

Forum: Human Rights Council (HRC)

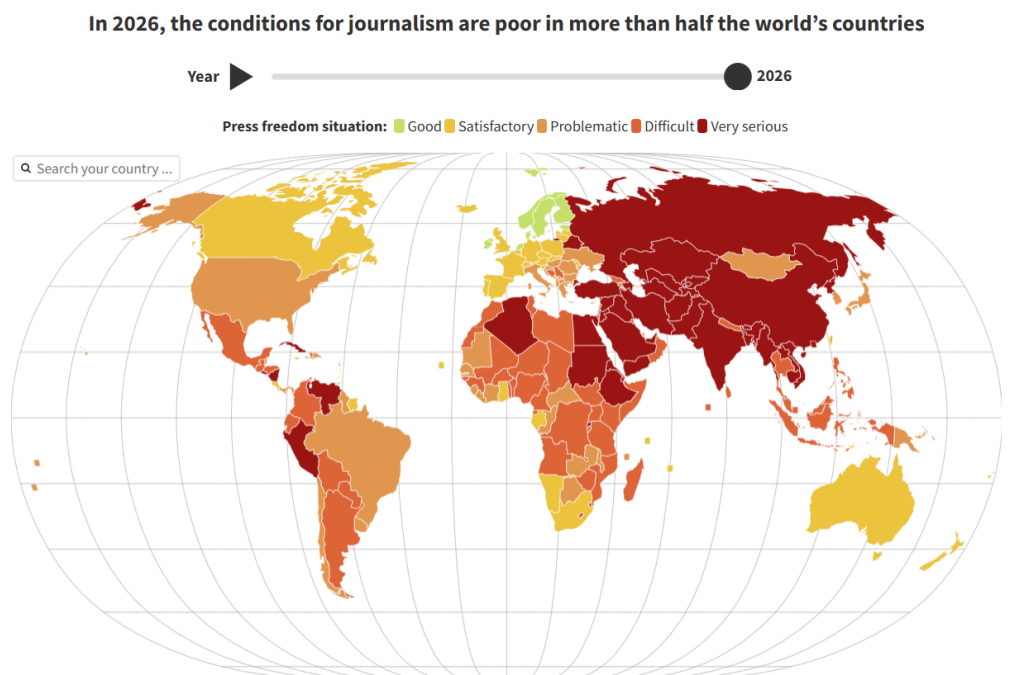
Issue: Maintaining freedom of press and guaranteeing the safety of journalists

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Introduction

Imagine a world where every question a citizen asks about their government is met with silence, not because there are no answers, but because no one is left alive or free to report them. This scenario is closer to reality than it may seem, given how rapidly global press freedom continues to decline. Citizens hold power accountable through press freedom, which is the right to investigate, publish and criticise without fear of violence or punishment. It is guaranteed by Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights ([UNGA, 1948](#)) and the ICCPR ([UNGA, 1966](#)), and is a foundation for almost all other rights; if a society cannot access accurate information, it cannot meaningfully exercise the rights it has. But this freedom is being eroded. In 2026, the world's press freedom index fell to its lowest level in the 25-year history of the index, with more than half of the 180 countries surveyed rated as "difficult" or "very serious" for press freedom. ([RSF, 2026](#)). This report explores the reasons for the decline in press freedom, the hot spots of the crisis and what the international community can practically do to address it.



RSF World Press Freedom Index 2026 Map, showing global press freedom situation per country
([RSF, 2026](#))

Definition of Key Terms

Press Freedom

The right of media entities to collect, publish and broadcast information without interference, censorship or retaliation from the government.

Journalist

An individual involved in gathering, verifying, producing, and disseminating news and information to the public. This encompasses professional journalists as well as media workers or social media producers who are involved in journalistic activity.

Impunity

Freedom from punishment or from the consequences of an action. In this context, it means that a State does not investigate, prosecute or punish those responsible for the crime against a journalist, and that perpetrators go unpunished.

SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation)

A lawsuit filed against a journalist or outlet with little genuine expectation of winning, intended instead to burden them with legal costs and time so they abandon a story or self-censor in future.

Self-Censorship

a journalist's decision to withhold, soften or avoid a story because of fear of legal, physical or digital consequences, not for editorial reasons.

Background Information

Journalists face threats to press freedom through a clear chain of cause and effect: suppressive motives drive states and armed actors to suppress reporting; these motives are then carried out through criminalising laws and physical violence against journalists; and impunity for these acts allows the entire cycle to continue unchecked.

