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Report: Press Freedom Continues to Decline Worldwide

By Meredith Buel
Washington
01 May 2007[Buel Report - Download 946K](#) [Listen to Buel Report](#) [Watch Press Freedom report / Real broadband - download](#) [Watch Press Freedom report / Real broadband](#) [Watch Press Freedom report / Real dialup - download](#) [Watch Press Freedom report / Real dialup](#) 

Military coups, oppressive governments, and the outright murder of journalists are some of the reasons why media freedom continued a global decline in 2006. Those are among the findings of a new report released by Freedom House, a Washington-based, pro-democracy organization. VOA correspondent Meredith Buel has details from Capitol Hill.



Members of the media demonstrate against the kidnapping of BBC journalist Alan Johnston in downtown Cairo, 30 Apr 2007

The annual study of press freedom identifies what it calls troubling trends around the world, especially in Asia, the former Soviet Union and Latin America.

The report says among the most critical setbacks in Asia came in countries such as Thailand, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, the Philippines and Fiji because of political upheaval or states of emergency.

In Latin America, the study identified Venezuela, Argentina and Brazil as countries where media freedoms declined because of state action and deteriorating security environments.

Freedom House's Executive Director is Jennifer Windsor. "The reasons are multiple, but they include what we call the push back against democracy, which is a growing drive to neutralize and eliminate all potential sources of political opposition which has materialized in a number of crucial countries, with the press as a principal target," she said.

The Freedom House report was released during a conference sponsored by the organization and the Broadcasting Board of Governors, which oversees U.S. government, non-military, international broadcasting, including Voice of America.

Under Secretary of State Karen Hughes quoted statistics

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showing a record number, more than 110 journalists and media workers, were killed last year. "Journalists expose corruption and crime. They shine a spotlight on human rights abuses around the world and perhaps for those very reasons we are living in a time of great danger for journalists around the world. They are at greater risk than ever of being threatened, jailed or killed,"

The Freedom House report called the decline in press freedom in Russia and Venezuela appalling, because of the impact these nations have on the regions around them.

Washington Post White House reporter and former Moscow Bureau Chief Peter Baker highlighted the killing last year of investigative journalist Anna Politkovskaya as evidence of an increasingly dangerous work environment for reporters in Russia. "It is a climate in which independent journalists find it increasingly difficult to do their craft, to find venues in which to get opposition voices out and even to live their lives as the murder of Anna Politkovskaya last fall showed," he said.

In Venezuela, the government of President Hugo Chavez has announced the pro-opposition network, Radio Caracas Television, will go off the air later this month.

The chairman of the network, Marcel Granier, says the government is becoming more arbitrary and authoritarian. "This has slowly evolved into systematic language of hatred and aggression towards journalists, humorists, editors, newspapers, radio stations, employers and employees of the media," he said.

In Zimbabwe, the Freedom House report says President Robert Mugabe's government continues to tighten control over domestic media and block efforts of foreign reporters to cover events inside the country.

Geoffrey Nyarota, an award-winning investigative journalist from Zimbabwe, says the government-controlled media frequently focuses attacks on independent reporters. "We were described as enemies of the state and there is nothing as disconcerting as to see a government minister describing you as an enemy of the state," he said.

The Freedom House report also warns of expanded restrictions on the Internet, saying China, Vietnam and Iran continue to convict and imprison large numbers of journalists and what it called "cyber dissidents."

The five countries receiving the worst ratings in the survey are Burma, Cuba, Libya, North Korea and Turkmenistan.

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