

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi
State Counsellor
Minister of Foreign Affairs
Minister of the President's Office
of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar
State Counsellor Office No 8
Naypyitaw, Myanmar

Paris, 7 September 2017

Dear State Counsellor,

After your party, the National League for Democracy, won the November 2015 general election, Myanmar's journalists hoped that they would be free to work and would no longer have to fear arrest or imprisonment when they criticized the authorities. Two years later, Reporters Without Borders (RSF, also known under its French name Reporters sans frontières) is forced to conclude that media freedom has clearly not been one of your government's priorities.

Now that clashes between Myanmar's armed forces and Rohingya fighters have left more than 400 dead and caused an exodus of around 130,000 refugees to Bangladesh, it seems urgent that journalists should be allowed to do their job of investigating and reporting in the western state of Rakhine. In RSF's view, this is the only way to be able to shed light on the responsibility of the various parties for triggering the unprecedented humanitarian crisis in this region.

Yesterday, you blamed "terrorists" for "a huge iceberg of misinformation", objecting to the expression "ethnic cleansing," which has been used several times by Nobel laureates to describe what the Rohingya minority has suffered in Rakhine. Since the start of the current crisis, Myanmarese and foreign journalists have been systematically denied access to the conflict region by the military authorities, with the result that the only reliable information has come from interviews with refugees who fled into Bangladesh and from the smoke of burned villages that can be seen from the border. RSF firmly condemns this state of affairs, which recalls the worst moments for media freedom during the five decades of military dictatorship in Myanmar.

These restrictions have been compounded by cases of blatant censorship. In particular, RSF voices its support for the BBC, which had to suspend local retransmission of its Burmese-language service on 4 September. The BBC was censored by its local broadcast partner, which refused to retransmit content if the term "Bengalis" was not used to refer to Rohingyas.

RSF regards these violations of the freedom to inform as unacceptable in a country that claims to be in a transition to democracy. As head of the government, your silence on these media freedom violations is absolutely deafening. Must we remind you of what you said when you were freed in 2010, namely that “the basis of democratic freedom is freedom of speech”? Must we remind you of the assurances you gave to RSF in 2011 about your commitment to media freedom?

Today we have to point out that many journalists have been silenced since you took over as head of your country’s government in April 2016.

In June of this year, RSF condemned the detention of three journalists – **Aye Naing** and **Pyae Phone Naing** of *Democratic Voice of Burma* and **Thein Zaw** of *The Irrawaddy* – under the Unlawful Association Act, a law widely used by the previous military government to silence dissent when you were heading the opposition from prison or house arrest. At the start of June, we issued a press release about the defamation suit that the armed forces brought against two *Voice Daily* journalists over a satirical article regarded as insulting. Shortly before that, **Myo Yan Naung Thein**, an imprisoned blogger who is a member of your party, was convicted in April of defamation over a comment criticizing the head of the armed forces. At the start of this week, RSF issued a press release deploring the fact that the journalist **Swe Win** was going on trial on a charge of defaming Ashin Wirathu, a fundamentalist Buddhist monk who is notorious for his use of hate speech.

These are just a few of the nearly 70 journalists who have been prosecuted under article 66(d) of the 2013 Telecommunications Act. RSF asks you to ensure that this article is amended again because it criminalizes the provision of news and information and because its vagueness facilitates disregard for the rule of law with respect to journalists and their work.

Awarded the Sakharov Prize in 1990 and the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991, you are a leading figure in the defence of human rights in general and freedom of the press in particular. RSF urges you to remain equal to the moral authority that these awards gave you, by doing what is necessary to ensure respect for the freedom to inform.

I respectfully thank you for the attention you give to this letter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of a large, stylized 'C' followed by a horizontal line that ends in a small upward tick.

Christophe Deloire
Secretary-general