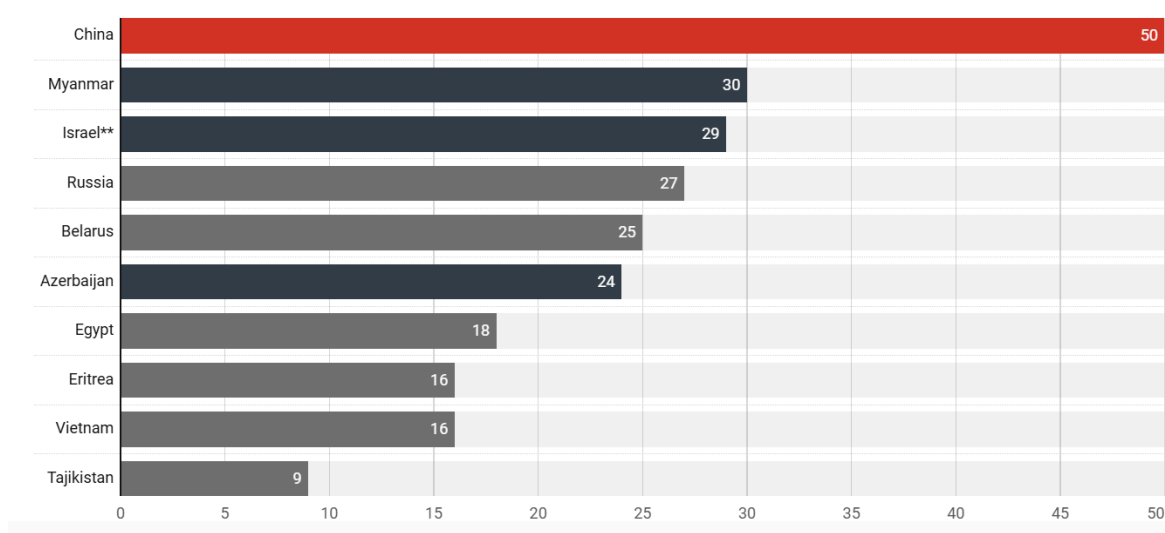
Why Suppression and Violence Exist

Investigative journalism threatens governments, armed groups, and criminal organisations when it exposes corruption, human rights abuses, or other activities they have an interest in keeping hidden. Investigative reporters can document evidence of government corruption, bribery, abuses and reveal information that would otherwise remain concealed. This can

directly threaten those responsible, therefore governments may prosecute journalists who investigate corruption; armed groups may target journalists who document attacks against civilians; and criminal organizations may target journalists investigating trafficking. This is reflected in cases such as China's prosecution of journalists investigating state corruption ([NYT,2026](#)), the targeting of reporters documenting attacks on civilians by armed groups in Syria ([RSF,2026](#)) and the killing of journalists investigating trafficking networks by drug cartels in Mexico ([CBS,2025](#)).

Legal Criminalisation

A number of states have broadly drafted laws, such as those on national security, "fake news" or defamation, that are used to prosecute journalists for legitimate reporting, such as Russia's 2022 law criminalising the spread of "false information" about its armed forces ([OHCHR,2022](#)), used against journalists covering the conflict in Ukraine or Turkey's counter-terrorism legislation used to imprison reporters covering government criticism ([RSF,2021](#)). These laws are not explicitly drafted with journalists being mentioned, but their ambiguity allows governments to selectively enforce them, thereby lending an appearance of legality to prosecution. SLAPP suits do the same thing, but with civil, not criminal law, and take advantage of the fact that most journalists and outlets can't outlast a well-funded legal campaign. The scale of this criminalisation is quantifiable: CPJ's 2025 prison census counted 330 journalists imprisoned globally, among the highest since the recording began in 1992, with China, Myanmar and Israel leading the census. ([CPJ, 2026](#)) Imprisonment is a more effective suppression method for a state than violence, which attracts international condemnation, because it keeps a journalist out of the field for an extended period of time and prevents other journalists from reporting on the same story.



Number of journalists imprisoned worldwide by country as of December 1st, 2025 ([CJP,2025](#)).

Violence in Conflict Zones

The most common means of press suppression is physical violence during armed conflict, because accountability mechanisms that would otherwise prevent attacks are largely inoperative in war. In 2022-2025, UNESCO documented 186 journalists killed in the process of reporting on conflict, a 67% rise from the previous reporting period. In 2025 alone, 93 journalists have been killed, 60 of those were killed in conflict zones. This is not just a crossfire issue, but a deliberate targeting issue as well. ([UNESCO, 2026](#)). The August 2025 killing of Al Jazeera correspondent Anas Al-Sharif and five colleagues in a strike on a clearly marked media tent drew direct condemnation from UNESCO, which invoked Security Council Resolution 2222, affirming journalists' protected status as civilians under international humanitarian law ([UNESCO,2025](#)).

The Fear of Reporting and Impunity

All of the above legal and physical threats influence journalism before it is published. Many journalists, fearing the potential for a defamation charge, imprisonment, or worse, self-censor and drop coverage of sensitive topics, rather than risk the consequences of pursuing it. This fear is still alive because there is almost no deterrence against it: nine out of ten times, journalists' killers go unpunished. ([UN, 2025](#)). Impunity thus does not simply fail to deter future violence, but it also tells future perpetrators that targeting journalists carries little to no risk. Ironically, it is the journalists themselves who end up paying the price for something that isn't even a crime, simply speaking or reporting leads to them suffering through violence, harassment, exile, or legal trouble.

