

Writers in Prison Committee – PEN Congress – Chair’s Report

Let me begin by wishing all of you the best of health during these weird and trying time, unexpected and uncertain though it is. Writers like isolation to get their work done, but when that isolation is imposed, it is not easy. I do wish we were meeting in person, but it makes eminent sense not to do so. I do hope you are surrounded by virtual or real presence of friendships and companionships during this unusual time.

We meet at a time of great uncertainty, and a cataclysmic event – the pandemic – has offered opportunities around the world for political leaders to create laws, impose restrictions, require surveillance, and monitor movements of people, writers, journalists, and movements, ostensibly to safeguard our health, but with little clarity about who gathers the data, with whom it is shared, for how long it is used, and for what purpose it is stored. Just as 9/11 saw a rollback in our fundamental freedoms in order to protect us from terrorism, COVID-19 has offered an opportunity to governments to restrict our freedoms further.

At the Congress, we will have two panels where we will discuss challenging issues. In one, we will be speaking with writers and experts about how the pandemic has changed the world; in another, we will examine the author’s identity and authenticity. Who speaks for whom. I do hope you will join those conversations.

As I begin my final year as the chair of Writers in Prison Committee, I want to offer three reflections, which I hope will guide us as we develop our next strategic plan.

The more things change, the more they remain the same: As the Pandemic has shown us, government have rediscovered their old tools to curb freedom of expression. We need to remain vigilant.

The Internet may have been a false dawn: The freedoms the Internet promised has also led to proliferation of lies, also known as fake news, and hateful speech. Both create problems for liberties. The former creates noise in which it is harder to find out the truth; the latter intimidates vast groups of people who may opt out of conversations, letting the loud voices dominate the discussion. Internet-based companies which offer platforms have shown themselves to be incapable or unwilling to regulate content. Governments aren’t fit-for-purpose either. We need newer, clever ways of dealing with the issue.

Non-state actors can sometimes be more dangerous than state actors: Related to my previous point, it is clear that non-state actors – religions, religious groups, corporations, armed opposition groups carrying out propaganda – may be as dangerous to freedom of expression as governments. And yet, as the previous point shows, governments may not be able to counter those forces effectively.

As we explore our future strategy, we need to think carefully how to capitalize on our strengths, how to mobilise our membership, and how to use the new technologies to amplify our work so that we have the freedom to read and the freedom to write, and those who have the freedom to speak also have freedom after they’ve spoken. I will have more to say about this when we discuss our strategic plan.

For now, let me encourage members to consider standing for elections (or running for office, if you are so inclined) to be the next chair. As you know, my term ends in Summer 2021. By the PEN Constitution, I am not eligible for another term. It has been an honour and privilege working with all of you. I encourage PEN members who feel strongly about the issue to raise their hands and consider running for the chair's position. The Search Committee will have more details. I am happy to talk to anyone interested to explain what it entails and share my experiences. For those who want to start early, follow the **Search Committee guidance** for candidature nominations. The election will be held at the Centenary Congress, hopefully in person in Oxford, next year.

The chair cannot function without the tireless work of the researchers and coordinators at the Secretariat, and I want to thank the present team – Alicia Quinones, Sara Whyatt, Nduko oMatigere, Ross Holder, and Aurelia Dondo (maternity leave), as well as thank those who have left PEN International in recent months – Lianna Merner, Emma Wadsworth-Jones, and Laurens Hueting – for their excellent work and wise advice. I also want to thank Cathy McCann and the protection team for their help. They do all the hard work; I write short statements and get to speak in public, but I cannot do any of that without their help. And none of us can do any of this without the help and support of all of you, the centres, which work so hard in ensuring that the PEN message goes far and wide.

Let me provide a regional overview now.

AFRICA:

Individual case work, capacity strengthening of PEN Centres and solidarity action on emergent freedom of expression concerns by peer organizations formed the bulk of work for PEN International in Africa in 2020.

On case work, we carried out Rapid Action Network (RAN) calls for action on behalf of three writers in distress. The first RAN was on Ugandan writer and journalist, **Kakwenza Rukirabashaija** who arrested in April by the military police. Although he was accused of violating Uganda's COVID-19 control regulations through a post he had made on his Facebook page, his interrogation under torture centred on his novel, *The Greedy Barbarians*, a book critical of endemic official corruption in **Uganda**. Although he was released on bail, court proceedings have dragged. PEN continues to monitor this case. Here is a link to for more information on the case <https://pen-international.org/news/uganda-release-kakwenza-rukirabashaija>.

