of expression and the media are essential qualities of any functioning democracy; people must be allowed to discuss and debate issues freely, to challenge their governments, and to make informed decisions. It is an important avenue for widening opportunities for participation, bringing communities together, and allowing people to share information. The impact on the ability to provide humanitarian relief, rescue, medical services, during periods of internet disruption in the Middle East conflict has been a stark reminder of the importance of the free flow of information.

In the face of such serious threats, the UK's commitment to media freedom remains firm. The Integrated Review Refresh confirmed that global interconnectedness is essential and natural, a source of strength, and reflected in the commitment to free speech and universal human rights which underpins our democracy. The 2023 International Development White Paper made this clear. It committed the UK to promoting and protecting the role of independent media, in order to ensure the free flow of reliable and trustworthy information, so that people can discuss and debate issues freely, and hold their governments accountable without fear of censorship, internet shutdowns, or disinformation.

This report sets out how we have taken concrete action – through our diplomatic network, using our development expertise, and working with partners, including the Media Freedom Coalition – to keep media freedom on the global agenda, to shine a light on those who seek to attack journalists and to support and promote the work of independent media around the world. This first section of the report provides an overview of the work the FCDO has done in line with these objectives. The following sections provide information specifically in response to the questions raised by the Foreign Affairs Committee in their original report of 2019.

Key situations of concern for media in 2023

The Committee to Protect Journalists records the deaths of journalists and media workers who were confirmed killed and others who may have been targeted for journalism or other reasons. The CPJ reported that the outbreak of hostilities in Gaza was the deadliest period for journalists since they began recording in 1992. By December 31, 2023, they had recorded at least 77 journalists and media workers killed⁶. On 6 December, the UK signed a statement from the Media Freedom Coalition⁷, which expressed our concerns for the safety of journalists and access to information caused by the Israel/Gaza conflict. It underlined our understanding of the incredibly difficult time faced by journalists based in Gaza, carrying out crucial work in disseminating accurate and impartial reporting during a time of crisis despite the number of journalists killed. The statement highlighted the repercussions for safety of journalists and access to information of the conflict. Recognising the extreme dangers faced by journalists who risk their lives to keep the world informed about the realities and impact of conflicts, the statement called for respect for the protection of journalists, media workers, their equipment and infrastructure, as civilian objects under international humanitarian law.

⁶ Committee to Protect Journalists: [Israel-Gaza war takes record toll on journalists - Committee to Protect Journalists \(cpj.org\)](https://www.cpj.org/en/press-releases/israel-gaza-war-takes-record-toll-on-journalists)

⁷ [Media Freedom Coalition statement on the safety of journalists and media workers in conflict - Media Freedom Coalition](https://www.mediafreedomcoalition.org/press-releases/media-freedom-coalition-statement-on-the-safety-of-journalists-and-media-workers-in-conflict)

Continuing its crackdown since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Russian state further repressed the media domestically and in the temporarily controlled territories of Ukraine. In Ukraine, at least 30 journalists or media workers were killed while on duty in the war, and many more were injured. Russia destroyed broadcasting infrastructure and persecuted dissenting voices. Journalists were killed, abducted and subjected to unlawful detention and torture.

Within Russia, the Kremlin continues to take increasingly severe action to restrict public access to reliable information, including through repression of media organisations and blocking online media. Using laws on ‘foreign agents’ and ‘discrediting’ the Russian Armed Forces, the authorities persisted in banning or restricting almost all independent media outlets. According to Ovid-Info, by December 2023, 88 people had been prosecuted by December for ‘discrediting’ the Russian Armed Forces in 2023.⁸ Journalists, such as Maria Ponomarenko, were sentenced to lengthy prison terms for reporting deemed to have spread ‘knowingly false information’ about the armed forces. As of December, 28 journalists and media workers were detained in Russia according to Reporters Without Borders.⁹ Russia’s restrictions on information also extended to the wider internet. In the first six months of the year, Roskomnadzor claimed it had banned 885,000 websites considered to contain prohibited information¹⁰.

The Russian authorities labelled the offices of Meduza, Dozhd and Novaya Gazeta Europe in exile, amongst others, as ‘undesirable organisations’, criminalising sharing their content on social media. At least 43 journalists faced criminal prosecution for their anti-war stance, many facing lengthy prison sentences for spreading ‘fake news’ or ‘discrediting the armed forces’. Those journalists who remain in Russia also faced intimidation and harassment. On 4 July, in the Republic of Chechnya, Russian journalist, Elena Milashina, and lawyer Alexander Nemov, were viciously attacked by masked men and hospitalised. The UK co-signed a Media Freedom Coalition statement, which condemned the attack as an affront to media freedom and called for a thorough and transparent investigation¹¹.

In 2023 the Kremlin also increasingly pressured, intimidated and in some cases criminalised Russian citizens viewing independent media. This limit on freedom of information catalyses the Kremlin’s narrative. However, despite the majority of organisations having to operate from exile, Russian independent media continues to survive, reaching an estimated 6 – 9% of the Russian population. Media organisations continue to conduct valuable, objective reporting on the Russian state’s record, including its human rights violations, and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

⁸ Data on politically motivated criminal prosecutions in Russia, ОВД-Инфо (ovdinfo.org):

<https://en.ovdinfo.org/data-politically-motivated-criminal-prosecutions-russia>

⁹ <https://rsf.org/en/country/russia>

¹⁰ <https://meduza.io/en/news/2023/09/07/russian-authorities-reportedly-blocked-more-than-885-000-websites-in-first-half-of-2023>

¹¹ [Media Freedom Coalition statement on the attack on journalist Elena Milashina and Alexander Nemov - Media Freedom Coalition](#)

The impact of Russia's war in Ukraine continued to be reflected in severe measures against media and civil society in a systematic clampdown on media freedom by Belarus. 39 journalists remained behind bars. The 2023 OSCE Moscow Mechanism report¹² found that freedom of expression in Belarus had been grievously undermined. Legislation could target any independent voice, particularly critics of government or Russia's illegal war in Ukraine. Journalists had fled or faced imprisonment. Anyone who administered social media networks or communication channels for listed so-called "extremists" could face serious charges, even of terrorism. The quantity of content deemed extremist in each single month in 2022 and 2023, exceeded all the content classified as extremist in the whole year of 2021.

The FCDO also recognises that the changing online landscape is at the heart of the challenges facing journalists and media workers today. The security threats facing journalists include cyber threats and online violence and abuse, the deteriorating financial situation facing many media outlets is connected to news moving online, and the changing digital landscape has also allowed for the proliferation of mis- and disinformation. We take this into account in all our work to defend media freedom. This section provides some examples of the FCDO's work which relate specifically to media freedom and the changing online environment.

The Kremlin uses disinformation as a central tenet of its domestic, foreign and security policy to deny and distract from its actions (as seen on a daily basis during its illegal war in Ukraine) and to undermine democratic and human rights-based processes and institutions. The UK and like-minded countries are working together to expose Russia's malign activities and motivations and build societal resilience to disinformation and other forms of information manipulation and interference through support to build media literacy, critical thinking and understanding about sources of information amongst vulnerable communities and audiences globally.

Russia is conducting an information war as well as a kinetic one. A key part of the UK's agenda is supporting Ukraine to counter Russia's global Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (or "FIMI") campaign. Other hostile states and non-state actors are also increasingly using similar tools to threaten the UK's global interests. The FCDO is scaling up the UK's response to the information threat posed by Russia (understanding their tactics, preparing response options to deter hostile information operations, and working with allies and partners to build resilience) – as well as other hostile states. We will deliver the Integrated Review Refresh's ambition of increasing UK's "capability to assess & respond to the hostile manipulation of information by actors including Russia, China & Iran where they affect UK interests abroad".

We have pre-bunked and exposed Russian plans and atrocities for example exposing Russia's systematic forcible deportation of Ukrainian children and the reality of Russian control of the Temporarily Controlled Territories of Ukraine.

