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Foreign reporters prevented from entering Gaza Strip for past two weeks

Reporters Without Borders wrote yesterday to Israeli defence minister Ehud Barak protesting against a ban that has prevented dozens of foreign journalists from entering the Gaza Strip via the Eretz crossing since 6 November. The heads of some of the world's biggest news media also wrote yesterday to Prime Minister Ehud Olmert asking him to lift the ban.

"To our knowledge, no foreign journalist has been allowed to enter this autonomous territory at the Eretz crossing since 6 November," the Reporters Without Borders letter said. "No previous restriction on the movements of foreign reporters ever lasted so long. This unilateral and unjustified ban has seriously impacted their ability to work. The Tel Aviv-based Foreign Press Association has issued two statements condemning the ban.

"Closing off the Gaza Strip to the foreign press not only prevents international public opinion from being informed about the humanitarian crisis unfolding there, but also draws attention to the coercive measures taken by Israel and engenders the suspicion that this is a deliberate attempt to cover up what is happening.

"In fact, a foreign media presence is all the more indispensable as its reporters represent an independent source of information. The mounting threats to Palestinian journalists in the Gaza Strip since Hamas seized power in June 2007 force them to censor themselves. But that is not the case with foreign journalists, who can talk about the Hamas government without fear."

The Reporters Without Borders letter added: "For these reasons and for the sake of not prolonging a flagrant violation of the media's freedom of movement and freedom to work, we urge you to do what is necessary to put an end to this drastic and pernicious measure."

Defence Ministry spokesman Shlomo Dror today said journalists would be allowed back into the Gaza Strip "once the [Hamas] militants stop shooting." He also claimed that the situation in the Gaza Strip was being "adequately covered by reporters already there." Dror also said Israel was not happy with international media coverage, which he said exaggerated Palestinian suffering.

"These comments are disturbing and unacceptable," Reporters Without Borders said, "inasmuch as the defence ministry spokesman confirmed that the ban imposed by Israel on foreign reporters is a strictly punitive measure."