

Opening Statement
Chairman Eliot L. Engel

House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere

Press Freedom in the Americas

Wednesday, June 16, 2010

On World Press Freedom Day last month, President Obama brought attention to an issue that far too often goes unnoticed. He said that “last year was a bad one for the freedom of the press worldwide” and “more media workers were killed for their work last year than any year in recent history.”

Unfortunately, this is particularly true here in the Americas where press freedom has been deteriorating over the past few years. I called today’s briefing and hearing to shed light on this disturbing trend.

When nine journalists are murdered in Honduras in five and a half months making the small country the most dangerous one for journalists in the hemisphere, or when Mexico’s drug cartels brutally murder members of the press for reporting on the drug trade, we cannot sit idly by.

When Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez shuts down opposition TV and radio stations and intimidates journalists and media owners who express dissent, we all have a responsibility to speak out.

And certainly, we must continue to shed light on the stark state of the press in Cuba – a country with one of the worst media environments in the world where 25 of the estimated 200 political prisoners are independent journalists.

These are just a few of the most troubling examples of the breakdown in press freedom that we see in the Americas, and I hope that we will have a chance to examine these trends more closely.

While most of us in the inter-American community are quick to speak out when electoral democracy is in peril, we sometimes neglect to raise up our voices when other fundamental aspects of democracy are at risk, including a free and independent press.

Yet, in reading the Inter-American Democratic Charter – a charter agreed to on September 11, 2001 by every country in the hemisphere except Cuba – we understand that democracy is about much more than just elections. Of course, free and fair elections are essential. But, the Inter-American Democratic Charter must also be utilized to ensure that fundamental freedoms and democratic norms are safeguarded. This means that we

must speak out when the press is under attack in the hemisphere, as freedom of the press is a central tenet in any democracy.

I am particularly pleased to welcome OAS Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression Catalina Botero who will brief the committee prior to our hearing. Ms. Botero, your office does tremendous work in highlighting the breakdowns in press freedom in this hemisphere, and we all look forward to hearing from you. After the briefing is over, I will introduce our hearing witnesses.

Thank you. I am now pleased to call on Ranking Member Mack for his opening statement.