In one example, the #TakenFromUkraine campaign was developed with the US, Poland and Canada with over three million views of campaign content across multiple media – with witness testimony events featuring Ukrainian survivors of

¹² <https://www.osce.org/odihr/543240>

Russian atrocities hosted for UK Parliamentarians and members of the London diplomatic community. We have revealed Russia's true intent & scale of egregious activity such as the reality of Russian authorities' systematic interrogation, detention, and forced deportation of vast numbers of Ukrainian civilians. During the summer, for example, the FCDO published evidence showing that 91% of Ukrainian civilians held by Russian forces described torture and ill-treatment, including sexual violence. We have combatted Russia's information war on Ukraine, by actively identifying & challenging Russian Information Manipulation & Interference operations. We have worked to disrupt information operations internationally. The UK is continuing to work with partners to understand the threat internationally, share information and provide expertise to help build resilience. We have partnered with the Government of Ukraine to help them challenge Russian disinformation and communicate to international audiences. We have worked with the Ukrainians to deliver campaigns including across the global middle ground that reach millions of people through online content and media, with a focus on amplifying local and Ukrainian voices to lay out the impact of the war on Ukrainian people and global stability and prosperity. Through the new Information Threats and Influence Directorate, the FCDO is growing its capability to assess and respond to the full range of information threats by hostile actors and working closely with international partners.

The British High Commission **New Delhi** worked on a project under the India Challenge Enabling Fund to build capacity for regional digital newsrooms in two Indian states – Rajasthan and Gujarat – to use artificial intelligence to identify trends in local reporting data, collate readership patterns and to combat fake news. Some of India's successful digital newsrooms were already using artificial intelligence, but mostly for collating business and sports news.

A Conflict Security and Stability Fund supported Hate Speech and Disinformation Programme, worked to curtail hate speech and disinformation online through policy dialogues with government and non-government stakeholders; technical assistance to the Pakistani government through training civil servants, launching a fact-checking tool called iVerify; and digital literacy courses for university students.

Ahead of the 2023 general elections, the British High Commission **Abuja** worked with the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD), the Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room and other civil society and media partners to help them to address fake news and disinformation. They supported the training of journalists on conflict-sensitive reporting and on the use of communication tools to ensure information was fact-checked, balanced and promoted tolerance. They also worked through civil society partners to provide targeted training to media personnel on promoting women and youth engagement in politics ahead of the elections. They continued to support interventions that enabled the media and civil society to hold government accountable, including facilitating media and civil society to work together to secure reforms to the 2022 Electoral Act which strengthened good governance in Nigeria.

The Media Freedom Coalition and UNESCO's Global Media Defence Fund

The Media Freedom Coalition (MFC), co-created by the UK and Canada in 2019, has issued 42 statements on situations of concern, key issues, and marking key

dates and events to date, 10 of which were issued in 2023. There are currently 50 members.

This year the MFC took the step for the second time of expelling one of its members. The co-chairs had been in correspondence with the authorities in Sudan over the deteriorating media freedom situation there. The outbreak of armed conflict in April led to a worsening of the situation. The majority of the media stopped operating due to ongoing attacks against journalists, media and media workers. The MFC's decision to expel Sudan took effect at the end of August.¹³ This decision sends an important message to the Coalition about the importance of accountability for MFC members who signed the London pledge, which committed them to fulfil their own international human rights obligations as well as to work with others to protect media freedom globally.

Estonia took over as MFC Co-Chair from Canada on 1 July 2023 and joined Netherlands as the other Co-Chair. Estonia has been an active, valuable partner on media freedom, member of the Executive Group, host of the 2022 Global Media Freedom Conference and regular contributor to the Global Media Defence Fund. Germany re-joined the Executive Group in 2023. They have contributed to the Global Media Defence Fund and have a support scheme for journalists in exile. Germany will take over as Co-Chair from the Netherlands in 2024. Since handing over our Co-Chair role to the Netherlands in 2022, the UK continues to be actively involved in the Executive Group, as co-chair of the Media Development Working Group, and through the activities of our diplomatic network (see below).

The UK has continued to support UNESCO's Global Media Defence Fund (GMDF) which to date has supported 120 projects helping over 5000 journalists worldwide, nearly 1500 lawyers and 200 NGOs. 37 projects have been pre-selected in the latest call for proposals, which will be implemented in 2024. Following this success and impressive achievement, the Fund has been extended until 2026 and the budget has increased to US\$12 million.

The Media Freedom Coalition will be celebrating its fifth anniversary in 2024, which will be an opportune moment to reflect on its performance and achievements to date and re-commit the Coalition to another five years of activity.

Defending Media Freedom in International Fora and Events

The UK continued to work across multilateral fora to keep media freedom and the safety of journalists on the agenda. At the UN, we have consistently used our position to champion media freedom. This has included condemning Russia's attacks on journalists and countering Russian disinformation. At the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), we continued to call out Russia's violations of freedom of expression. We supported the OSCE's independent human rights institutions, prompting and delivering statements condemning Russia's domestic crackdown on media outlets and independent journalism and on safety of journalists in Ukraine.

¹³ Media Freedom Coalition's Co-Chairs' Statement on the Membership of Sudan: <https://mediafreedomcoalition.org/statements/co-chairs/2023/mfc-statement-sudan-membership/>

The UK supported the renewal of the mandate of the OSCE's Representative on Freedom of the Media until September 2024. In May, the UK gave a statement on behalf of the Group of Friends on Safety of Journalists, highlighting the transnational repression of journalists across the OSCE region. We supported financially and participated in the OSCE Chair's Warsaw Human Dimension Conference in October, which enabled civil society, governments and academia to discuss human rights and democracy concerns across the OSCE region, in eight plenary and 57 side events.

Our Mission to the United Nations in Geneva signalled ongoing UK support for the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, by supporting the renewal of the mandate for a further two years in January. The FCDO coordinated HMG's response to a questionnaire from the Special Rapporteur on the role of freedom of expression and sustainable development. This set out the UK's domestic media landscape, digital infrastructure and access to internet/mobile services; legislation: the Online Safety Bill; information rights, online media literacy strategy, measures to protect whistleblowing and investigative journalism; and plans for measures to counter Strategic Litigation Against Public Participation (SLAPP). In June in the discussion of the ensuing report¹⁴ at the Human Rights Council in Geneva, the UK delivered a statement which paid tribute to journalists who campaigned on sustainable development, highlighting how they faced unprecedented threats, violence, intimidation including online, and called on all supporters of Agenda 2030 to protect the media. The statement highlighted the UK's online media strategy, anti-SLAPPs measures, and work through the Media Freedom Coalition and Freedom Online Coalition to mitigate threats to journalists and internet shutdowns¹⁵.

As part of the US-hosted Summit for Democracy on 29-30 March, the Netherlands hosted a high-level hybrid event in The Hague on media freedom. Home Office Minister of State for Security, Tom Tugendhat, represented the UK virtually, highlighting state threats to journalists in the UK from Iran, and his role chairing the UK's Defending Democracy Task Force. The event was opened by Netherlands Foreign Minister Wopke Hoekstra, it was moderated by former BBC World News anchor Nisha Pillai and was attended by the Foreign Ministers of Slovenia and Kosovo. The event succeeded in fostering a good discussion between government, civil society, young people, academics and journalists on defending media freedom against a backdrop of media freedom in Europe being increasingly under threat.

The UK Delegation to the Council of Europe (CoE) took over the Chair of the like-minded Group of Friends for media freedom (GoF) on 1 July. The UK Chair of the GoF met with the partners of the CoE's Safety of Journalists Platform,¹⁶ made up of civil society and journalists union groups. The Platform collects alerts from European journalist associations and gives visibility to cases and situations where

¹⁴ A/HRC/53/25: Sustainable development and freedom of expression: why voice matters – Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc5325-sustainable-development-and-freedom-expression-why-voice>

¹⁵ UN HRC53: UK Statement on the right to freedom of expression: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/un-hrc53-uk-statement-on-the-right-to-freedom-of-expression>

¹⁶ <https://fom.coe.int/en/accueil>

journalists, journalism, and the freedom to publish are threatened. The CoE encourages follow-up dialogue between governments and journalist groups to address these cases. The UK has responded to several cases and had several of them closed. The UK contributed €54,000 to the Platform in 2023.

At the most recent CoE Congress of Local and Regional Authorities a report on 'Local and regional media: watchdogs of democracy, guardians of community' was adopted which encouraged local and regional authorities to take concrete action to support local and regional media. During the session, the BBC presented their Local Democracy Reporter (LDR) scheme, which supports the vital role of local journalism in holding local authorities accountable, fostering transparency, and empowering citizens to engage in local decision-making.

