

Wednesday 20 May 2020

Threats against journalists in Northern Ireland must stop

Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR) partners, press freedom and freedom of expression organisations, journalists' organisations, journalists and media workers condemn threats against journalists in Northern Ireland.

We, the undersigned, condemn the threats made by the South East Antrim Ulster Defence Association (UDA) against journalists at the [Sunday Life and Sunday World](#) in Northern Ireland. Early in the morning of 8 May, the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) visited the homes of a number of journalists to warn them about credible threats, including threats of physical violence against their colleagues and plans to target a journalist with a car bomb.

Both the Sunday Life and Sunday World have covered the South East Antrim UDA in their coverage of the murder of [Glenn Quinn](#), as well as the UDA's role in the Northern Irish drug trade. While it is unclear why the UDA have chosen now to threaten journalists, the papers' coverage of the UDA suggests the group's intention was to intimidate the journalists, their colleagues and others and dissuade them from continuing their work. Richard Sullivan, the Belfast editor of the Sunday World told ECPMF: *"Journalists in Northern Ireland continue to run the risk of attack from organised crime gangs and paramilitary organisations. It seems remarkable that in a major UK city, reporters are being visited in their homes and being warned they face imminent attack and even death. It is more than 22 years since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, yet the threat to freedom of speech, freedom of the press and the basic right to life are still being threatened by these organisations."*

Further to the threats made against the journalists, we, the undersigned, are appalled by the [subsequent threats](#) made against politicians, UUP leader Steve Aiken, UUP MLA Doug Beattie, SDLP MLA Patsy McGlone and Alliance MP Stephen Farry, who have been contacted by the PSNI warning of 'credible threats'. We commend these politicians for speaking out in support of press and media freedom and join calls for their continued protection.

As demonstrated in countries such as Italy, Serbia and Mexico, militancy and organised crime exert a disproportionate threat to journalists and require a concerted and robust response. Without this, violence, impunity and self-censorship could severely undermine the free and independent media landscape across Northern Ireland. As highlighted by Séamus Dooley, [National Union of Journalists \(NUJ\)](#) Assistant General Secretary, *"this is a grim reminder of the threats faced by many journalists across the globe by those who have reason to fear a free, independent and questioning press."* As a result of these threats, the publishers of three Belfast-based newspapers and the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) have joined together to [stand up for journalists and press freedom](#) in Northern Ireland.

While the PSNI were able to warn the journalists and politicians of the threats made against them, **we call on the service to continue the pressure to bring those behind the threats to justice.** This will be a powerful signal to all journalists and media workers across Northern Ireland that they are protected and able to work free from the threats of violence.

This comes at a time when press and media freedom is increasingly at risk in Northern Ireland. The [murder of Lyra McKee](#) in Derry by the New IRA in 2019, the unsolved 2001 murder of Sunday World investigative journalist, [Martin O'Hagan](#), threats made by dissident Republicans against [Irish News](#), and the legal actions brought against [Barry McCaffrey and Trevor Birney](#) highlight a

number of threats to media freedom in the country. Many of these recent violations and active threats to the safety of journalists in Northern Ireland were significant factors for the [United Kingdom \(UK\)](#) dropping two places in Reporters Without Borders' 2020 [World Press Freedom Index](#).

To ensure press and media freedom is adequately protected across Northern Ireland, **we call on the PSNI to ensure that these threats are investigated fully and on policy-makers in Stormont and Westminster to commit to protecting journalists and media workers in Northern Ireland.**

Signed by

ARTICLE 19

Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)

The Daphne Caruana Galizia Foundation

European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF)

European Federation of Journalists (EFJ)

Free Press Unlimited (FPU)

The Guardian News and Media Ltd

Index on Censorship

International Press Institute (IPI)

Media Diversity Institute (MDI)

Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP)

Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa (OBCT)

Reporters Without Borders (RSF)

Scottish PEN

The Shift News

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Rachel Hamada, Journalist

Meirion Jones, Investigations Editor, The Bureau of Investigative Journalism (TBIJ)

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This statement is part of the Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR), an Europe-wide mechanism, which tracks, monitors and responds to violations of press and media freedom in EU Member States and Candidate Countries. This project provides legal and practical support, public advocacy and information to protect journalists and media workers. The MFRR is organised by an consortium led by the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF) with ARTICLE 19, the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ), Free Press Unlimited (FPU), the Institute for Applied Informatics at the University of Leipzig (InfAI), International Press Institute (IPI) and CCI/Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa (OBCT). The project is co-funded by the European Commission. www.mfrr.eu