In July, prominent Zimbabwean investigative journalist and filmmaker, **Hopewell Chin'ono** was violently arrested at his home in **Zimbabwe** and charged with inciting public violence based on a Twitter post in which he had expressed support for peaceful anticorruption protests planned for July 31. It is however believed that the authorities targeted Hopewell for judicial harassment because of his investigative reports on alleged high-level corruption on COVID19 supplies. Here is a link to the RAN we posted on his case <https://pen-international.org/news/zimbabwe-release-journalist-hopewell-chinono-and-drop-all-charges-against-him> Hopewell was released on bail after 45 days of detention at a maximum security prison, banning his lawyer from representing him and frivolous denials of his bail applications. PEN continues to monitor this case.

In July again, award-winning Zimbabwean writer, playwright and filmmaker **Tsitsi Dangarembga** whose novel *This Mournable Body* is in the 2020 Booker Prize shortlist, was arrested in Harare while peacefully protesting corruption. This was on July 31, a day when peaceful anticorruption demonstrations had been called by opposition, civil society and professional association activists. She was detained overnight and released on a cash bail, ordered to surrender her passport and report to the police every week. Here is a link for information about her case <https://pen-international.org/news/zimbabwe-drop-charges-against-writer-tsitsi-dangarembga> PEN continues to monitor this case.

On capacity strengthening, a total of ten Africa centres (Zimbabwe, **Afrikaans**, **Malawi**, Uganda, **Eritrea**, **Gambia**, **Nigeria**, **Sierra Leone** and **Guinea Bissau**) have consistently participated in the CSP webinar series covering diverse knowledge, skills, attitudes and practice topics. Also, six centres (Afrikaans, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Zimbabwe, Eritrea and **South Africa**) received small digital support grants (£ 5000) to support online communication and implementation of literary activities in the face of COVID19 disruptions on in-person centre activities.

PEN, together with several Zimbabwean, regional and global civil society organizations co-signed a joint statement addressed to the Speaker of the Zimbabwe Parliament raising concerns about the gazetted Cybersecurity and Data Protection Bill. Here is a link to the statement <https://pen-international.org/news/zimbabwe-government-cybersecurity-bill>

On a positive note, in February 2020, the conviction of Ugandan academic, activist and poet **Stella Nyanzi** was quashed, ending her detention in jail. Here is a link the statement we issued on the good news of her court victory <https://pen-international.org/news/uganda-academic-activist-and-poet-dr-stella-nyanzi-released-conviction-quashed>. She also participated in the Women Writers' Committee meeting earlier this year, and read her poems at a superb session of poetry from around the world that the WWC and **San Miguel** PEN had put together. Do take a look at the video: <https://www.penclub.fr/pen-international-women-writers-committees-free-the-word-poetry-gone-viral/>

Also, after years of advocacy spearheaded by PEN Sierra Leone and other local civil society groups, with support from PEN International, in August, the Sierra Leone Parliament repealed the countries criminal defamation law. This effectively ended the criminalization of defamation and seditious libel. PEN is exploring with PEN Sierra Leone further action, particularly on capacity strengthening of journalists on the new, more progressive legal and policy environment and ways to secure the gains of the successful advocacy.

ASIA:

PEN's campaigning and advocacy work in the Asia/ Pacific region continues to centre on long-term imprisonment and the threat to freedom of expression posed by government censorship and the arbitrary use of security legislation to intimidate dissenting voices.

China continues to be a priority, with the country comprising of the largest number of cases within the 2019 Case List. The situation within **China** remains grave, particularly for vulnerable minorities in Xinjiang, and the extent of the threat posed to writers at risk increasingly extends beyond the country's national boundaries, with exiled writers facing the risk of refoulement or persecution of family members still inside China. The recent implementation of the national security law in **Hong Kong** is a particular concern for freedom of expression in the territory, which has long acted as a sanctuary for writers in China. To address the scale of the challenge, the first meeting of the China Planning Group (CPG) was convened in August 2020. The role of the CPG is to coordinate a long-term strategy of actions between several PEN centres working on issues of freedom of expression and the protection of writers at risk in China.

The targeting of writers and journalists criticising government policies continues to be a frequent issue throughout the region, with several recent cases in **India** emerging in response to criticism of the Indian government's implementation of the controversial Citizenship (Amendment) act. In **Thailand**, public criticism of the ruling monarchy remains fraught with danger, and several writers and activists have been charged under the country's highly punitive lèse-majesté law for their peaceful participation in pro-democracy protests in recent months.

The implementation of broad emergency powers in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in countries such as **Cambodia, Myanmar, Philippines**, and Thailand is also a pressing concern given each country's well documented reputation for using security measures to censor criticism and criminalise dissent. In **Singapore**, government efforts to ostensibly counter the issue of 'fake news' surrounding COVID-19 through legislation has resulted in its use against organisations who criticised the government's early handling of the pandemic. The health dangers posed by COVID-19 have been exacerbated through the ongoing implementation of internet shutdowns in **Bangladesh**, Myanmar, and the Indian-administered union territory of **Jammu and Kashmir**, resulting in the denial of access to information crucial to the health and well-being of vulnerable populations.

