

PRESS RELEASE

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IPI Retains Ethiopia, Nepal, Russia, Sri Lanka, Venezuela and Zimbabwe on IPI Watch List

At the Board Meeting of the International Press Institute (IPI), in Belgrade, Serbia on 14 June 2008, the IPI Board unanimously voted to keep Ethiopia, Nepal, Russia, Sri Lanka, Venezuela and Zimbabwe on the IPI Watch List.

The Ethiopian media landscape, which recently offered some positive signs, such as the release of 15 journalists in 2007, still faces major fallout from a harsh 2005 crackdown in terms of banned media, control of independent voices, regular blocking of Websites and use of the legal system to stifle journalists who refuse to tow the line. Furthermore, the whereabouts and status of two Eritrean state broadcaster journalists arrested while trying to enter Somalia in late 2006 remain unknown.

In Nepal, the 12 April Constituent Assembly elections campaign was plagued by violence against, and efforts to intimidate, journalists. Election results triggered some concern, with the CPN-Maoists, associated with many attacks on journalists, winning the most votes.

Russia continued to be a dangerous place for journalists. Repression of the independent media continued in the period running up to parliamentary (2 December 2007) and presidential (2 March 2008) elections. Charges of criminal defamation continued to be brought against editors and journalists critical of public officials, with disproportionate penalties proving a disincentive to objective reporting. In addition, journalists who covered opposition parties or reported critically on the current administration were often subjected to threats and physical harassment.

In Sri Lanka, where the conflict between the government and the Tamil rebels has recently escalated, journalists have been specifically targeted because of their reports. In many occasions, authorities have threatened the media not to publish "unpatriotic" reports, and physical attacks and other forms of harassment are commonplace. Attacks on journalists, including murder, remain unpunished, with no apparent official investigations being conducted into such crimes.

In Venezuela, President Hugo Chávez suffered a major setback in his campaign against Venezuela's privately-owned and largely pro-opposition media when, in a 2 December 2007 referendum, the country's citizens narrowly rejected proposals to amend several articles of the Constitution. The proposed amendments would have effectively revoked the 2001 Law on States of Exception, which states that freedom of thought and access to information cannot be restricted, even during emergencies. Nevertheless, the private media continued to face verbal and physical attacks, as well as legal and administrative harassment, in particular in the run-up to the December referendum.

Conditions in Zimbabwe remained oppressive, and spiraled to new lows in the aftermath of the disputed elections, held on 29 March. Many journalists, including several international media outlets, were prohibited from covering the elections; others were detained and even beaten. With follow-up elections currently scheduled for 27 June, reports of press freedom violations have also multiplied.