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Senator the Hon Marise Payne
Minister for Foreign Affairs
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10 July 2020

Your Excellency,

Re: investigation and safety of Al Jazeera journalists

The Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance (MEAA) is the advocate and professional association for Australia's journalists.

In response to the Al Jazeera documentary "Locked up in Malaysia's lockdown" broadcast on July 3, Malaysian police are investigating the broadcaster and six of its editorial staff for "sedition, defamation and violation of" Malaysia's *Communications and Multimedia Act*. As you know, penalties under the Act include jail terms and fines.

Of the six Al Jazeera staff, five are Australians, some of whom are members of MEAA, making them accredited journalists with the Brussels-based International Federation of Journalists.

Since the broadcast, Al Jazeera personnel in Malaysia have been targeted in a sustained campaign of online abuse ("trolling"). They have received death threats and, in an extreme threat to their safety, they have been subjected to "doxing" – the disclosure of their personnel details on social media platforms in order to enable and provoke further harassment, threats and intimidation. A source used in the story has even been pursued through the use of a "wanted" notice.

Malaysia has a responsibility to protect the journalists working in your country.

You would be aware of Malaysia's obligations under UN General Assembly resolution *74/157 The safety of journalists and the issue of impunity* adopted on December 18 2019 that states Malaysia, as a UN member state, should do its "utmost to prevent violence, threats and attacks targeting journalists and media workers". MEAA calls on you to fulfil that obligation towards our colleagues.

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MEAA also urges the Malaysian Government and its agencies to cease its investigation of the Al Jazeera documentary – reporting on Malaysia’s treatment of migrant workers is legitimate public interest journalism; it must not be treated as a criminal offence.

Indeed, the Malaysian Government should consider its own failures to participate in the broadcast program. The documentary acknowledged Malaysia’s success in containing the COVID-19 virus. The Al Jazeera crew repeatedly sought Malaysian Government input and responses for inclusion in the news story but were repeatedly rebuffed. The documentary featured material that had been reported on by other media outlets, including the *South China Morning Post*.

Your Excellency, you would be familiar with the phrase “Journalism is not a crime” – a statement that was taken up around the world when Al Jazeera journalists were arrested, charged and tried in Egypt in 2013.

Governments should be resilient in accepting and responding to any criticism with reason, honesty and transparency. Attacking a fundamental pillar of press freedom by criminalising legitimate public interest journalism is a dangerous step. Silencing freedom of expression at a critical time as the world combats the global pandemic is not worthy of a democracy.

MEAA urges the Malaysian Government and its agencies to step back from criminalising journalism.

We urge the Malaysian authorities to cease the police investigation.

We call on Malaysia to do its utmost to ensure the safety of Al Jazeera personnel as required by the UN General Assembly resolution.

Your sincerely,

Marcus Strom
Federal president
MEAA Media