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Alejandro Aguirre, President
Inter American Press Association
Subcommittee Hearing on Press Freedom in the Americas
Washington, D.C.
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Chairman, The Honorable Eliot L. Engel (D-NY)

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee. It is a great honor to be here today.

My name is Alejandro Aguirre, and I am the President of the Inter-American Press Association, based in Miami, Florida. I am also Deputy Editor and Publisher of Diario Las Américas, South Florida's 1st Spanish Language Daily Newspaper.

The IAPA represents 1,200 news and media outlets. Since 1950, we have worked

toward fomenting a free-flow of information and opinion in emerging democracies through various programs including our Chapultepec Project; assisting news outlets in developed democracies; as well as assisting journalists where news media are overtly or covertly suppressed, especially in the investigation of assassinations through our Impunity Project.

In the last ten years, political dynamics have changed to such a degree that many of the democratic successes achieved in the previous decades have been overturned, and thousands of journalists in Latin America and the Caribbean are reporting under threat of incarceration or murder.

The suppression of the free press is typically exercised in two ways: either through direct government-sponsored actions such as in Cuba and Venezuela, among others, or through an almost total breakdown in civil society in which terrorist groups and/or drug cartels intimidate journalists, at times aided by weak or corrupt local and law enforcement officials.

Mr. Chairman and members of the Sub-Committee, you are very familiar with the various political realities in Latin America, and time constraints don't permit me to go into many specific details here, but let me just say that the increase in media

suppression in countries such as Venezuela, Argentina, Cuba, Ecuador, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Brazil, and the murder of journalists in countries such as Mexico, Honduras and Columbia are stifling the independent press as these actions are intended.

But for the brave voices who continue to report in any way they can despite the constant threat of reprisals the flow of information in many of these countries would be completely lost. These men and women work in the face of threats against them and their families, surveillance of their loved ones and ultimately brutal kidnapping and murders.

In Venezuela the data paints a dismal picture-- the shutdown of *RCTV* is now in its third year, as are those of 34 radio stations last year and five TV stations at the beginning of 2010. An arrest order was given for Mr. Guillermo Zuloaga, owner of *Globovisión* after President Chávez criticized publicly just last week. It was made public the day the World Cup started.

In Cuba the half century old dictatorship allows no semblance freedom of speech as we know it. The "Woman in White" are physically attacked for demanding Free Speech as was the blogger Yoani Sánchez. Twenty journalists remain in jails.

Ecuador recently approved a Communication Law which requires the imposition of mandatory membership to a national journalists association; prior censorship; and a legal requirement to observe a government mandated ethical conduct. These types of laws are becoming a disturbing trend in the hemisphere.

We recognize President Obama for having expressed directly to the President of Ecuador, his concern for freedom of the press, as well as Secretary of State Clinton and Assistant Secretary Valenzuela's discussions on this issue with the Ecuadorean government and we applaud their efforts.

There are a number of cases of judicial censorship such as in Venezuela, Peru, and Argentina, and there is government censorship in the Brazilian newspaper *O Estado*.

This is not just a threat to the citizens of these countries, but it is also a threat to countries which live by the tenets of freedom of speech and of the press. The suppression of freedom anywhere is a threat to freedom everywhere. Specifically, the loss of a free press in Latin America poses a direct threat to the interests of the United States.

Organized crime flourishes in places where there is little or no journalistic reporting due to intimidation. These activities lead to greater infiltration of illegal drugs and weapons, in many cases, crossing over U.S. borders. It creates an environment leading to the exodus of an economically-viable population which becomes a desperate population fleeing their home countries out of fear for their lives.

Since the beginning of this year, 11 journalists have been murdered (six in Honduras, four in Mexico and one in Colombia), and the whereabouts of six others who have disappeared in Mexico remain unknown.

The United States can continue to play a very important role in encouraging a free press in Latin America, and encouraging those that are seeking to use their voice for the purposes of independent reporting.

Specifically, the Department of State should continue to promote bilateral discussions with Latin American and Caribbean countries which either engage in government-sponsored suppression or are dealing with criminal entities within their borders and are in need of assistance.

The role of the U.S. Government and the continued attention by this Sub-Committee is critical in this effort, for the sake of this nation and the free world, because Freedom of Speech is the cornerstone of all democracies.

Thank you again for this opportunity, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.