

CPJ announces 2009 International Press Freedom Awardees

WASHINGTON: Naziha Réjiba, editor of the Tunisian online news journal Kalima, said she knows what to expect when she returns home — surveillance, harassment, and threats conducted by one of the world's most repressive governments.



“While I’m speaking, many homes of Tunisian journalists are completely surrounded,” Réjiba, one of four recipients of the 2009 International Press Freedom Awards, told reporters at the National Press Club on Thursday, 19 November 2009, describing state surveillance. The Committee to Protect Journalists gives the awards each year to courageous journalists working in dangerous and repressive circumstances.

At the press conference, CPJ also introduced awardee Mustafa Haji Abdinur, an Agence France-Presse correspondent and editor-in-chief of Radio Simba in Somalia. Two other CPJ awardees, J.S. Tissainayagam of Sri Lanka and Eynulla Fatullayev of Azerbaijan, were recognised but not present: they are imprisoned in their home countries in retaliation for their work.

The awards will be officially bestowed on Tuesday, 24 November in New York; the awardees are in Washington to meet with elected officials, diplomats, and news media.

Abdinur noted the dangers facing the press in Somalia, where 18 journalists have died on duty since 2005. “When a journalist is killed, the news is also killed,” he said, noting that foreign journalists are no longer stationed in the country and domestic reporters are being attacked, killed, or forced into exile. Few reporters are left, and the world knows ever less about the grave crisis there.

CPJ executive director Joel Simon called for the release of the imprisoned journalists Tissainayagam and Fatullayev. “We will make sure their respective governments are aware of our outrage,” he said.

Fatullayev is an investigative journalist whose colleague, editor Elmar Huseynov, was assassinated in 2001. Fatullayev is serving more than eight years on fabricated charges after his reporting on the unsolved Huseynov slaying raised questions about government obstruction.

“His only crime is his journalism,” said Nina Ognianova, CPJ’s Europe and Central Asia program coordinator. “He is being punished for doing a job that the government has not done: investigating the murder of his editor.”

Tissainayagam, or Tissa as he is known in Sri Lanka, is serving 20 years in prison on terrorism charges

based on his journalism. Tissainayagam had written columns documenting human rights and other abuses by Sri Lankan military authorities. The government called it "inciting communal disharmony."

Bob Dietz, CPJ's Asia program coordinator, called on Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa to interver in the case, rectify a miscarriage of justice, and set Tissainayagam free.

For more information about the awardees and the awards ceremony, which will be held at the Waldorf-Astoria in New York, go to <http://cpj.org/>.

At the ceremony, CPJ will also honor the author and former *New York Times* columnist Anthony Lewis. Lewis, a founding board member of CPJ, will be presented the Burton Benjamin Memorial Award for lifetir achievement.

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