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Dear Minister,

Reporters Without Borders, an organisation that defends press freedom worldwide, would like to share with you its concern about the press law reform you have been working on for nearly three years. We have just learned that those drafting the law plan to extend its penalties to Internet users, posing an additional danger to online free expression. The revised version of the law is not only vaguely worded but also fails to decriminalize press offences.

Article 2 has these definitions:

- electronic newspaper: a digital information media that reports the news and publishes articles, photos, cartoons and audiovisual files about an event and depends on constant updating of news published online
- electronic publisher: someone who obtains a licence for an electronic newspaper
- electronic publishing: news published online in the form of text, sounds, photos and videos.

Article 10 says "every foreign publication must obtain the Syrian information ministry's approval in order to be disseminated in the market for the first time and the minister has the power to prevent the dissemination of foreign publications if he finds that they violate Syria's sovereignty, national security and public decency." The proposed law does not however mention the status of websites.

This lack of precision compounds the already restrictive provisions governing the Internet since 2005. Under article 19, the editor of an electronic publication must be Syrian and at least 25 years old, must reside in Syria and cannot work for a foreign government. However, the 10 May draft does not include any definition of what constitutes a website.

We therefore urge you to amend the proposed revision to allow more freedom of expression. Syria is one of the world's most closed countries as regards news and information. We would like to point out that it was ranked 159th out of 173 countries in the 2008 Reporters Without Borders press freedom index. This put it in the group of Middle East countries with the worst rankings.

You told your Gabonese counterpart on 6 May: "Syria encourages dialogue among civilizations and nations as it is considered the real tool to outline consolidated relations based on mutual respect." The

dialogue you refer to should begin at home for it to function successfully. The effort you put in to modifying the press law will reflect the extent of your desire for dialogue.

We thank you in advance for giving our request your careful consideration.

Respectfully,

Jean-François Julliard
Secretary-General