



## **WikiLeaks Kristinn Hrafnsson speech at the Austrian Journalists Club (ÖJC) - Journalist Award 2022**

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**Kristinn Hrafnsson:** Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for inviting me here today. The Austrian Journalist Club has been very supportive of the battle that we are now waging to get Julian Assange into freedom. And I want to thank the club for the understanding of how important it is that we fight this fight not just for the sake of Julian Assange, but for the sake of journalistic freedom, because the case against him is a blatant attack on journalistic freedom, which is the foundation of our democracy, of our existence today as civilised countries in a civilised world. I want to start out on a different path than I had planned. I was introduced as a surprise. I don't know exactly what that means. I hope it's not in a negative way, but I may surprise myself and may surprise you here that I actually want to reflect on the current situation that we are encountering, the serious situation that we are witnessing today. We are here in the shadow of terrible events. We are here in the shadow of war, where bombs are falling while bullets are being shot, where people are being killed, and civilians are fleeing, they're afraid. And that is the horror of the war, that is the truth of the war. And in my mind as a father, as an individual and a journalist it is terrible to think that there are children now traumatised and possibly scarred for life by events taking place in our days. That is, in my opinion, what journalists should focus on and never forget, not get too focussed on the numbers of armaments, the political discourse, the geopolitical implications, the economic sanctions, the cost of them. The true cost of war is the human cost. And that is what we should never forget to focus on. WikiLeaks has done that throughout the years. The true cost of war, the death toll, the horrors of the war for the civilians that have been killed has been the focus of the publications by WikiLeaks. And exposing that truth is the reason why Julian Assange is now fighting for his freedom, why he is now being persecuted and has been persecuted for more than a decade. I want to reflect back to the early days of April in 2010, just three days before WikiLeaks published the collateral murder video, the Apache helicopter video showing the assassination and killing of civilians on the streets of Baghdad

in July 2007. I was in Baghdad just prior to the release, and I met two children there. Their name is Saeed and Doa. A boy and a girl, siblings, 12 and eight years old. It struck me as a very significant event in my life and after 20 years of journalism, probably at that point, one of a turning point. They didn't know that I knew, because I'd seen the video showing how they had been wounded and how their father had been killed in the events shown in that video. What had happened basically, was that their father, Matasher Tomal, a gentle man by all accounts, by his neighbours and friends, as they told me, was driving the two kids to school. He had picked up two neighbours. And by chance he turns the corner and drives upon a carnage, because just moments earlier, Apache helicopters, the strongest gunship in the arsenal of the US military, had opened fire and mowed down dozens civilians. Including killing a Reuters journalist, a photojournalist, one of the best at Reuters Namir Noor- Eldeen. What Matasher Tomal did was of no surprise to his friends. He stopped as a good Samaritan does, to help another Reuter employee who was on all four heavily wounded bleeding to death on the sidewalk. He and his friends jump out of the car to save Saeed Chmagh, the assistant to Namir Noor- Eldeen and get him to a hospital. What they didn't know at the time and what we later learnt was that high above in the sky a crew of the helicopter gunship were frantically trying to get permission from ground control to assassinate them, to kill them. Innocent civilians, no arms inside, trying to save a Reuters journalist. Two children in the minivan. And they were pleading for permission to mow them down with bullets. And they got that permission. If you have seen that video, it will strike you as something that you will never forget. But that is the reality of the war. What Saeed and Doa will never recover from it's not the wounds from the shrapnel of the 30 millimetre bullets that was sprayed upon the minivan, but the trauma to the soul and the fact that they lost their father that day. Matasher Tomal saved them by throwing himself over their small bodies in the front seat of the minivan, thereby shielding them and saving their lives. They are the only survivors from that event. I thought when I looked at the sorrow in their eyes that there was some sense of shame that had to be pointed towards my profession, towards journalism. Had we forgotten these individuals, the children? Had we ever reported them by name? Had we minimised their existence and their deaths to mere numbers? And I thought, would they ever get any sense of justice? Of course, there's no compensation for the loss of a father to young children. No monetary value would compensate such a loss, and no such compensation was offered. The only justice that they will get was from knowing, and for the world, for knowing the injustice in the act, for the world to know what really happened that day, that a war crime was committed and a father was killed. And it's because this video was released, that Julian Assange is still being hunted down by those forces who do not want the truth of the war to be presented to the general public. Last August, another war ended in Afghanistan after 20 years, 20 years of a failed mission. And a lot of people were very surprised that after 20 years, all the billions of dollars spent on the effort there, how quickly things folded and how quickly the Taliban's took over within days and they asked themselves, So was it all in vain? How could this happen after 20 years? Well, in my opinion, there was no surprise there. Because ten years earlier, in the mid-summer of 2010, WikiLeaks and Julian Assange published the Afghan War Diary, showing the reality of the Afghan war. The corruption, the