The UK Mission to the United Nations in Geneva is a member of the Group of Friends for the Safety of Journalists. In September, they co-sponsored a photo exhibition with the UNESCO Liaison Office and Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), which highlighted the range of risks faced by journalists – from killings targeting them and the prevalent impunity for these crimes to the high number of journalists detained worldwide and the increasing legal harassment they endure. We supported the Netherlands, together with OHCHR and UNESCO, by cosponsoring their event at the 54th session of the Human Rights Council on the importance of initiatives and activities to protect media freedom and journalists.

A highlight of the year was the UK's co-hosting with UNESCO of a Global Conference to celebrate the International Day for Universal Access to Information (IDUAI). It took place at the Bonavero Institute of Human Rights, University of Oxford, on 28 September. Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, Minister of State for the FCDO, opened this multi-stakeholder event with participants from over 30 countries. The Conference also included representatives from the following communities: journalists, academics, judiciary, civil society, internet freedom, international organisations and Information Commissioners. The Conference participants recognised the importance of the online space for access to information. The Oxford Statement¹⁷ highlighted the vital role independent media plays in facilitating access to information, enabling everyone to participate fully and effectively in public life. It rejected disinformation and narratives that divide and polarise; and how internet shutdowns often go hand in hand with attempts to restrict press freedom, silence debate and spread mis- and disinformation. Hosting this event reinforced our commitment to working with partners for an open, free, global, interoperable, reliable and secure Internet.

At the UN Human Rights Council, on 29 September, the UK held a side event on media freedom in **Hong Kong**. 25 countries sponsored the event. The UK Permanent Representative chaired the panel, consisting of civil society representatives and journalists and highlighted the precipitous decline in media freedom since the introduction of the National Security Law, in stark contrast to the rights and freedoms enshrined in the legally binding Joint Declaration. Panellists described the impact and chilling effect on journalists and pro-democracy figures

¹⁷ [Global Conference for the International Day for Universal Access to Information \(IDUAI\) 2023 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/global-conference-for-the-international-day-for-universal-access-to-information-iduai-2023)

including the targeting of Jimmy Lai and the Stand News journalists. Panellists proposed recommendations for China ahead of its Universal Periodic Review in January 2024. Canada, the US, the Netherlands and Switzerland all spoke in support and echoed the sentiments expressed by the panellists. In addition, on 29 December the UK led a third statement through the Media Freedom Coalition on the continued attacks on freedom of the press and suppression of independent local media in Hong Kong. 24 countries signed the statement¹⁸. China is a human rights priority country in the FCDO Annual Human Rights and Democracy Report. The UK referenced freedom of expression in statements on China at the Human Rights Council in September and at the UN General Assembly Third Committee in October.

A delegation of FCDO, Ministry of Justice and DCMS officials attended the launch of the Council of Europe's Campaign on the Safety of Journalists 5-6 October in Riga, Latvia¹⁹. The campaign will run until 2027 to encourage member states to take practical measures to implement the 2016 Council of Europe Decision on the Safety of Journalists. The four key themes of the campaign are prevention, prosecution, protection and promotion of journalism and its key role in democracies. The conference featured a dramatisation of the killing and subsequent investigation into the death of Daphne Caruana Galizia, followed by a discussion on how Maltese journalists responded to her killing, supported the investigation and followed up on the stories she was investigating. Participants heard testimony from leading Latvian and Ukrainian journalists on threats to the safety of journalists in peacetime and holding the Ukrainian authorities to account in the conditions of conflict. They heard a review of the latest European Court of Human Rights litigation on freedom of opinion and expression. The conference ended with the first meeting of national focal points of the Council of Europe campaign for the safety of journalists. DCMS as the UK focal point for the campaign set out the UK National Action Plan and HMG's actions under the four themes. During Journalist Matters week, on 30 October, DCMS published a refreshed UK National Action Plan²⁰.

At the 78th session of the UN General Assembly, the UK reaffirmed our support for media freedom by co-sponsoring the resolution on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity, alongside the penholder Greece, the core group of countries working on the resolution: Argentina, Austria, Costa Rica, France and Tunisia, and 42 other countries. The text highlighted the role of women journalists and media workers and the particular risks that they face, expressed serious concern at the rise of strategic lawsuits against public participation and called for protection from them. It referenced the exposure and vulnerability of journalists and media workers observing, monitoring and reporting on protests, and the role of artificial intelligence. The resolution urged States to develop and implement policies, action plans and strategies related to the promotion of media and information literacy. It requested the Secretary-General to report to the 80th session of the General Assembly in 2025, and 61st session of the Human Rights Council in 2026. The report should cover the safety of journalists, with a special focus on those reporting on climate change, environmental and disaster issues, women journalists and media workers, and the

¹⁸ [Media Freedom in Hong Kong - Media Freedom Coalition Statement - Media Freedom Coalition](#)

¹⁹ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/freedom-expression/safety-of-journalists-campaign>

²⁰ [National Action Plan for the Safety of Journalists \(2023\) - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

activities of the network of focal points for the United Nations Action Plan on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity.

A major challenge facing journalists in many countries around the world is internet shutdowns. The UK has been focusing attention on this issue in several international fora this year. As the country chair of the Freedom Online Coalition's Taskforce on Internet Shutdowns (TFIS), we have worked with NGOs Access Now and the Global Network Initiative on four lines of effort in 2023. These include: (1) knowledge sharing – resources and repository; (2) response – preventative and reactive; (3) shifting global norms and raising the profile of Internet shutdowns on the international agenda; and (4) improving data collection and presentation tools on Internet shutdowns.

We secured a firm commitment in the G7 Digital Ministerial Declaration²¹ to tackle internet shutdowns and restrictions, including through the Freedom Online Coalition and its Task Force on Internet Shutdowns. We hosted a UK/TFIS session on shutdowns and elections at the Internet Governance Forum in October – which brought together experts to look at causes, trends and impacts of Internet shutdowns, including on human rights, information integrity and democratic participation. We also launched and led the drafting of the FOC joint Internet Shutdowns and Elections Statement²².

Action to defend and promote the work of women journalists.

To mark International Women's Day on 8 March, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, Minister of State for the FCDO, posted on Twitter (now X),²³ amplifying the statement of the Media Freedom Coalition, which focused on the safety of women journalists,²⁴ the importance of their role and the disproportionate abuse that they suffer.

The FCDO has also worked with the International Centre for Journalists (ICJ) to support the reporting and monitoring of online violence against women journalists, as part of wider FCDO work to tackle the abuse faced by women journalists, and to promote and protect the rights of women and girls more broadly. The OSCE Representative for Freedom of the Media credited this FCDO-funded project as contributing to the Guidelines for Monitoring Online Violence against Women Journalists issued in 2023.

In Belarus, prominent and leading woman journalists have been targeted. Nearly one in four journalists imprisoned were women²⁵. On 17 March, Lord Ahmad condemned²⁶ the convictions of independent Belarusian news outlet TuT.By chief editor Maryna Zolatava and CEO Liudmila Chekina, in support of coordinated posts

²¹ [g7digital-tech-2023.go.jp](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/g7-digital-ministerial-declaration-2023)

²² [FOC Issues Joint Statement on Internet Shutdowns and Elections - Freedom Online Coalition](#)

²³ [Lord \(Tariq\)Ahmad of Wimbledon on X: "The UKGb joins the Media Freedom Coalition in condemning all forms of violence against women in the media, both online and offline and pays tribute to their vital contribution to truth and justice. #defendmediafreedom" / X \(twitter.com\)](#)

²⁴ [Media Freedom Coalition statement: International Women's Day 2023 - Media Freedom Coalition](#)

²⁵ [Bilan_2023_EN_0.pdf \(rsf.org\)](#)

²⁶ <https://twitter.com/tariqahmadbt/status/1636742428655865857>

on Twitter (now X) from Media Freedom Coalition Co-Chairs²⁷ and others including the US, Estonia and Czechia. Chekina and Zolatava had been detained for over 20 months. The Belarusian authorities sealed TuT.By's office and blocked access to their website on May 18, 2021, in response to the news outlet's coverage of the 2020 elections²⁸. After a closed trial, Chekina and Zolatava were convicted of tax evasion, incitement of hatred as well as endangering national security, and sentenced to 12 years in prison. These sentences and that of a third woman journalist, Valeryia Kastsiuhova (Belarusian Yearbook, Nashe Mneniye), of 10 years in prison were three of the top eight heaviest prison sentences handed down to journalists in 2023 according to Reporters without Borders 2023 Roundup²⁹. The British Embassy in Minsk has regularly stood outside the courtrooms of trials involving journalists in an act of solidarity along with our likeminded partners.

