

News from **Congressman Eliot Engel**

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ENGEL CHAIRS HEARING ON PRESS FREEDOM IN THE AMERICAS

*Chairman of Western Hemisphere Subcommittee Calls for Inter-American Community
to Address Abuses against Media*

Washington, D.C. – Congressman Eliot Engel, Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, is holding a hearing today on the breakdown of press freedom in the Americas.

At today’s hearing, Rep. Engel argues that, “while most of us in the inter-American community are quick to speak out when electoral democracy is in peril, we sometimes neglect to raise up our voices when other fundamental aspects of democracy are at risk, including a free and independent press.”

Catalina Botero, Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression at the Organization of American States (OAS), is briefing Members of the Subcommittee. Witnesses at today’s hearing include Marcel Granier (President and Director General of RCTV in Venezuela), Joel Simon (Executive Director of the Committee to Protect Journalists), Alejandra Nuño (Program Director for Central America and Mexico at the Center for Justice and International Law), Eduardo Enriquez (Managing Editor of Nicaragua’s La Prensa) and Alejandro Aguirre (President of the Inter-American Press Association and Deputy Editor and Publisher of Diario Las Americas)

Following the session, testimony can be read and the proceedings can be viewed at <http://foreignaffairs.house.gov/subcommittees.asp?committee=8&sec=hearings>

The following is Chairman Engel’s opening statement at today’s hearing:

“On World Press Freedom Day last month, President Obama brought attention to an issue that far too often goes unnoticed. He said that ‘last year was a bad one for the freedom of the press worldwide’ and ‘more media workers were killed for their work last year than any year in recent history.’

“Unfortunately, this is particularly true here in the Americas where press freedom has been deteriorating over the past few years. I called today’s briefing and hearing to shed light on this disturbing trend.

“When nine journalists are murdered in Honduras in five and a half months making the small country the most dangerous one for journalists in the hemisphere, or when Mexico’s drug cartels brutally murder members of the press for reporting on the drug trade, we cannot sit idly by.

“When Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez shuts down opposition TV and radio stations and intimidates journalists and media owners who express dissent, we all have a responsibility to speak out.

“And certainly, we must continue to shed light on the stark state of the press in Cuba – a country with one of the worst media environments in the world where 25 of the estimated 200 political prisoners are independent journalists.

“These are just a few of the most troubling examples of the breakdown in press freedom that we see in the Americas, and I hope that we will have a chance to examine these trends more closely.

“While most of us in the inter-American community are quick to speak out when electoral democracy is in peril, we sometimes neglect to raise up our voices when other fundamental aspects of democracy are at risk, including a free and independent press.

“Yet, in reading the Inter-American Democratic Charter – a charter agreed to on September 11, 2001 by every country in the hemisphere except Cuba – we understand that democracy is about much more than just elections. Of course, free and fair elections are essential. But, the Inter-American Democratic Charter must also be utilized to ensure that fundamental freedoms and democratic norms are safeguarded. This means that we must speak out when the press is under attack in the hemisphere, as freedom of the press is a central tenet in any democracy.

“I am particularly pleased to welcome OAS Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression Catalina Botero who will brief the committee prior to our hearing. Ms. Botero, your office does tremendous work in highlighting the breakdowns in press freedom in this hemisphere, and we all look forward to hearing from you.”