

**Remarks of Ms. Amal Clooney - Launch of the Second Report by the High Level Panel of Legal Experts on Media Freedom: A Pressing Concern: Protecting and Promoting Press Freedom by Strengthening Consular Support to Journalists at Risk**

**16 November 2020**

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Thank you very much to the governments of Canada and Botswana for inviting me to address this global conference for media freedom. When I spoke at the inaugural conference last year I said that the challenges for media freedom were global and urgent, sadly that has not changed. Recent reports suggest that democratic freedoms have been in decline for the fourteenth consecutive year and that more than half of the world population now lives in a country where freedom of expression is in crisis.

In the past year alone the government of the Philippines has taken the largest broadcaster off the air, a new security law in Hong Kong has led to dozens of arrests and chilled the press, journalists in Belarus have been detained after reporting on post-election violence and just last week a journalist in Mexico was shot just as he was about to go on air.

In the Covid era the threat to journalists has only increased as new draconian laws have been introduced. In China individuals who tried to report on the early spread of the virus were prosecuted for spreading false rumours and disturbing public order and journalists in more than a dozen countries have been prosecuted merely for questioning their governments handling of the pandemic.

Although I am no longer Britons envoy on media freedom, I am still a member of an independent panel of legal experts convened to provide advice to governments on ways to better protect journalists. Today we are presenting our latest report, part of a series that has been developed in consultation with journalists and lawyers around the world. All of our reports this year relate to improving the enforcement of international legal protections that exist on paper, but need to be given effect by governments. Our aim is to bring to life the commitment made by 173 countries that have ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and in doing so promise to protect freedom of the press.

Earlier this year I authored a report recommending that governments impose targeted sanctions for human rights abuses wherever they occur, following the example set in legislation that has been adopted in the US and Canada. The report set out a number of suggestions for drafting sanctions legislation and using it in cases involving threats to the press. I am happy to say that since then the UK has introduced its own global human rights sanctions regime and has already used it to sanction Saudi officials for the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi and Belarus officials for threats to media freedom in that country. I have addressed a parliamentary committee in Australia considering similar legislation and I am in touch with officials within the EU as Europe considers its own regime.

Today, we are proud to launch our second report which responds to challenges faced by journalists who are posted abroad and harassed or arrested while working there. It argues that states should protect their nationals who work abroad by providing consular assistance, meaning assistance from diplomats, including, prison visits, access to legal advice, the monitoring of any trial and where necessary repatriation. Although some states already do this to some extent the system is haphazard and weak, so the report proposes a new charter of rights for detained journalists and a new code of conduct for governments to be overseen by a newly appointed international commissioner who would be tasked with monitoring states compliance.

I am delighted to introduce the author of the report, Irwin Cotler who will explain these recommendations in more detail, many of you will know him as Canadas former Minister of Justice

and Attorney General, who went on to set up the Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights a Montreal based organisation dedicated to promoting human rights. He is a brilliant lawyer and colleague on the legal panel who has devoted his career to combatting injustice around the world. Justice Abella, who sits on the Canadian Supreme Court has called him 'Canada's gift to the world' and I can certainly understand why he is considered a national treasure.

I will hand things over to Irwin from here, but let me just close by saying that we are not just here to write reports and speak at conferences, I think we probably all have other things we could be doing with our time. Irwin and I and the other lawyers we've worked with over the past year have produced detailed legal and policy advice addressed to a group of governments that says it champions press freedom. So the launch of a report should be the beginning of a conversation and I look forward to hearing the response of key governments to the suggestions that we are making.

Ultimately press freedom can only be protected if governments that respect human rights stand up to those that don't by imposing real world consequences on abusive behaviour and protecting journalists when they are attacked abroad. In due course I will provide an update on government's responses to our advice, I hope there will be good news and I hope to that our next discussion will be able to take place in person.

All the best and enjoy the rest of the conference.

Thank you.