The Gender Aspect

Women journalists are subjected to gender-specific threats. A study by the International Center for Journalists, in collaboration with UN Women and UNESCO, revealed that 75% of 354 women journalists surveyed faced online abuse in 2025, often including gendered harassment and AI-generated abuse ([UNESCO, 2026](#)), demonstrating how digital platforms have created a low-cost, low-accountability channel for intimidation that physical distance no longer prevents.

Past Attempts to Solve the Issue

The only legally binding instruments on the issue are Security Council resolutions 1738 and Resolution 2222. Resolution 1738 was the first to call for the protection of journalists as civilians in armed conflict ([UNSC,2006](#)). Resolution 2222 ([UNSC,2015](#))

reinforced this by calling for UN peacekeeping missions to make a formal statement on violence against journalists in conflict areas, and to incorporate monitoring into the UN's work. The UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists ([UN,2012](#)) is a non binding framework that organised the response to this issue into 3 parts: prevention (training judicial and security actors), protection (national safety mechanisms for at-risk journalists), and prosecution (reporting on the judicial status of journalist killings). These frameworks have shifted international norms on press freedom and protection but because only the Security Council resolutions are legally binding, the Plan of Action depends entirely on voluntary state compliance, which could be considered its main weakness, due to that reporting on judicial follow up remains low, and overall the growth of the problem has consistently outpaced efforts to solve it.

Organisations and Major Countries Involved

UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.)

UNESCO leads the UN's response through its Plan of Action (prevention, protection, prosecution) and tracks cases via its Observatory of Killed Journalists. In Gaza, it currently provides journalists with equipment, psychological support, and training.

RWB (Reporters Without Borders)

RWB holds UN consultative status and argues current legal protections are outdated. It is pushing the EU to enforce its Media Freedom Act, and its 2026 Index found misused national-security laws are now the fastest-declining protection worldwide.

CPJ (Committee to Protect Journalists)

The CPJ treats criminalisation as the crisis's central driver, and provides legal, medical, and trauma support to jailed and released journalists. Its latest report named China, Myanmar, and Israel as the world's top jailers.

China

China frames press restrictions as a matter of sovereignty rather than human rights, and has been the world's leading jailer of journalists for three years running, exemplified by the 2024 espionage conviction of journalist Dong Yuyu. ([CPJ,2025](#))

Israel

Israel defends its Gaza press restrictions as military necessity, and only allows journalists in under military escort. RSF names this a key reason the Middle East is now the most dangerous region for journalists. ([RSF,2026](#))

Myanmar

Myanmar's military government treats independent media as a threat, shutting down

dozens of outlets' licences since the 2021 coup and running all official information through state broadcasters. ([CPJ,2026](#))

Possible Solutions

Addressing legal criminalisation:

- Encourage states to adopt model legislation narrowing the scope of national-security and defamation laws to explicitly exclude legitimate journalistic activity.
- Establish regional legal-aid funds, coordinated through bodies like the HRC, to help journalists fight SLAPP suits without bearing the full financial burden alone.

Addressing violence in conflict zones:

- Integrate explicit journalist-protection clauses into UN peacekeeping and special political mission mandates, building on Resolution 2222, so protection is written into operations rather than relying on after-the-fact condemnation.
- Create a rapid-notification hotline between accredited media outlets, independent journalists and citizens and UN missions operating in active conflict zones to reduce mistaken or preventable strikes on identified press and request for aid for attacked journalists.

Addressing fear of reporting and impunity:

- Encourage that states submit judicial-status reports on journalist killings to UNESCO annually, with non-reporting states publicly listed to increase diplomatic pressure.

Addressing the gendered dimension:

- Require social media and press platforms operating internationally to establish rapid-response reporting channels specifically for coordinated harassment campaigns against women journalists.

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Appendix

Delegates should explore the following resources to expand their understanding of the issue at hand and how to create realistic and effective solutions for the same:

i. Past Resolutions and Treaties on This Issue:

- UN Security Council Resolution 1738 (2006): first binding text requiring parties to armed conflict to treat journalists as protected civilians
- UN Security Council Resolution 2222 (2015): adds mandatory peacekeeping-mission reporting on violence against journalists
- UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity (2012):

three-pillar framework of prevention, protection, and prosecution

- UN General Assembly Resolution 68/163 (2013): calls on states to investigate journalist killings and report findings to UNESCO
- Human Rights Council Resolution 21/12 (2012): first HRC resolution condemning attacks on journalists and calling for safe reporting environments
- Human Rights Council Resolution 27/5 (2014): follow-up resolution strengthening state accountability measures
- UNESCO General Conference Windhoek+30 Declaration (2021): reaffirms press freedom principles on the 30th anniversary of the original 1991 Windhoek Declaration

ii. A document delegates should read closely before drafting resolutions:

- Article 79 of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions (1977): the founding legal text establishing journalists' protected status as civilians during armed conflict, and the direct legal basis for Security Council Resolutions 1738 and 2222.

iii. Useful monitoring and reference tools:

- UNESCO Observatory of Killed Journalists
- RSF World Press Freedom Index, full country rankings
- CPJ interactive database of imprisoned and killed journalists