

WASHINGTON, DC - U.S. Congressman Mike Pence offered the following remarks on the floor of the U.S. House in recognition of World Press Freedom Day, which fell on Sunday, May 3, 2009 this year:

"Madam Speaker, I come to the floor today in support of World Press Freedom Day, celebrated on the 3rd day of May each year. I do so with a profound sense of humility and with a sense of privilege about being able to come to the floor to speak in support of freedom of the press around the world.

"World Press Freedom Day has been observed for sixteen years now and serves as a reminder to us all of the vital importance of this core freedom. It is a day in which we celebrate the indispensable role played by journalists in exposing abuses of power, while at the same time we sound the alarm about the growing number of journalists that are still being silenced by death or jailed as they attempt to report on important issues of the day and bring to light information in the public interest.

"Since this day was first celebrated, 692 journalists have been killed. The majority of victims were local reporters covering topics such as crime, corruption, and national security in their home countries. Adding to this tragic figure are the hundreds more each year who face intimidation, censorship, and arbitrary arrest - guilty of nothing more than a passion for truth and a tenacious belief that a free society depends on an informed citizenry. In every corner of the globe - from Iran to Zimbabwe, Burma to Pakistan, Cuba and Venezuela - there are journalists being actively harassed and exercising self-censorship because of threats and intimidation from repressive regimes.

"As part of combating this intimidation and censorship, Mr. Adam Schiff of California and I recently introduced the Daniel Pearl Freedom of Press Act. As many will remember, Daniel Pearl was kidnapped and murdered by terrorists in Pakistan, just four months after the September 11th attacks. At the time of his kidnapping, Pearl served as the South Asia Bureau Chief of the Wall Street Journal, and was based in Mumbai, India. He went to Pakistan as part of an investigation into the alleged links between Richard Reid, the shoe bomber, Al Qaeda and Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). He was subsequently beheaded by his captors. This legislation is dedicated to Daniel Pearl, the many that have gone before him, and those that still face such dangers today. The legislation seeks to highlight and promote freedom of the press by establishing an annual State Department report on the status of press freedom in every country in the world and create a grant program aimed at broadening and strengthening the independence of journalists and media organizations.

"Now, more than ever, the defense of the freedom of the press must continue. Here at home, the Constitution of the United States provides: 'Congress shall make no law...abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press.' Not since those words were adopted has this body passed a law to ensure the freedom of the press. Last month, the House passed the Free Flow of Information Act of 2009, legislation I was honored to introduce with Representative Rick Boucher of Virginia. The bill provides a qualified privilege of confidential sources to journalists - which is sadly missing in federal law - and enables reporters to shield sources in most instances from disclosure. I urge its swift passage by our colleagues in the Senate.

"While it is my great hope that a federal media shield bill will soon be signed into law here at home, the struggle for freedom of the press is much more primitive in its evolution in many parts of the world. And for that reason we must stand in solidarity with all those around the globe who love freedom and continue to strain at the bonds of tyranny and oppression on this day of remembrance.

"On this day, we remember reporters like Roxana Saberi. Miss Saberi is a 31-year-old American journalist who was arrested in February 2009, and is being held in Iran on charges of espionage, which her lawyer and the US Department of State call baseless. Saberi is a freelance journalist who moved to Iran six years ago and reports for NPR, the BBC, and other news organizations. A true representative of this melting pot that is America, she grew up in Fargo, North Dakota, the daughter of Reza Saberi, who was born in Iran, and Akiko Saberi, who is from Japan.

"As we learn of cases like Miss Saberi, we understand the stakes that are at risk here. We understand why oppressive regimes like that of Iran want so desperately to muzzle the unfiltered reporting of journalists like Saberi. And we understand why it is so important to cherish and protect freedom of the press as a vital check on abuses of power. Today, we call on the government of Iran to free Miss Saberi, hospitalized in her desperate attempt to win her freedom with a hunger strike that might appeal to the conscience of her oppressor where her valid legal arguments did not.

"As a conservative who believes in limited government, I believe the only check on government power in real time is a free and independent press. A free press ensures the flow of information to the public, and let me say, during a time when the role of government in our lives and in our enterprises seems to grow every day - both at home and abroad - ensuring the vitality of a free and independent press is more important than ever.

"I salute the bravery of reporters and press outlets around the world. I urge you to stand firm and take heart. The U.S. House of Representatives stands firmly behind your right to increased freedoms; soon we hope to see this right enshrined in our public law, and stand in solidarity with those on the front lines of the worldwide fight for freedom of the press."