

公益社団法人 日本外国特派員協会
The Foreign Correspondents' Club of Japan
100-0005 Japan, Tokyo-to, Chiyoda-ku, Marunouchi 3-2-3, Marunouchi Nijubashi Building 5F
<http://www.fccj.or.jp> E-mail: front@fccj.or.jp Tel:+81-3-3211-3161 Fax:+81-3-3201-0677

Freedom of the Press Award Winners 2022

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The Foreign Correspondents' Club of Japan named the winners of its Freedom of the Press Awards 2022 at a ceremony on April 26. The Board selected the journalists of Hong Kong as a group as the winners in Asia category, and Thomas Ash, a Tokyo-based American documentary director, as the recipient of the Japan award.

Russian independent news outlet Novaya Gazeta and Japanese TV reporter and broadcaster Shigenori Kanehira received the Honorable Mention awards in Asia and Japan categories, respectively, while the Japanese veteran political journalist Soichiro Tahara received a Freedom of the Press Lifetime Achievement award.

The awards recognize outstanding journalists and media organizations that have made important contributions to upholding the values of a free press in the region, often under extreme pressure, including by pursuing coverage of taboo subjects and even risking their lives while doing so.

"The Freedom of the Press Award ... is actually a landmark in our activities and has been since FCCJ was launched in 1945," said FCCJ President Suvendrini Kakuchi. Reminding everyone that Japan's postwar constitution guaranteed complete press freedom and freedom of expression, she noted: "Of course, the interpretation of democracy is what our awards single out."

Introducing Hong Kong journalists as the winner in this year's category, FCCJ Second Vice-President and co-chair of the freedom of the press committee Ilgin Yorulmaz mentioned the continuous deterioration of press freedom in Hong Kong under the 2020 National Security Law "used as pretext to shut down Apple Daily, the territory's largest Chinese-language opposition newspaper, and the independent media outlet Stand News, among others, as well as to prosecute dozens of journalists and press freedom fighters."

A day earlier, she noted, FCCJ's sister organization, The Foreign Correspondents' Club of Hong Kong, has had to suspend its annual Human Rights Press Awards this year due to concerns it might violate the law.

Ronson Chan, Chairperson of the Hong Kong Journalists' Association, who was himself held for investigation during a police raid on his newspaper's offices, joined online to accept the award on behalf of the country's press corps.

"Hong Kong journalists are kind, passionate, tenacious, and honest," Chan said. "Although the environment for reporting has changed in Hong Kong, most of us have remained in our positions, trying our best to find the truth for the Hong Kong community."

Ronson quoted the 2021 Nobel Peace Prize winner, Filipina journalist Maria Ressa: "Without facts, you can't have truth. Without truth, you can't have trust. Without trust, we have no shared reality, no democracy, and it becomes impossible to deal with our world's existential problems: climate, coronavirus, the battle for truth."

Thomas Ash won for his documentaries on hard-hitting issues such as Japan's inhumane immigration system and the immense damage it causes to vulnerable immigrants and asylum seekers.

"His latest work, Ushiku, takes viewers deep into the psychological and physical environment inhabited by foreign detainees in one of the largest immigration centers in Japan," said David McNeill, co-chair of the freedom of the press committee.

"The nine people who represent so many thousands of others who are either indefinitely detained, or who are out on provisional release, without the ability to work, without health insurance, and without freedom of movement," Ash said, after dedicating his award to them.

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Ash added: "Article 21 of the Japanese constitution guarantees freedom of speech, press and all other forms of expression ... If journalists, activists, and filmmakers had had the freedom to record and share the voices of those in detention, conditions inside these internment camps would never have deteriorated to this extent. In other words, if we had true freedom of speech and true freedom of the press, this film would not have needed to be made."

Russian journalist Pavel Kanygin accepted the Asia Honorable Mention award on behalf of the Russian independent outlet Novaya Gazeta. "In these dark times, it is invaluable for us to feel support from our global community and from our Japanese colleagues. It helps us feel that we are not alone," Kanygin said.

"For two previous months, the free people of our country have been living in a nightmare. Those opposing the war became enemies of the state. The expression itself, 'no war', became a crime if spoken loudly in a public setting. It's a crime that will put an individual in prison for three years, but for 15 years if you are a professional journalist."

Shigenori Kanehira, one of the few veteran Japanese journalists who is still regularly out in the field, often putting himself in harm's way, accepted the Honorable Mention award for Japan online from Okinawa after a busy two months that saw him on the Ukraine border and in Belarus.

"When interviewing Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko in Minsk, I had to give private instructions to the TBS news team that arrived from Tokyo: 'Don't smile unnecessarily during the interview'. President Lukashenko never smiled and neither did I. The day before, we interviewed random people on the streets of Minsk. To my surprise, most openly said they were against the war," Kanehira noted.

Finally, Soichiro Takahara, the legendary 87-year-old journalist and the winner of an FCCJ Lifetime Achievement Award, remembered his experience as a fifth-grader at the end of the Second World War.

During the war, his teachers and the media told him Japan was fighting a just war, only to switch after Japan's defeat to say that the U.S. and the UK had been right after all. The experience set him on the path to becoming a journalist.

"I knew that you couldn't just follow what you were being told by your instructors and could not believe what you were being told by the people in power," Tahara said. "I learned you can't trust the mainstream media and that the state will deceive the people. I felt the need to have primary information, primary sources and the need to confirm things myself."

Foreign Correspondents' Club of Japan