Several centres in the Asia/Pacific region have submitted applications for the Civil Society Programme Digital Communications projects including PEN **Afghanistan**, PEN Bangladesh, PEN **Malaysia**, and PEN Myanmar. With proposed initiatives including online webinars, website development and workshops, the grant will enable Centres in the region to significantly increase their online presence, providing an important platform for membership engagement while COVID-19 restrictions remain a reality throughout much of the region.

AMERICAS:

In 2020, 10 PEN Centres in Latin America and the Caribbean implemented digital projects in 10 countries to raise their digital profile and the impact of their campaigns by Civil Society Programs. We accompanied the process of creation of aspiring centres in **Ecuador** and **Chiapas**. Also, **Brazil** PEN Centre was reactivated. In April and June, we held two regional meetings to discuss the Regional Strategy for the Americas 2020-2023 and the impact of COVID-19 in the continent.

We strengthened alliances the regional offices of ARTICLE 19 and Reporters without Borders. PEN and UNESCO published the book *Writing the future in indigenous languages* about the meeting in 2019. The PEN VIDA UNESCO Count project was established for five countries of the continent to start in 2020-2021.

We worked on barriers to freedom of expression such as restrictive laws in **Honduras, Nicaragua,** and **Cuba**. These countries are facing a repressive and censor laws and measures that were hardened during the COVID-19 crisis. We also publish a statement on [USA](#) and the restrictions to free expression after the murder of George Floyd.

We have advocated for at least 25 writers, journalists, and artists in Nicaragua (6), **Canada** (1), **Mexico** (5), **Chile** (1), **Venezuela** (5), and Cuba (5). Some main cases in the Americas, during this year, received good news. **Roberto de Jesús Quiñones Haces**, a Cuban poet, was released on 4th September 2020. We campaigned on his case at least three times during the year (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4rST7SMcNP0&t=2s>). At least 15 centres in the Region contributed with specific actions on his release. **Lydia Cacho** was part of the good news. Some of Lydia Cacho's aggressors are on trial or in jail. A murderer of journalist [Miroslava Breach](#) was sentenced. PEN has been advocating on her case from [2017](#) and [2018](#).

We supported at least three journalists with Emergency Funds. In February 2020, after our calls, the Nicaraguan government [released materials](#) for newspapers. In Honduras, we advocated with [Reporters without Borders and Article 19](#) on New Penal Code, to avoid censorship and repression against journalists and writers. Also in Honduras, we are working with Inter American Commission of Human Rights on Jairo López's case, a Honduran journalist.

In Chile, we called for the justice on the case of [Las Tesis](#), Chilean Artists, who wrote the famous song "A rapist in your path" about violence against women. Las Tesis group is facing a lawsuit for their performance. We are continue advocating with regional NGO's on Barriers against Freedom of Expression in Cuba, on [laws against artistic freedom](#) and freedom of expression.

The protests were part of our main work during this year. One of the most representative movements were in [USA](#) and [Cuba](#). PEN was monitoring the situation with journalists and writers.

Despite of Covid 19 Crisis, the network in Latin American and The Caribbean Centre is working to strengthen their capacity to act as a region in every single case. Nevertheless, the attacks against journalists and Freedom of Expression are increasing in countries such as Mexico, Nicaragua, Honduras, **Colombia**, Brazil, Venezuela and Cuba.

EUROPE:

Hate speech, in particular online, is on the rise in many European countries, while the situation for media freedom is deteriorating, including as the consequence of new laws and regulations that were hastily approved during the pandemic emergency.

With regard to PEN International's focus countries, the situation for media freedom in **Turkey** remains dire, which was also reflected in the work on individual cases. PEN co-organised, with IPI and MLSA, an advocacy campaign to mark Kurdish reporter Nedim Türfent's 1500th day behind bars, including two successful online events in English and Turkish, social media clips, solidarity messages and a joint statement with 43 civil society organisations. PEN also coordinated a joint statement with 37 Centres and other civil society organisations to protest the closure of online station Ozgürüz, led by Can Dünder, and issued statements in two other cases of judicial harassment (Nurcan Baysal and Ragip Zarakolu). PEN International also supported several joint NGO statements calling for the release of political prisoners in light of the pandemic.

