

Watchdog RSF to open first Asia office in Taipei

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International press freedom group Reporters Without Borders (RSF) on Thursday said that it is to open its first Asia office in Taiwan, after the Paris-based organization rejected Hong Kong over concerns that China poses the “biggest threat” to press freedom.

Taiwan last year ranked 51st in the organization’s World Press Freedom Index, while Hong Kong was 69th and China 176th.

Recent incidents in Hong Kong — including the disappearance of five booksellers who were known for salacious titles about the Chinese leadership — have sparked fears that Beijing is choking the territory’s freedoms.

Hong Kong presented “real obstacles” for the watchdog to carry out its monitoring work, Chinese dissident Wuer Kaixi said.

“They wouldn’t be able to guarantee the safety of their staff,” said Wuer Kaixi, an Uighur student leader in the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests who now lives in exile in Taiwan and sits on RSF’s emeritus board.

He said he proposed Taiwan as an alternative, citing its boisterous and competitive media landscape.

“Freedom of speech and freedom of press is absolutely not an issue in Taiwan. What might be a problem is the threat from China,” he said.

“RSF realized that China is the biggest threat to press freedom, so it decided to shift its focus to Asia,” he added.

Taiwan was chosen not only because of its central geographic location and ease of

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operational logistics, but also due to its status as the top-ranking Asian nation in the watchdog's annual rankings, RSF secretary-general Christophe Deloire said.

"The opening of an East Asia office corresponds to the ongoing international expansion of our association and aims to better address the new challenges of media freedoms in this increasingly influential region of the world," he said in a statement released late on Thursday.

The office in Taipei is also to cover other East Asian countries, including Japan, North Korea, South Korea and Mongolia.

In the statement, the organization said that its Taipei bureau would serve as a strategic platform to exercise influence and action on the multiple fronts in which it is engaged.

It cited areas such as advocacy on behalf of press rights, building awareness in support of specific campaigns, assistance to journalists and building capacity for journalists.

Executive Yuan spokesman Hsu Kuo-yung (胡國勇) said the government welcomed the group's decision and its appreciation of the nation's contribution to press freedom and the protection of human rights.

The organization has the same spirit as Taiwan, Hsu said, adding that freedom of speech had a key role in the nation's transition from authoritarianism to democracy and is an important core value in its democratic development.

The Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) also extended a welcome to RSF's Taipei office, expressing hope that the organization could continue to fight for human rights, as well as freedom of speech and press.

The party also urged the organization to pay attention to and report on what it called controversial policies of the administration of President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文), citing as examples

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a draft counterintelligence act, a draft transitional justice promotion bill and the Act Governing the Handling of Ill-gotten Properties by Political Parties and Their Affiliate Organizations (黨產處理條例).

“These highly contested draft bills violate human rights and freedom of expression and have raised concerns that the government is seeking to infringe on the public’s freedom of press or impede the operation of our democratic system,” KMT Culture and Communications Committee deputy director Hu Wen-chi (胡文奇) said.

RSF has 11 other offices worldwide — in Berlin, Brussels, Helsinki, London, Madrid, Rio de Janeiro, Stockholm, Tunis, Vienna, Washington and Geneva.

Additional reporting by Stacy Hsu

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