



FREEDOM NOW

Statement by Maran Turner, Freedom Now
Working Session 2: Freedom of the Media

On World Press Freedom Day last May, the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media joined his UN, Latin American, and African colleagues in a joint statement recognizing the essential role an independent and diverse media plays in supporting democratic institutions and the rule of law.

We in civil society stress that a strong robust media is necessary not just for functionality but for ensuring basic human rights. This is true for those societies which fail to engage in genuine democracy building as much as it is for mature democracies, such as the United States, where we in the country have been reminded how critical it is to remain vigilant at home.

I wish to raise two countries in the OSCE where support for independent media is crucial.

President Mirziyoyev's government has taken important steps in showing Uzbekistan's support of press freedom by inviting international media bureaus such as the BBC to return and by releasing journalists such as Yusuf Ruzimuradov from prison. The release of journalists is only step one. It must go further. Allowing the Uzbek media the autonomy it has been granted under international law will be the only way by which promises the country's officials have made about protecting the human rights of its citizens are followed.

By contrast, I am disappointed by what continues to be a deterioration of human rights in Azerbaijan, where independent media has been shut out and shut down and where journalists remain under constant threat of harassment and arrest. There are currently nine journalists imprisoned in Azerbaijan, including Mehman Huseynov, Seymur Hezi, and Afghan Mukhtarli, who was abducted from Georgia last year. We ask that the government review these cases immediately and release them. I would go further in asking the Azerbaijani delegation why it is so fearful of criticism, which is essential for healthy societies.

We call on OSCE members to consider applying more focused pressure on governments that fail to respect press freedom, especially for those that are imprisoning journalists and harassing their family members. The mistreatment and harassment of journalists and independent media must not be allowed to silence criticism.