The Rt Hon Theresa May MP

Prime Minister

10 Downing Street

London

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14 May 2018

Dear Prime Minister,

I am writing on behalf of Reporters Without Borders – known internationally as Reporters sans frontières (RSF) – to urge you to raise press freedom concerns as a matter of urgent priority in your meeting with Turkish President Erdoğan on 15 May. Specifically, we ask you to call for the release of Turkey’s many jailed journalists and a stop to the unprecedented crackdown on freedom of expression taking place in the country, which is a source of destabilisation both for Turkey and all of Europe.

I last wrote to you in January 2017 ahead of your visit to Ankara, where you met with President Erdoğan. We appreciated the response we later received from Sir Alan Duncan, but were disappointed that you did not specifically mention the plight of the unjustly jailed journalists, or the broader crackdown on freedom of expression in the country. Remaining publicly silent on these worrying issues whilst agreeing new trade deals with President Erdoğan sends the wrong signal about the UK’s priorities in its bilateral relations with Turkey.

Now, 15 months after your visit, the freedom of expression situation in Turkey is more dire than ever. Turkey recently dropped to 157th out of 180 countries in Reporters’ Without Borders 2018 World Press Freedom Index, and remains the world’s biggest prison for professional journalists. Under the state of emergency imposed following the failed coup attempt in July 2016, over 100 journalists have been arrested, more than 140 media outlets closed, and at least 889 press cards rescinded.

Among the jailed journalists are 11 columnists and editors of *Zaman* newspaper, which was closed by state decree in 2016. They are currently standing trial in Istanbul, where a verdict is expected imminently. Prosecutors have requested life sentences for five of these journalists - Şahin Alpay, Ahmet Turan Alkan, Ali Bulaç, Mümtazer Türköne, and Mustafa Ünal - accused of ‘attempting to overthrow the constitutional order’ and belonging to a ‘terrorist organisation’. They would have no possibility of parole and minimal family visits.

Life sentences are not unprecedented; in February, journalists Ahmet Altan, Mehmet Altan, and Nazlı Ilıcak were convicted of ‘attempting to overthrow the constitutional order’ under Article 309 of the Turkish Penal Code and sentenced to aggravated life sentences, or life without parole. These were the first verdicts against journalists accused of being connected to the failed coup attempt of July 2016, and set a dangerous precedent for the many other journalists standing trial on similar charges.

In March, a group of 25 journalists were convicted of supporting or being members of the movement led by US-based Muslim preacher Fethullah Gülen, regarded by the Turkish government as a ‘terrorist organisation’ and blamed for the failed coup attempt in July 2016. They received sentences ranging from two to seven years in prison.

In April, 14 *Cumhuriyet* newspaper journalists received a range of sentences up to eight years and six weeks in prison. The 14 convicted defendants will remain free, under court control, until their convictions are upheld on appeal. Accused of supporting the goals of three separate ‘terrorist organisations’, the journalists were targeted after publishing a series of revelations that were embarrassing for the Turkish authorities. The newspaper was awarded RSF’s Press Freedom Prize in 2015.

RSF’s own representative in Turkey, Erol Önderoglu, is also facing serious jail time. Önderoglu, who is standing trial as part of a group of three journalists and human rights defenders, has been charged with ‘terrorist propaganda’ in connection with a campaign of solidarity with *Özgür Gündem*, a Kurdish daily newspaper that has been closed by the authorities. The next hearing in their case has been set for 9 October.

The sale in March of Turkey’s biggest media group, Doğan Media Company, to a pro-government conglomerate, Demirören Holding, has served as further confirmation of the end of media pluralism in Turkey. Doğan had been the last major remaining media group not to have been brought under the Turkish government’s control.

Thank you for your attention to these extremely worrying issues, which we urge you to raise as a matter of urgent priority in your meeting with President Erdoğan. The United Kingdom must make it clear that press freedom matters in its bilateral relations, and that it will hold its partners accountable for upholding their own laws and their international obligations.

Sincerely yours,

Christophe Deloire

Secretary General

Reporters Without Borders (RSF)