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cc: Senator the Hon Marise Payne
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cc: Anthony Bellanger
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1 June 2020

Your Excellency,

Re: Attacks on journalists

The Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance (MEAA), the trade union and professional association for journalists in Australia, strongly protests the attacks on journalists that have taken place across the United States in the past 48 hours. More than 60 assaults on journalists have been documented during protests on Friday and Saturday. Disturbingly, many of these instances appear to be at the hands of law enforcement officers.

In at least two cases, those incidents involved Australian media personnel carrying out their duties.

In Minneapolis on Saturday, a huddle of reporters and photojournalists, clearly identifiable because of the equipment they carry, were fired on by police and were forced to rush to cover for their safety. An Australian Seven Network reporter said she had been hit in the arm.

In a second incident in Minneapolis, a crew from the Nine network were detained at gunpoint by police. While in their car approaching a roadblock, a police officer pulled out a weapon and got them to get out of their car. They were searched, one member of the crew handcuffed and then after presenting their media credentials they were eventually set free.

It is apparent that across the US, law enforcement agencies have used the protests to attack the media. On many occasions the incidents have been videoed and in many cases the media is some distance away from the active protests, and sometimes even standing behind or within police lines.

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The videoed incidents show police deliberately targeting the media. Working journalists, clearly identifiable, have been shot at with a variety of munitions.

1. In Minneapolis, four members of a news crew was arrested after state police said it had to confirm they were “members of the media”. The news crew was “live to air” at the time, using its camera and microphone and the journalists have their credentials displayed in plain sight.
2. In Chicago, a reporter and his crew was forced to lie on the ground after identifying themselves half a dozen six times as “press” and showing their media credentials. Having complied with police instructions and continuing to lie prone, a police officer shot pepper spray in the reporter’s face.
3. In Minneapolis on Friday, a CNN crew was detained while broadcasting live on television.

Journalists have been reported injured in New York, Chicago, Washington DC, Minneapolis, Pittsburgh, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, San Diego, Detroit and Denver.

It is clear that police in many parts of the US are using the opportunity to direct their weapons against journalists. There are reports that two journalists may have lost their sight after being shot in the head with rubber bullets.

These dangerous actions by law enforcement have also been echoed among protesters. One assaulted a reporter and tried to seize her microphone while she was live on air. In Washington DC, a news crew was forced to flee after a large crowd discovered the network they worked for.

In Atlanta, the CNN headquarters was subject to physical attack by a large crowd.

It appears from these incidents that the media in the US is seen by many as a legitimate target to attack. This attitude is likely attributable for the most part to the comments made almost daily by President Trump, by members of his administration and family, and members of the Republican Party. The US President has used the microblogging website Twitter to name media outlets that he regards as ‘fake news’, including, as recently as yesterday, CNN, MSDNC (sic), the New York Times and the Washington Post.

The relentless verbal assaults, particularly the President describing ‘Fake News’ outlets as the “Enemy of the People” – a phrase he used again on Sunday – have dangerous consequences. The 48 hours of protests show that journalists are being routinely demonised, harassed, targeted, shot at and arrested.

This war on media freedom and journalists rights must stop.

Your Excellency, MEAA urges that:

1. the rights enshrined in First Amendment of the US Constitution be observed;
2. members of law enforcement agencies are trained in the role of the media in a healthy, functioning democracy;
3. police officers practice procedures to ensure the safety of journalists as they carry out their reporting duties.

We would welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss our concerns.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'MS', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Marcus Strom
Federal President
MEAA Media section