World Press Freedom Day

Kanbar Hossein-Bor, FCDO Media Freedom Coordinator, led a delegation, which participated in a series of events hosted by UNESCO in New York to mark World Press Freedom Day. The UNESCO Director-General, and a video address by the UN Secretary-General, opened the central event at the UN General Assembly on 2 May. There were panel discussions on the theme: Shaping a Future of Rights: Freedom of Expression as a Driver of All Other Rights on the 30th anniversary of World Press Freedom Day. The Mandate Holders on Media Freedom and Democracy issued their Joint Declaration on Media Freedom and Democracy. During the UNESCO event, the annual UK-Canada Media Freedom Award winner was announced. This award is designed to recognise the grassroots achievements of those who have defended journalists or championed media freedom. This year, Lina Attalah received the award on behalf of the independent Egyptian online newspaper Mada Masr where she is the editor. Mada Masr were recognised for their extraordinary commitment to high-quality independent journalism. They stood their ground despite external pressures – a takedown of their website and legal threats against their reporters.

During the events in New York, the Media Freedom Coalition Secretariat also organised a strategy workshop and MFC Year in Review sessions for MFC members. The workshop produced a set of recommendations to improve the effectiveness of the Coalition, which the Secretariat has begun to action.

The Media Freedom Coalition's High-Level Panel of Legal Experts on Media Freedom held side events on refuge for journalists, and presented their international standards report on blasphemy legislation and its impact on the media. Other side events covered women journalists, media development, the role of media in democracy, media and digitisation, and media and security. The Media Freedom Coalition issued a statement emphasising how the work of journalists is essential to the functioning of democracies and for individuals to understand and exercise as well as benefit from the protection of human rights.

²⁷ <https://twitter.com/CanadaFP/status/1636743302962724864>
<https://twitter.com/DutchMFA/status/1636761540589133824>

²⁸ [Media freedom in Belarus: Media Freedom Coalition statement - Media Freedom Coalition](#)

²⁹ [Bilan 2023 EN 0.pdf \(rsf.org\)](#)

To mark World Press Freedom Day, the British Embassy in **Tehran** convened Ambassadors of Media Freedom Coalition members.³⁰ Attendees shared views on the current situation in Iran and committed to continue working together to promote and support media freedom in Iran and internationally. In **Bangladesh**, the British High Commission joined an MFC op-ed on the role of the media in democracy³¹ and took part in social media activities. The High Commissioner took part in events with the media and participated in a video on press freedom shown on YouTube.³²

International Day to end Impunity for Crimes Against Journalists

On 2 November, at the UN International Day to End Impunity for Crimes Against Journalists, we provided input into and amplified the statement of the Media Freedom Coalition, which focused on the importance of independent journalism and media in elections. Looking ahead to 2024 with 65 national elections expected in 54 countries, impacting half the global population,³³ the statement pointed to the importance of the free flow of information and ideas to the integrity of democratic processes. It cited UNESCO data on violence and crimes against journalists during elections. Between January 2019 and June 2022, 759 journalists and media professionals were reportedly subjected to physical attacks in at least 89 elections in 70 countries.³⁴ 42% of the attacks were committed by law enforcement. The UN Secretary-General's report on the Safety of Journalists and Impunity 2 August 2023 noted that the use of non-lethal ammunition by the police, ranging from rubber bullets to pepper balls, had injured dozens of journalists. Many other journalists had been arrested, beaten and subjected to other forms of physical and psychological ill-treatment.³⁵

Action by the FCDO Global Network

The FCDO's global network has worked to promote and protect media freedom in 2023.

Kyrgyzstan is currently experiencing a shrinking civic space through a deliberate crackdown on independent media, accompanied by draft laws on mass media and civil society. British Embassy Bishkek responded by holding regular meetings to listen to the concerns of civil society and independent media. The Ambassador raised these concerns with prominent MPs and held a press briefing with independent media. The Embassy agreed with likeminded partners a joint approach of escalating responses. This included a joint statement to mark UN International

³⁰ [Simon Shercliff on X: "مراسم گرامیداشت روز جهانی آزادی مطبوعات به همراه ائتلاف کشورهای مدافع آزادی رسانه" \(MFC\) که در تهران نمایندگی دارند DEFREFIDKESATCHCZNLGRRSPYSIITGSAU1/3 #WorldPressFreedomDay. #WPF2023 @MediaFreedom https://t.co/Q5d30PKzNm" / X \(twitter.com\)](#)

³¹ [Press Freedom: A Vital Element for Democracy | The Daily Star](#)

³² [World Press Freedom Day 2023 | Media Freedom Coalition - YouTube](#)

³³ [Media Freedom Coalition statement on the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes Against Journalists - Media Freedom Coalition](#)

³⁴ [The role of law enforcement agents: ensuring safety of journalists during public demonstrations and elections - UNESCO Digital Library](#)

³⁵ [A/78/270: Report of the Secretary-General on the safety of journalists and the issue of impunity | OHCHR](#)

Day to End Impunity for Crimes Against Journalists. They monitored the trial of news outlet Kloop, taken to court by the government for an article on corruption. They initiated a social media campaign called #YesWeCare to counter claims by Kyrgyz Parliamentarians that the west did not care about the Kyrgyz public. In addition, they prepared a Media Freedom Coalition statement for issue if the draft law on mass media were approved.

British Embassy **Budapest** regularly engaged with organisations supporting media freedom, including attending conferences and discussions. The Embassy supported Transparency International Hungary's Mentor-Mentee programme for investigative journalists and its 'SOMA Award', which recognised the most impactful investigative article of the year. The award honoured investigative journalism in memory of Hungarian investigative journalist József 'Soma' Gőbölyös, who died in 2001.

Our Ambassador and staff at British Embassy **Bratislava** regularly engaged with media representatives and attended media freedom conferences and discussions. Over the past few years, the media environment in Slovakia has been improving. Slovakia rose eight places from 27th to 22nd in the RSF World Media Freedom Index in 2022 and to 17th in 2023. The Embassy supported the creation of the Jan Kuciak Media Freedom Library at the Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, in tribute to alumni, the murdered investigative reporter Jan Kuciak, who remained a highly respected media figure in Slovakia. The Embassy contributed foreign language literature for journalism students.

The British High Commission **Nicosia** supported the publication of a book titled 'Responsible Journalism – Guide on self-censorship' to support media freedom in the north of Cyprus, where journalists were increasingly oppressed. The book was distributed to Turkish Cypriot journalists, academics and universities and the text was made available to be downloaded free of charge. Journalist contacts praised it as a good tool to raise awareness.

Ahead of elections in **Cambodia**, on 13 February the Government revoked the licence of one of the few independent media organisations, Voice of Democracy, after it published an article criticising the son of the Prime Minister. Minister Trevelyan posted on Twitter (now X)³⁶ and our Embassy issued a public statement alongside Australia, Canada, the US and EU partners. Our Ambassador raised the election climate, citing Voice of Democracy, with Prime Minister Hun Sen, as did senior French, Japanese and German visitors. Our Embassy convened the international community to consider their response to the shrinking civic space in Cambodia. However, the government's response was tough, rejecting the criticism from the diplomatic community and threatening outlets and civil society, which expressed solidarity with Voice of Democracy.

Our High Commissioner in **Ottawa** hosted an annual "#Uncensored Dinner" for the media community. Ottawa's leading journalists and media commentators came together in the name of protecting and upholding media freedom, providing an opportunity to recognise the challenges they face and advocate for more support. BHC Ottawa also co-hosted a "Do it for Democracy" event with the Parliamentary

³⁶ <https://twitter.com/annietrev/status/1626267662400585730?t=7Zb4H1wu8Y5MYL4IIJLBQg&s=19>

Centre, (the Westminster Foundation for Democracy equivalent in Canada) which included media freedom elements.

Media freedom is an important part of the UK's democracy and good governance work in **sub-Saharan Africa**, where we support transparency and accountability and seek to ensure that the conduct of government is underpinned by freedom of expression and an inclusive and open digital and media space.

