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Scepticism arises over domination by handful

NEW Zealand Foreign Affairs and Trade Minister Don McKinnon said there was growing scepticism about the international media as it was being dominated by a handful of global interests, most of which reflected a Western viewpoint.

In his speech at the Commonwealth Press Union biennial conference yesterday, McKinnon said this was one perception of today's media and raised questions about the way which Governments in future would deal with such global media organisations.

He said these globalised operations were seen as being sensitive to profit margins, but insensitive to the impact which their reporting had at the local level.

"So-called 'responsible journalism', it is argued, has been sacrificed on the altar of larger markets and greater profitability."

He said this development raised questions for Governments about monitoring and regulating the media, as many rules of Government-Press relations were based on checks and balances.

"How can a Government establish effective working relationships with organisations which are owned and operated by individuals who need never enter the country, who need never leave their offices on the other side of the world?" he said.

His speech was titled Press Freedom and Human Rights Within the Commonwealth - A Ministerial Perspective".

He said multinationals and corporations continued to grow in influence and power while the ability of the Government to control the flow of capital, skills, people, technology and information has reduced significantly.

"That may not necessarily be negative, but it sure makes life more complicated for lawmakers," he said.

McKinnon said the bottomline was that there was an obverse to Press claims either to freedom of expression or to the ability to disseminate freely the opinions of others.

The obverse was one of responsibility.

"There will always be a boundary line and tension between the human rights of the individual and the need to protect society's wider interests and rights.

"Technological developments are challenging that boundary line and unfortunately, there are those in the media who flout responsibility, who pay little heed to relationships of trust, who choose to ignore their industry's own peer pressure and whose international persona leads them to claim special exclusivity," he said.

He said as long as these existed, Governments would seek to monitor and regulate media rights.

Asked by Murray Burt, president of the Commonwealth Journalists Association, for his views on the arbiter of the responsibility of the media, he said it was clearly society that regulated.

"The Government or Press organisations may lurch from side to side but readers will tell you by what they are reading," he said.

He also said that the dominance of the Western media and the influence of their "Western lenses" on the world should be recognised.

He said major television stations like the CNN, BBC and ABC comprised 85 per cent of the electronic media and they clearly had "Western lenses"

attached.

He said this in response to a question by Jale Moala, editor of Fiji's Daily Post, who asked if there were really "Western lenses" as former Hong Kong Governor Chris Patten seemed to have suggested otherwise in his speech.

Speaking to reporters later, McKinnon said he had spoken to Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi about his country's concern over Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's case.

He said he had voiced concern over the clear differences between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Anwar, and said this was an issue which had caused tension among friends in the region.

McKinnon met Abdullah yesterday.

Asked if the issue would mar the Apec meeting next month, he said it would not go away but it was in the judicial process.

"We have a lot of faith in the Malaysian judicial process. We have had New Zealanders who had been under the threat of capital punishment but had been relieved.

"This case can't be ignored but I don't believe it is going to be a major problem in Apec," he said.

Consultant editor of the Sunday Times in Sri Lanka, Iqbal Athas, related his experience of death threats against him and his family for his criticism of the military and the Government.

He had even been threatened at gunpoint but was saved by his daughter's screams.

He argued strongly for Press freedom, saying this laid at the heart of the all the other rights.

He believed the principal characteristic of a free media was the opportunity for private and independent ownership and operation.

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