inability to build up infrastructure in the country, etc. and the failed military mission, how the war for the first part of these two decades had been a progress from bad to worse. That was a new thing at that time in 2010- everybody was certain that the generals were right where they came on television and in interviews and told everybody that the war is just about to be over, there are just a few pockets of resistance, it will be over in a month's month or two, maybe half a year. I was in Afghanistan in 2007 and the chief of the forces there told me this in an interview in 2007: This will be over in a few months. But in 2010 WikiLeaks published the reality of the war and everyone should have known what was going on there, and that it would not end well. But another decade followed with the same flaws. But the truth of the war was in the documents published by Julian Assange. That was the truth of that war, and that is the reason why he is now sitting in a jail in a London prison. In 2017 in his first speech as director of the CIA, Mike Pompeo spent half his speech talking about WikiLeaks. And he called WikiLeaks a hostile intelligence agency. There is a grain of truth in his words. But I don't think it's the truth that Mike Pompeo wanted to convey. To start with I can proudly say, and I'm certain Julian Assange will agree with me, is that WikiLeaks, yes, is an intelligence agency of the people. And I think as a journalist, every journalist should be proudly saying that he's an intelligent agent for the people. That is another way of saying that people are real journalists providing truthful information to the general public. After all, that is the role of journalism. That is why that role is seen as so important in a democratic society. But where does this hostile element come into play? How can it be hostile to present the truth to the general public? Sure certainly, it's not hostile to people to know the truth. But yes, it is hostile to those who see the truth as a threat to their corruptive power and corrupt power and the abuse of power. For some reason, Mike Pompeo and his cronies saw the truth, not just the truth about the war, the general truth as somehow an existential threat. That's where we should get worried. WikiLeaks has never been a threat to the general public, we serve the public by presenting truthful information. But we should get worried when people in power see that as a threat to themselves. As a journalist, I often see a trend in the presentation of stories. It is the original story and then often there is another story in the reaction to the original story. It's like action - reaction. And indeed, the publication of 2010 and 11 by WikiLeaks, those elements, the truth about the war, the truth about US foreign policy are the basis of the indictment against Julian Assange and the threat of 175 years in prison. Those stories were and [still]are huge in journalistic terms. The stories were global, they were printed, they were broadcast all over the world, everybody took notice. But in my mind, the reaction is now fast becoming as years go by, almost as big as a story. The reaction in the persecution against Julian Assange, by the persecution against Julian Assange, and the attempt to put him away for the rest of his life speaks a volume about the world we live in today. And that is something that we need to reflect on and we need to fight against. Because we do not want that world. That is something that would be very serious. I want to reflect on the situation as I began with it, my sort of final note. There is a tendency, an underlying tendency now to see the situation now as a fight between ideals, between autocratic regimes and liberal democracies. Oppression against freedom. I think now in this situation, as we are witnessing, it is more important than ever before, possibly ever before, that we show an

action and demand that our political leaders confirm those ideals in their action. That they really mean something by calling for press freedom, that they can put something behind the claim that we are somehow freer than others, that we treasure press freedom. And the biggest action today would be to take away the threat against press freedom that is entailed in the indictment against Julian Assange. That we ask our political leaders to put pressure on the Biden administration to drop the charges so Julian Assange can walk free. Those leaders who try to make a name for themselves, by dropping bombs, will not get a glorious place in future's history. But those who actually are willing to lead by example and take bold steps in actually showing that they are meaning what they say when they want to defend the foundations of democracy entailed in press freedom, they will reap the benefits for it. They will be remembered. Let's put pressures on our political leaders. Let's ask them to put pressure on the Biden administration. He has an opportunity to actually be on the right side of history in the books. Thank you very much.

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