Through the FCDO, the UK funded the annual Chevening Africa Media Freedom Fellowship³⁷ (CAMFF), hosted by the University of Westminster. The Fellowship was aimed at mid-senior level African professionals with demonstrable leadership skills in their fields. This included public servants working in areas of media policy and regulatory frameworks, or media professionals, including journalists. The programme combined professional development of the values of good journalism (curiosity, rigour, challenge, storytelling, research, doing no harm, and freedom of speech) with an understanding of new opportunities to make reporting more effective and to use new ways to enhance its reach and impact. In 2023, fellows from Burundi, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Malawi, Sierra Leone, South Africa, South Sudan, Uganda and Zimbabwe, attended the course, which included a visit to the FCDO in June.

In **Angola**, we have encouraged media freedom and transparency amongst public media outlets. The British Embassy Luanda designed a project that focused on Media Freedom by providing online English Language training and capacity building. The project would train 15 journalists from the national public TV Network (Televisão Pública de Angola - TPA) to start in December 2023.

Uganda retains a relatively vibrant print, broadcast, and digital media environment with an ability to hold elements of the Government to account. Despite this, there remains a downward trajectory for media freedom evidenced by the continuing usage of arbitrary detention against government critics and members of the opposition, the use of a national internet shutdown during the last elections, and attacks on the media. Uganda has fallen 29 places in Reporters Without Borders' World Press Freedom Index over the last 10 years. The UK regularly raises these issues with the Government of Uganda in both multilateral fora and through our High Commission in Kampala. We are working with the Government of Uganda and broader civil society to push for a free, independent and impartial media to be allowed to flourish. The High Commission supported quality Ugandan journalism through both the Chevening Africa Media Freedom Fellowship and the Chevening scholarship programme. Concern has also focused on the digital space, with the passing of the Computer Misuse (Amendment) Act. The UK makes regular representations to the Government of Uganda urging them to ensure that, while striking the balance between protecting the right to privacy (including child protection) and freedom of expression, they uphold the fundamentals of both the Constitution of Uganda and Uganda's obligations under international human rights law.

³⁷ [Chevening Africa Media Freedom Fellowship \(CAMFF\) | Chevening](#)

According to an October 2023 report by the Commission on Human Rights in **South Sudan**,³⁸ civic space in South Sudan had “virtually disappeared”, replaced with an “entrenched systematic repression in regard to the media, human rights defenders and civil society”. In 2023, journalists, critics and human rights activists were threatened, harassed, illegally arrested and arbitrarily detained by South Sudanese authorities. The UK took a leading role in calling for the expansion of civic and political space ahead of likely elections in 2024, the first held since South Sudan became an independent country. We lobbied the South Sudanese Government directly to improve media freedom and civic space and highlighted individual cases of concern. In April, the UK led the successful mandate renewal of the Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan, which is a crucial mechanism for investigating, reporting, and collecting evidence of the curtailment of media freedom in South Sudan.

The British Embassy in **Cameroon** with the US and Canadian Embassies met media professionals to showcase the work of artists and reflect on the challenges and ways to promote and defend media freedom on 26 June³⁹.

Somalia ranked 141 out of 180 countries on the Reporters Without Borders press freedom index, and there were numerous cases of journalists being arrested and detained. The space for free and fair reporting remained severely limited. A prominent journalist was arrested in October 2022 for criticising the government clampdown on media freedom, prosecuted, and then released in 2023 after serving his term. Another journalist, detained in September 2023, was later released. The British Embassy, as Chair of the Human Rights Working Group, led international partners’ lobbying for the release of the journalists. In May 2023, we convened a roundtable of media freedom advocates and government representative with Ambassadors, to promote improved relationships between government and journalists. This became an ongoing series with a rotating host. We supported BBC Media Action to provide training and mentoring to local radio stations to develop content and support social behavioural change on gender equality, inclusive peacebuilding, climate change adaptation and biodiversity conservation. We continued to urge the Somali Government to stop using the Somali Penal Code to arrest journalists and to amend the 2020 Media Law, to enable the media to report independently without risk of retribution.

In the **Sahel** region, our Embassy supported media freedom through political engagement, including emphasising its importance to participative democracy, and funding projects to develop capacity in the media sector.

Pakistan ranked 150 out of 180 countries on the 2023 Reporters Without Borders (RSF) Media Freedom Index. According to Freedom Network (Pakistan NGO) from August 2021-23 11 journalists have been murdered, another 20 survived assassination attempts, 11 were abducted, another avoided kidnap, 25 were arrested or detained by the authorities. There have been 25 legal cases registered against journalists. Journalists suffered physical assault in 59 cases, 26 of which caused bodily injuries. There were five attacks on the homes of journalists. In 30

³⁸ [A_HRC_54_CRP.6.pdf \(ohchr.org\)](#)

³⁹ <https://twitter.com/UKinCameroon/status/1673311368840134672>

cases, journalists received specific threats of murder or other dire consequences and in 59 cases, journalists were harassed.

The Pakistan network has advocated for the safety of journalists and a freer media landscape by engaging publicly and privately with the Pakistani authorities on media freedom and the safety of journalists, particularly ahead of the 2024 elections. BHC officials regularly meet journalists and visit press clubs to understand the media landscape and hold events such as a roundtable with journalists and social media influencers in Karachi, to hear their concerns.

Under the flagship FCDO-funded Chevening South Asia Journalism Fellowship, seven journalists from Pakistan undertook an 8-week fellowship hosted by the University of Westminster. The programme explores the different ways in which the media play a part in holding democratic processes to account, including government, the civil service and security, as well as the broader political system in both the South Asia region and the UK.

FCDO collaboration with domestic departments

The FCDO continues to work closely with domestic departments in our collective defence of media freedom and the safety of journalists. In 2021, we co-established, with the then-Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) a cross-governmental meeting of senior officials from the FCDO, DCMS, Home Office (HO), Ministry of Justice (MoJ), Northern Ireland Office (NIO) and Cabinet Office (CO). They met in February and September. They discussed: the refresh of the UK National Action Plan for the Safety of Journalists (DCMS lead); measures to counter SLAPPs (MoJ lead); the Online Safety Act (DSIT lead); an update to the Public Order Act on journalists in demonstrations (Home Office lead); managing UK alerts on the Council of Europe Platform for the Safety and Protection of Journalists, and wider media freedom and sustainability work, including digital markets regulation (DCMS/BEIS lead) and media literacy work (DSIT lead). The Police Service of Northern Ireland updated on their strategy, working with journalists to deal with threats and attacks against them.

The FCDO continued to coordinate closely with DCMS and the Home Office on the UK National Action Plan (NAP) for the Safety of Journalists, attending meetings of the National Committee, which oversees implementation of the Plan, in July and December. The FCDO committed in the refresh of the Plan to continue its media freedom work internationally including through the Media Freedom Coalition and UNESCO's Global Media Defence Fund, to share UK experience in international fora, to promote the safety of female journalists and counter technology-facilitated gender-based violence. For instance, at an OSCE Human Dimension Committee meeting on 18 October, Switzerland reported on its first National Action Plan for the Safety of Media Professionals: participants put this down to the example the UK had set on reporting our National Action Plan and our encouraging of others to do so.

Working with the Council of Europe, the FCDO facilitated contacts with DCMS and the Ministry of Justice. DCMS are acting as the UK national focal point for the Council of Europe campaign for the safety of journalists. Ministry of Justice officials continued to actively share information and look at different practices and

approaches to SLAPPs with the EU, OSCE and the Council of Europe. The Council of Europe completed drafting a Recommendation and Explanatory Memorandum (EM) on countering the use of SLAPPs in late October. The EU continues to work on an EU SLAPPs directive. The Ministry of Justice will present on UK experience of drafting and implementing SLAPPs legislation at a Council of Europe event in 2024.

Teresa Ribeiro, OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFOM) visited the UK in October. She explored how to build trust in the media and democracy in this age of prevalent disinformation with UK interlocutors. She discussed media regulation with Ofcom Directors for Broadcasting, Media and Content. She met the Rt Hon Sir John Whittingdale, MP to discuss the Online Safety Bill and National Action Plan for the Safety of Journalists. With Lord Bellamy, she discussed UK measures to counter Strategic Litigation Against Public Participation. Ms Ribeiro called on Theo Clarke, MP, Vice Chair APPGs on Media Freedom and the BBC, and Andy Carter, MP, Chair of the APPG on public policy on the media. She also met UK media and civil society.

Reporters without Borders (RSF) published its annual report on Media Freedom on World Press Freedom Day in May. The UK's position at 26, dropped two places from the previous year. RSF noted initiatives to support local democracy reporting. The adoption of measures to counter Strategic Litigation Against Public Participation in legislation, the Online Safety Bill, the dropping of the Bill of Rights and DCMS's refresh of the National Action Plan for the Safety of Journalists are positive measures implemented over the course of this year.

