

Sr. Dn. Juan Carlos Varela Rodríguez
President of the Republic of Panama

Brussels, 30 November 2016

Your Excellency,

On behalf of the International and European Federation of Journalists (IFJ and EFJ), representing 600,000 journalists in 140 countries, we would like to express our grave concern about the case of the Dutch journalist Okke OrNSTEIN, who has been detained in your country since November 15.

Mr. OrNSTEIN was arrested on his arrival at Panama's international airport and charged with slander and libel in connection with articles he published on his website about the alleged fraudulent commercial activity of a Canadian citizen, Monte Friesner, who is currently facing criminal proceedings in Panama.

Mr. OrNSTEIN faces a prison term of 38 months, - a term we consider to be totally unfair since Mr. Friesner had previously been tried in the United States for reasons similar to those mentioned by OrNSTEIN in his articles. In addition, according to his lawyer, Channa Samkalden, the reporter has not received his rights to adequate legal assistance.

On the occasion of the international anti-corruption conference that starts tomorrow in your country, we ask you to immediately release our colleague, since we consider it unjust that the messenger is punished instead of those responsible for crimes such as fraud and corruption.

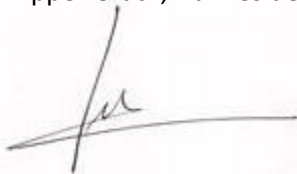
The IFJ and the EFJ are resolutely opposed to the use of prison sentences for alleged cases of defamation, as in Mr OrNSTEIN's situation. Criminal defamation is outlawed in most parts of the world. In the worst cases, a civil suit or a fine is the appropriate means to seek to achieve reparation.

We also join in solidarity with our affiliate in the Netherlands, the Dutch Association Journalists (NVJ), in declaring that this sentence sends the signal that independent investigative journalism about these types of crimes is not possible in Panama. We would also like to remind you that independent journalism is one of the essential pillars of any system that calls itself democratic.

Finally, we pledge ourselves to join the efforts of the NVJ, which is working with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Dutch embassy in your country to release our colleague as soon as possible.

Yours sincerely,
Philippe Leruth, IFJ President

Mogens Blicher Bjerregård, EFJ President



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