Russia and **Belarus** remained our prime areas of concern in Europe this year. The situation in both countries continued to deteriorate. In September last year, Ukrainian writer Oleg Sentsov was freed – again, he should never have been imprisoned, but the overall climate remained grim. This October began with the tragic death of Irina Slavina's who self-immolated in protest against the Russian government. We remain deeply concerned about the arrests of **Hanna Komar**, the poet and translator who is the secretary of the centre; project manager **Uladzimir Liankievic**, and translator **Siarzh Miadzvedzeu**. We remain concerned about the ongoing attacks on freedom of expression and the right to peaceful protest in the wake of the elections in Belarus on 9 August 2020 (<https://pen-international.org/news/pen-international-centres-condemn-arrest-of-belarus-pen-members-and-employees>). As the centre president and Nobel Laureate Sviatlana Aleksievič (Svetlana Alexievich) put it, journalists, bloggers and patrons of culture are among the 24 political prisoners. They must be released unconditionally and allegations of their ill-treatment must be promptly investigated (<https://pen-international.org/news/belarus-pen-calls-for-immediate-release-political-prisoners>).

In **Azerbaijan**, old patterns of persecution are continued, as is reflected for instance in the case of Elchin Mammad, a dissident journalist supported by PEN who stands accused of theft and has been detained since 30 March 2020, a few days after he published a critical report on the human rights situation in his country. In **Kyrgyzstan**, PEN International organised a birthday wishes campaign for long-time PEN case Azimjon Askarov, who unfortunately passed away shortly after.

Furthermore, PEN International also joined two English PEN statements concerning the **United Kingdom** together with Scottish PEN, Irish PEN and Wales PEN Cymru, urging the Church of England to overturn a judgment in relation to an Irish-language epitaph (also supported by the TLRC Committee), and expressing support for journalist Amy Fenton, who was forced to flee her family home after threats she received for her reporting. PEN International and six PEN Centres also signed on to a broader NGO statement calling for the release of Julian Assange.

PEN International also joined signed on to an open letter to **Malta's** Attorney General, asking for Europol support in the case of murdered journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia. We also joined a statement calling for justice on 9 July, 1000 days after her assassination. PEN international also

joined a call for robust and transparent investigation into threats made against journalist Nello Scavo by Neville Gafà, a former person of trust in the Office of the Prime Minister.

At **EU level**, PEN International continues to be involved in the work of a grand coalition of NGO's that advocates for a European instrument tackling Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs), including engagement in the development of a Model Directive. Recently, the European Commission has started signalling interest in initiating the legislative process and there is a group of like-minded MEPs. Furthermore, PEN International also signed on to a statement in support of the mandate of the **OSCE** Representative on Freedom of the Media. With 28 other civil society organisations, we expressed our deep concern over the decision of the representatives of Azerbaijan and Tajikistan to block the renewal of the mandate of Harlem Désir.

MENA:

The COVID-19 pandemic became, and continues to be, the over-riding concern for PEN in the MENA region in 2020. Early on in the outbreak writers and activists in **Egypt** were among those [briefly arrested](#) during protests calling for the release of political prisoners who they feared are at particular risk of contracting the disease in overcrowded and medically under-resourced prisons. These fears tragically came to be founded with the death in prison in May of filmmaker [Shady Habash](#), reportedly after having ingested sanitizer. Yet more people continued to be detained, such as in June when [Sanaa Seif](#), also a filmmaker, who had protested outside the prison her where brother, a PEN main case, **Alaa Abd El Fattah**, was detained. Several RAN alerts and joint statements were issued on these and other cases in Egypt over the months by PEN International in collaboration with PEN Centres.

In **Iran**, [Narges Mohammadi](#), has finally been released from a long prison term, although she should never have been jailed in the first place. PEN welcomed her release, and we had signed a joint statement by United Nation Special Rapporteurs, after which she was allowed to speak to her children, now living in Europe, for the first time in over a year. PEN also demanded the dropping of charges against [three writers](#) who were ordered to enter prison in May despite the extent of COVID in the jails.

Fears for the welfare of prisoners in **Bahrain**, also seeing widespread COVID 19 outbreaks in jails, led to the release of many political prisoners, but a number of human rights defenders and journalists [remained behind bars](#). PEN joined call for them also be released.

The crisis in **Yemen** which has led to deep suffering across the country, also saw [death sentences](#) served against four journalists by the *de facto* Houthi government in Sanaa. They had been arrested four years earlier on charges of spying and 'false news'. The hosting of the Hay Literary Festival in Abu Dhabi gave an opportunity to highlight the poor state of freedom of expression in the **United Arab Emirates**, including [long sentences](#) being served by three human rights defenders and activists.

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These are not easy times; these are trying times. We shall remain focused in helping our brothers and sisters in jail or facing intimidation, calling for their freedom and spreading their words wider; we will continue to resist power with our voices and our pens, and we hope to meet in person next summer.

Stay well, be well, take care,
Salil Tripathi