Further Information in relation to questions in the 2019 FAC Report

The FCO must now demonstrate the impact, and sustainability, of its policies and initiatives. Currently, there are concerns that the FCO has allocated too few resources, given too little detail about how it will fulfil its campaign, and taken too passing an interest in how to make it sustainable. The FCO must move beyond the rhetoric to demonstrate impact in defending media freedom, and beyond assurances to demonstrate working structures that will sustain that impact beyond the current year, and the past tenure of Jeremy Hunt as Foreign Secretary.

The past four years demonstrate that the UK's initiatives to bolster international efforts to defend media freedom are proving sustainable. The FCDO has helped to establish structures to keep media freedom high on the international agenda and support action towards an enabling environment for media freedom. These structures, including the Media Freedom Coalition, the UNESCO Global Media Defence Fund, and the High-Level Panel of Legal Experts on Media Freedom, have functioned well in 2023, with other countries also taking leading roles alongside the UK.

The UK-funded Media Freedom Coalition secretariat continued to provide effective support to the Co-Chairs and wider membership. Its support was a key factor in Estonia's decision to take on the Co-Chair role. The Secretariat has devised new working procedures, issued a monthly newsletter, and collated MFC activities in an Activity Report to form a baseline for the organisation going forward. It has

continued its outreach to individual Coalition members encouraging their engagement with the MFC. It has followed up on members' pledges, provided briefings and support to the MFC diplomatic networks and organised and recorded meetings and data on MFC activities.

On 2nd May, the Secretariat organised two workshops in New York: a review of the Activity Report and a strategy workshop to produce recommendations for the future. The events brought together government representatives, the Consultative Network and members of the High-Level Panel of Legal Experts on Media Freedom to discuss how to take forward meaningful commitment to media freedom; how to maximise the impact of action on cases; as well as involving all members in activities and ensuring the range of Media Freedom issues are covered. Key recommendations focused on maintaining the response rate, the capacity and speed of response to cases and situations of concern and including trends as well. The Secretariat has set up a case portal to inform on case action by member states, suggested a mechanism to spread case response management among Executive Group members, started to brief members on cases and situations, and produced a communications toolkit. It will consider generating agreed language for public statements. This year the MFC has experimented with social media responses by the Co-Chairs, and Executive Group members, which has increased and sped up the case response rate. The MFC has issued statements on transnational repression and highlighting the key role of media in elections. The Secretariat has also devised a procedure for setting up MFC Working Groups.

The High-Level Panel of Legal Experts on Media Freedom (HLLP) comprises distinguished lawyers who provide legal advice and recommendations to the Media Freedom Coalition and others for the purposes of promoting and protecting a vibrant, free and independent media. The Panel is independent of Government but funded by the UNESCO Global Media Defence Fund. The HLLP has engaged on a bilateral basis with seventeen member states of the Media Freedom Coalition to provide targeted legal and policy advice. They provided four bespoke engagement plans to four MFC members, detailing legal and policy recommendations and how the HLLP could provide assistance. They prepared legal advice to two states on specific draft legislation. They have completed six International Standards Reports on media related legislation. The first of these: "On Religious Freedom and Discontent: Report on International Standards and Blasphemy Laws" was launched at a side event in New York on 3 May 2023 for World Press Freedom Day. Five more reports are due to be published in 2024. Following the report by the HLLP 'Providing Safe Refuge to Journalists at Risk', Media Freedom Coalition states have provided 1,800 emergency visas to journalists at risk in 2022 and 2023. In response to the HLLP's report on tackling impunity, during their media freedom event as part of the fourth Summit for Democracy, the Netherlands committed to an initial scoping exercise of the feasibility of an Independent Investigative Task Force (see page 16). The HLLP secretariat took part in briefings for the MFC's Diplomatic Networks on the newly issued Diplomatic Toolkit. The toolkit sets out the offer from the HLLP, how to engage with the experts and summarises the advice and recommendations in the HLLP reports.

The UK should support training to the law-enforcement branches of countries so that they are willing and able to protect journalists.

The FCO should give more consideration to supporting an international mechanism for investigating and punishing the abuse of journalists when governments cannot or will not do so.

The UK supports existing mechanisms within the UN that address media freedom and does not see a need, at this time, to create a new mechanism. However, we will continue to keep this under consideration in dialogue with other members of the MFC.

This year the Dutch government announced that they would support a feasibility study into a standing international investigative task force for crimes against journalists. This is based on a recommendation of a 2020 report: “Advice on Promoting More Effective Investigations into Abuses Against Journalists” authored by the MFC’s High-Level Panel of Legal Experts on Media Freedom. The authors of the Dutch feasibility study will report in 2024. We look forward to reading the results of their work.

In 2023, the High-Level Panel of Legal Experts on Media Freedom worked on reports, which assessed the impact of a range of security-related legislations increasingly deployed by law enforcement to target media and set out the relevant applicable international standards. The first report issued in May on blasphemy legislation and more such reports will issue in 2024.

The **Maltese** authorities averted a major threat to a journalist in 2023. This followed from Threats to Life training coordinated in 2022 by BHC Valletta for Maltese authorities (including security services, police and armed forces) and the Malta Police Force drafting Threats to Life Standing Operating Procedures. The Public Inquiry into the murder of Maltese journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia had made this recommendation to improve the safety of journalists in Malta. The British High Commission continues to support Maltese authorities, including through the ongoing UK-Malta Policing Partnership.

The British Embassy in **Cambodia** worked with UNESCO’s Global Media Defence Fund on projects to improve legal protection for journalists: a Media Support Desk launched by the Cambodian Center for Independent Media strengthens the provision of legal aid to journalists and media and supports advocacy for a national legal protection mechanism for journalists and those reporting public interest information including the role of law enforcement. The Women’s Media Center brought women journalists together in networks to provide peer support, counselling and access to legal assistance to improve safety.

The Commonwealth Principles⁴⁰, endorsed by a meeting of the Commonwealth Law Ministers (Ministers of Justice) in 2022, provide Commonwealth member states with a set of guidelines that seeks to uphold the shared values that are enshrined in the Commonwealth Charter. These include guidance for law enforcement and the judiciary on not unduly restricting freedom of expression by legislation or criminal sanction; the judiciary’s role in upholding the right to freedom of expression; effective

⁴⁰ [Commonwealth Principles on Freedom of Expression and the Role of the Media in Good Governance.pdf \(production-new-commonwealth-files.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com\)](https://www.commonwealth.int/sites/default/files/2022-12/2022-12-16-Commonwealth-Principles-on-Freedom-of-Expression-and-the-Role-of-the-Media-in-Good-Governance.pdf)

laws and measures for a safe and enabling environment for journalists to work without fear of attack, intimidation or interference; and to act decisively to end impunity through impartial, prompt and effective investigations. Commonwealth Leaders will be invited to formally adopt the Media Principles at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Samoa in 2024.

The FCO should do more in public to shame those who persecute the media. We refer to examples raised by our witnesses:

- ***The FCO should publicly press for an independent judicial public inquiry in Malta into the murder of the journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia.***
- ***the FCO has referred to the murder of Jamal Khashoggi “by Saudi Arabia”. It should build on that acknowledgement, and work with international partners, to achieve accountability through public criticism and sanctions against Saudi perpetrators.***
- ***Severe reductions in media freedom have taken place in Turkiye. The FCO should designate Turkiye a Human Rights Priority Country. It should criticise the violations taking place there publicly and forcefully.***

The FCDO continued to raise violations of media freedom, to hold to account those who abuse or restrict media freedom and to promote and protect media freedom internationally.

In **Malta**, October 2023 marked six years since the assassination of journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia, and one year since the presentation before Parliament of a series of bills designed to address the recommendations of the public inquiry into her murder. These bills were heavily criticised, when first made public, for a lack of consultation and were then withdrawn, despite having been drafted by Prime Minister Abela himself. The legislation has yet to return to parliament but has been commented on by Malta’s “Committee of Experts” on media freedom, and was made public some time ago in the hopes of garnering a more genuine consultation. Prime Minister Abela continues to try to balance the views of those who see the Daphne Caruana Galizia case as resolved (with the self-confessed murderers now in prison and the alleged mastermind awaiting trial); with the case’s continued international profile and criticism from international organisations for the perceived lack of progress, both in bringing the mastermind to trial, and in enacting the full list of recommendations from the public inquiry.

