

EMBASSY OF THE
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

June 29, 2020

Mr. Guilherme Canela
Chief of the Section for Freedom of Expression and Safety of Journalists
Communication and Information Sector
UNESCO
7, place de Fontenoy
75352 Paris 07 SP

Dear Mr. Canela,

Please express our thanks to Assistant Director-General for Communication and Information Moez Chakchouk for his letter dated April 17, 2020 regarding the status of the legal investigations into the killings of Jacinto Hernández Torres on June 13, 2016 in Garland, Texas; Gerald Fischman, Rob Hiaasen, John McNamara, Rebecca Smith, and Wendi Winters in the Capital Gazette shootings in Annapolis, Maryland on June 28, 2018; and Zachary Stoner on May 30, 2018 in Chicago, Illinois. The letter also invited the United States to provide information on steps it has undertaken to promote journalist safety and address the issue of impunity. Upon receipt, the United States Department of State immediately passed this request to the Garland Police Department in Garland, Texas; the Anne Arundel County Police Department in Annapolis, Maryland; and the Chicago Police Department in Chicago, Illinois.

The Garland Police Department provided the following information regarding its investigation into the murder of Jacinto Torres Hernández. The suspect is still at large, and has not been arrested. However, the Garland Police Department does not believe that the murder of Mr. Hernández Torres was connected to his profession as a journalist. The case has been filed with Dallas County.

The Anne Arundel County Police Department provided the following information regarding its investigation into the murders of Gerald Fischman, Rob Hiaasen, John McNamara, Rebecca Smith, and Wendi Winters at the Capital Gazette offices in Annapolis, Maryland. Jarrod Warren Ramos, who was apprehended as a suspect and remains in custody, has pleaded guilty to the indictment. While admitting that he murdered the five journalists at the Gazette, Mr. Ramos has also maintained that he is not criminally responsible. Under Maryland law, a defendant can litigate their guilt or innocence via trial, and then if found guilty, a second trial can be held to determine whether the defendant is criminally responsible for their actions. The trial to determine Mr. Ramos' competency was scheduled to occur on March 4, 2020, but was delayed to June 2020. As of June 25, the trial has not yet occurred, but it is expected to take place in the near future, as soon as conditions related to the COVID-19 pandemic will allow.

The Chicago Police Department provided the following information regarding its investigation into the murder of Zachary Stoner. The investigation, which is currently considered closed, identified two alleged offenders. It showed that one of the alleged offenders was himself murdered following Mr. Stoner's death. The second alleged offender was arrested, but the Cook County State's Attorney declined to prosecute for reasons that have not been made public. (The United States Department of State is trying to clarify whether the murder of Mr. Stoner was connected to his profession as a journalist.)

As the world faces the COVID-19 pandemic, respect for freedom of expression, including for members of the press, is especially vital for individuals and communities to access and share timely information to protect their health. On World Press Freedom Day in May 2020, Secretary of State Pompeo highlighted the critical role of independent media in facilitating the open exchange of information, particularly in the context of the pandemic. As part of our foreign policy, the United States continues to use diplomacy, multilateral and multi-stakeholder engagement, and programmatic support to promote the ability of journalists to exercise free expression and to do their work safely. We advocate for the release of journalists imprisoned for their work, and we promote accountability for violence against journalists and media workers.

At the UN and in regional and multi-stakeholder fora, the United States continues to lead on supporting efforts related to freedom of the press. This includes leading or joining multilateral statements calling for government responses to COVID-19 that respect freedom of expression, including for members of the media, online and offline. In May 2020, we led in drafting the Freedom Online Coalition Joint Statement on COVID-19 and Internet Freedom. In the Organization of American States, the United States remains a steadfast supporter of the Office of the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression at the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. We also play an active role in the Executive Group of the Media Freedom Coalition (MFC), which works to facilitate joint diplomacy on individual cases of violence against journalists. In April 2020, MFC issued a statement calling on all States to protect access to free media and to support the free exchange of information.

The information contained in this response can be released publicly.

Sincerely,

Dionandrea Shorts
(e-signature)

Dionandrea Shorts
Advisor for IO and UNESCO Affairs

Enclosure: UNESCO Letter
CC: Ms Saorla McCabe, Programme Specialist
Ms Flavie Romer, Programme Assistant