For the FCDO, the former Foreign Secretary visited Malta in February and met with Daphne’s family to discuss the case and progress on media freedom reforms in Malta, the UK and across the world. During his visit, he also signed the UK-Malta Bilateral Cooperation Framework with Foreign Minister Borg, which commits our two countries to ongoing cooperation and support for Maltese work on media freedom, including legislative reform as recommended by the Public Inquiry.

Meanwhile the British High Commission in Valletta has continued to support the work of local news houses and NGOs, including through funding programmes with the

Times of Malta and the Maltese Institute of Journalists (IGM) to support the training of local journalists and to support the professionalization and function of the IGM itself. This has included facilitating a visit to the UK to hold meetings with UK Government officials from DCMS and the FCDO, as well as to meet with Ofcom, the National Union of Journalists and the Independent Press Standards Organisation. The High Commission has also worked directly with the Maltese Government, providing UK legal analysis on draft legislation around anti-SLAPP provisions that form part of the ongoing Maltese government work to address recommendations of the public inquiry.

Our Embassy in Ankara hosted the diplomatic corps to hear an assessment by an International Press Institute delegation on the latest situation in **Turkiye**. We attended events hosted by **Turkiye's** journalists' association, visited media freedom organisations, and met local journalists and branches of the journalists' association, when visiting regions. Embassy staff attended trials alongside others in the diplomatic community where there are freedom of expression concerns – for instance, the trials of Turkish Medical Association chair Şebnem Korur Fincancı, and her medical association.

The Embassy has supported the P24 NGO to provide a platform for independent journalism, in strategic reporting and advocacy on **Turkiye's** implementation of the right to media freedom and freedom of expression and the Association of Journalists in supporting journalists reporting in the regions affected by the earthquake.

The Embassy works with our delegation to the Council of Europe in Strasbourg to better understand the Turkish position and encourage compliance by the Turkish authorities with Council of Europe rulings in cases at the European Court of Human Rights that relate to journalists and human rights activists, such as Osman Kavala, who is currently serving a life sentence.

The UK has always been clear that Jamal Khashoggi's murder was a terrible crime, and that **Saudi Arabia** must ensure such an atrocity can never happen again. We have consistently set out our grave concerns - both publicly and privately. The UK has sanctioned twenty Saudi nationals involved in the murder under our global human rights regime. We continue to raise concerns on the restricted media freedoms in the Kingdom, and call for the release of journalists, influencers and those who have been arbitrarily detained for exercising their freedom of expression. Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, Minister of State for FCDO, for example, has regularly raised the UK's concerns around freedom of expression with the president of the Saudi Human Rights Commission, including when he hosted her for meetings in London in September.

Widely respected US Wall Street Journal Reporter Evan Gershkovich was arrested in **Russia** in March on espionage charges and remained in detention. Both the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary called for his immediate release. Alongside other members of the Media Freedom Coalition Executive Group, the UK signed a statement on 12 April, which condemned his detention. The UK also raised the case, and wider efforts to stifle media freedom, at the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) including on 2 November, the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes Against Journalists. The UK remained in close contact with

the US, which continued to provide Mr Gershovich consular support. The courts extended his detention multiple times. At the time of this report until 30 March 2024. A date had yet to be set for his trial.

In the **Philippines**, Nobel Laureate journalist Maria Ressa and her independent media outlet Rappler were cleared of tax evasion charges on 12 September. This was the second and last of the tax evasion charges filed against her by the Department of Justice under former President Duterte. The verdict was a positive step for media freedom under the new Marcos Administration, who had said publicly that he would defer to ‘independent’ courts to decide the merits of cases involving journalists and human rights defenders. Despite this win, the appeal over her conviction for criminal libel remains pending before the Supreme Court, including the appeal against the closure of Rappler ordered by the Securities and Exchange Commission. British Embassy Manila continued to monitor the developments in Ressa’s conviction for criminal libel, and in other cases involving journalists and media outlets, given the direct impact to media freedom and the ability of journalists to do their jobs without fear of reprisal. The United Kingdom government regularly engaged with the Philippines government on the importance of protecting and promoting media freedom, and Embassy staff regularly meet journalists in Manila and in the region to hear about their work and the challenges they faced. The UK funded a number of projects in partnership with local civil society organisations, which supported community journalists and student journalists.

On 22 June, the British High Commission in Dhaka, **Bangladesh** joined a local Media Freedom Coalition statement on the killing of Golam Rabbani Nadeem, correspondent of BanglaNews24.com and Ekattor TV, which welcomed the arrest and opening of a case against the suspected perpetrators and called on all those in positions of influence in Bangladeshi society to speak up for press freedom.⁴¹

British Embassy Kinshasa engaged frequently with the Government of the **Democratic Republic of Congo** on media freedom related issues including the safety of journalists, freedom of expression, instances of hate speech and restrictions on civic space. They voiced concerns including on high-profile cases. For example, following the arrest of Jeune Afrique journalist Stanis Bujakera in September, they issued public communications outlining concerns and joined an EU-led demarche. British Embassy Kinshasa also contributed funding to a project by Reporters without Borders. This project sought to improve the security and capacity of journalists reporting on the DRC elections scheduled for December 2023.

The FCO should use sanctions to punish those who persecute the media, and coordinate with other countries on sanctions, to amplify their impact.

Over the past year, the UK’s autonomous sanctions regimes have been a powerful tool in holding those who persecute the media to account. Asset freezes and travel bans have been imposed to target those who commit human rights violations against members of the media and suppress freedom of expression across the world.

⁴¹ [Statement from the Media Freedom Coalition \(MFC\) - on Recent Demise of Journalist Golam Rabbani Nadeem - U.S. Embassy in Bangladesh \(usembassy.gov\)](#)

Since October 2022 we have designated over 80 individuals for human rights abuses in Iran, including organisations like the Supreme Council for Cyberspace and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Cyber Defence Command (CDC), that are charged with collecting private information of regime opponents and filtering access to the internet in Iran.

The Global Human Rights Sanctions Regulations 2020 allow us to designate those who commit serious human rights abuses or violations, including those committed against journalists, media workers and other human rights defenders. We continue to consider designations relating to media freedom in order to deter and provide accountability for serious human rights violations or abuses.

International cooperation is at the heart of UK sanctions policy. The UK will continue to seek opportunities for coordination with international partners on sanctions. This includes close partners such as the US, Canada, Australia and the EU. Sanctions remain one of our most powerful tools to deter and disrupt malign activity, and to demonstrate our defence of international norms.

The FCO should coordinate more closely with the Home Office to ensure that visas or asylum are not unduly denied to those journalists, and their associates or families, who are abused in their own countries. The Government should also consider a particular class of visa for journalists, threatened with violence to ensure journalists have the confidence to keep reporting, knowing they can make the judgement to leave when they need, not simply when they have the most chance of securing asylum.

A free and independent media environment is vital for healthy democracies and human rights around the world. The FCDO supports journalists and human rights defenders under threat to continue their valuable work, including from exile if they are no longer able to operate within their home country. The UK considers all requests for asylum on an individual basis.

The FCDO as a matter of course coordinates with the Home Office on visa and asylum requests from any country. The Home Office have advised that the Home Secretary's existing discretion to grant leave – for example in exceptional humanitarian circumstances – is sufficient to respond to such individuals.

The UK has supported journalists operating in exile from Myanmar, through our support to the PROTECT programme (Protecting Rights, Openness and Transparency, Enhancing Civic Transformation), implemented by a consortium of organisations including ARTICLE 19 and Internews. The programme provided emergency grants to 76 journalists and human rights defenders exiled from Myanmar, including 33 women and 43 men. In addition to this the programme has also provided support to journalists at risk inside Myanmar. Support has included provision of safe houses, rental accommodation, emergency relocation, and transportation costs. The programme has also delivered online training to citizen journalists, who are filling the gap left by media organisations which have left Myanmar. The training comprised four online workshops focusing on Basic Journalism skills; Mobile Journalism; Digital Safety; and Psychosocial Support.

The FCO should put the online and digital threats to journalists at the heart of their strategy. Journalists must be able to work online and offline, free from surveillance and intimidation, and confident in the security of their sources and data.

The FCO should provide training and/or technical assistance to journalists to counter harassment and intimidation, including online, designed in consultation with them.

A key objective of the FCDO's International Cyber Values-Based Campaign in promoting human rights, diversity, and gender equality in the design, development, and use of cyberspace, is to ensure that the design of online space is shaped by and is responsive to international human rights standards relating to the protection of women from gendered cyber threats.

UNESCO and the International Centre for Journalists (ICJ) have recorded online violence against women journalists, including coordinated online attacks, which are intended to discredit and intimidate women journalists, undermine freedom of expression and impact on the quality of democracy. The FCDO has funded a project with the ICFJ to develop an Online Violence Early Warnings Systems Dashboard designed to aid reporting and monitoring of attacks targeting women journalists. Working with affected stakeholders the dashboard was designed to be adaptable, responsive, and user-friendly. It also predicted the risk of offline violence correlated with online attacks, to help to prevent escalation.

Pakistan witnessed arbitrary shutdown of internet services and restricted access to social media platforms. Following former Prime Minister Imran Khan's brief arrest on May 9, broadband internet was shut down for three days, resulting in restricted access to information as well as loss of services dependent on web applications and online businesses. On December 18, access to social media platforms was again restricted in Pakistan ahead of a virtual rally organised by the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). Netblocks, an internet-tracking agency on X, confirmed that live metrics showed a nation-wide disruption. Services eventually resumed once the PTI event concluded. Activists and digital rights experts condemned the incident as a violation of right of access to information as well as the right to assembly.

In **Bangladesh**, in response to concerns about the legal repression of sections of the media, the UK raised the impact of the Digital Security Act (DSA) and its successor the Cyber Security Act (CSA) at the 5th UK- Bangladesh Strategic Dialogue in September. The UK also submitted recommendations to the open consultation on the CSA (2023).

Our media development programme Protecting Independent Media for Effective Development (PRIMED), which is covered in more detail below, has supported media outlets in Ethiopia and Bangladesh to make the transition from print to digital. It has also provided digital security training to journalists in media organisations supported under the programme.

The British Embassy in **Manila**, in collaboration with the Asian Institute of Journalism and Communication, The Asia Foundation, and the Philippine Center for

Investigative Journalism, signed a partnership agreement in October 2023, committing to work together to create an environment where journalists can go about their work safely, free from intimidation and violence. The partnership would address the challenges faced by journalists operating in Mindanao, especially in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), and aimed to provide comprehensive support, including capacity building on safety, fact-checking, and sensitive reporting. It would also support advocacy and help journalists build platforms to tackle human rights and security issues, enhancing the resilience of media professionals in the region. This initiative is supported by the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund.

The FCO should consider further measures to address the financial weakness and vulnerability of media organisations around the world.

The FCO should consider widening the remit the Global Media Defence Fund further to support journalists trying to preserve their work and independence despite their financial vulnerability and malicious efforts to silence them by exploiting it.

The FCDO continues to play a leading role in global efforts to coordinate development assistance to the media. The UK is co-chair of the Media Freedom Coalition's Working Group on Media Development, which brings together governments, civil society organisations and multilateral bodies to improve the coordination and effectiveness of support to the media sector. The Working Group is the main donor-civil society group steering international efforts to improve the quantity and quality of media assistance.

In the first quarter of the year, the Working Group helped to develop commitments on media development, which were published at the second Summit for Democracy. The group brought together not only governments and civil society, but also private sector organisations, who all made commitments in the area of "Bolstering Independent and Diverse Media." Forty-three commitments were made in total, including for example Reporters' Shield, an initiative that will provide legal assistance for media to be able to keep operating in the face of major lawsuits.

In 2023, building on work which started in the Working Group, there was strong progress towards agreeing new Principles for Effective Support to Media and the Information Environment. The FCDO, working with other donor countries and media development organisations, developed a first draft of the principles and presented them to a meeting of the Network on Governance of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee (OECD DAC) in June. There was constructive feedback on the principles, and these are now undergoing an online consultation in advance of being finalised in 2024.

The FCDO has also continued to take forward its own programming on media development, which addresses the financial weakness and vulnerability of public interest media around the world. The Protecting Independent Media for Effective Development (PRIMED) programme continued to support independent outlets in Ethiopia, Sierra Leone and Bangladesh in 2023. The programme, which is ending in March 2024, has had some significant successes. It bolstered five independent

media organisations in Ethiopia, helping them increase their resilience and engage with larger and more diverse audiences in a highly constrained environment where civic space was closing. In Sierra Leone, it supported media organisations to maintain their independence and the quality of their coverage around the critical election period. In Bangladesh, the programme helped media sector actors to come together to engage the Government around a piece of proposed media legislation.

In 2019, the UNESCO Global Media Defence Fund (GMDF) was established with a specific focus on journalist safety because other pre-existing international funds for journalists were not addressing this. The GMDF has supported journalists globally with the aim of supporting different platforms that connect media workers with their colleagues, for example to increase awareness of organisations providing support. One GMDF partner in the Nord-Kivu region of the DRC set up a network of investigative journalists against aggressions against women journalists. This network aimed to centralize monitoring and documentation of threats and aggressions against women journalists in the province. They produced investigative reports on these cases, helping the journalists concerned access legal assistance and carrying out related advocacy with the relevant authorities. This project was deemed a success and has now been expanded to a nearby province, which GMDF is supporting in 2023 and 2024.

The GMDF also supports civil society organisations, which want to take cases to court to challenge legal provisions that prevent journalists from doing their job. The GMDF has supported sixty-seven cases of Strategic Litigation, which have come before national, regional or international courts, as well as relevant UN mechanisms. These cases were selected because of their strategic potential to contribute standard-setting precedents for the protection and promotion of freedom of expression and the safety of journalists. As an example, in a South Asian country, one GMDF partner identified the issue of frequent and arbitrary internet shutdowns as something of particular concern vis-à-vis the exercise of media freedom in their country. In March 2022, following the filing of a public interest litigation petition against an ongoing internet shutdown in the country, one of the local High Courts issues the very first stay order against an internet shutdown in the country. They ordered the State to comply with the directions issued by the local Supreme Court, which held that internet shutdown orders must be lawful, necessary and proportionate – as well as published.

Balkan posts have supported the FCDO's Media For All project in **Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia** delivered by the British Council, the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, Thomson Foundation and INTRAC. Running from 2019 to 2023, the project supported sustainable business models, quality content and amplifying the voices of women, youth and underrepresented or marginal groups. Media For All provided tailored support to 140 independent local media outlets across the Western Balkans, giving young journalists a start in the industry. Across the region: 85 outlets reached new audiences, 77 outlets improved financial resilience, 49 outlets updated and modernised their business stream and 51 outlets had an increase in website users. For example, in Serbia 25 media outlets in 16 cities or towns designed, tested and piloted new models of engagement and monetisation. The project provided customized support on audience analysis and digital presence, encouraged content

that responded to audience needs and reached new audiences and empowered women journalists. Support to media organisations in the Western Balkans will continue through the successor project, Media for Change, which commenced in 2023 and will run until 2025.

The Government should give a further extension to its funding of the BBC World Service beyond March 2020, to give the World Service greater financial certainty.

The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office strongly values the work of the BBC World Service in promoting UK values globally through its independent and impartial broadcasting - providing high quality accurate news, analysis and discussion in 42 languages across the globe to 318m people weekly. BBC Brand Tracker data from 2023 demonstrates that the BBC remains the most trusted and reliable international news provider.

The FCDO continues to provide funding to support the World Service operation, providing a funding settlement of £283 million over the Spending Review period 2022-2025. This supports 12 language services, enhancements to services in Arabic, Russian, Thai and English, work to enable digital transformation, and countering disinformation. The 12 languages are: Afaan Oromo, Amharic (Ethiopia), Tigrinya (Eritrea/Ethiopia); Gujarati, Marathi, Punjabi, Telugu (India); Igbo, Pidgin, Yoruba (Nigeria); Korean; and Serbian.

As an outcome of the Integrated Review Refresh in March 2023, the FCDO is also providing £20 million of additional funding to the World Service over two years to protect all 42 World Service language services it provides, recognising its crucial role in supporting UK soft power, projecting UK culture and values overseas, and in countering harmful disinformation. Last year, the Government (DCMS and FCDO) also gave an additional £4.1m of funding for the World Service towards its Ukrainian and Russian language services, supporting an increase in trusted and independent content to counter disinformation in Russia and Ukraine.