

Exaggerated: The Trial of Two British Journalists

The State Court of Batam today, Thursday, 1 October 2015, hosts an immigration case trial of two British journalist suspects, Neil Richard George Bonner and Rebecca Bernadette Margaret Prosser.

The Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI) considers that the trial against the two journalists is the culmination of exaggerated actions of the Indonesian Government on the arrest of them when they were conducting their journalistic work. Especially, prior to this trial, they have been detained by the Immigration for four months.

President of AJI Indonesia, Suwarjono, conveyed this in the press release, Thursday (1/10/2015). Jono said that the government should have just deported Neil and Rebecca immediately, if they were regarded as guilty.

"Why did Neil and Rebecca should wait for four months in Immigration detention, to be later taken to court. That is the culmination of exaggerated actions by the Indonesian Government," Suwarjono said.

Furthermore, Jono reminded that the government should have just implemented administrative sanction specified by Immigration officials on foreigners, following the Immigration Law, instead of applying this criminal proceeding on them. According to the Law No. 6 Year 2011 about Immigration, Article 75 and Article 122, misuse of entry permit to Indonesia to carry out journalistic work in Straits of Malacca is an administrative violation.

"There is definitely no reason at all to detain for so long, not to mention a criminal sanction," he affirmed. Accordingly, Jono added, AJI Indonesia demands the court to immediately discharge the two journalists.

The action that the Immigration had taken to legally process the journalists, only adds to the bad image of Indonesia as a country that restricts journalists work and taints press freedom. Whereas President Joko Widodo has determined to open access to foreign journalists throughout Indonesia, in conflict areas as well as other regions in the country. "Where is the commitment of the President who promised to open access to foreign journalists? The Immigration's action was contradictory with President's statement, why they still detained foreign journalists for administrative error. We received information that both of them had applied for visas at the Indonesian Embassy in London, but there was no response," Jono said.

Neil Richard George Bonner (31) and Rebecca Bernadette Margaret Prosser (30) were arrested Friday 29 May 2015, along with 11 others, by the Rapid Response team of Indonesian Navy from Batam consisted of troops from Tanjungpinang Naval Main Base IV, Batam Naval Base, and Navy Battalion 10 SBY.

At the time, Neil and Rebecca were at the Straits of Malacca, making pirate-themed documentary which was scheduled to be aired on international TV station National Geographic (NG). Both of them were alleged as misuse their entry permit by conducting a documentary filmmaking.

Meanwhile, Chairman of AJI Batam, Zuhri Muhammad regretted the perspective of Batam District Attorney who did not recognize Neil and Rebecca as journalists. Although the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) Asia Pasific clearly recognized them as journalists working in Indonesia. Neil and Rebecca are members of the National Union of Journalists, from United Kingdom.

"Law enforcers in Batam should not have prosecute and criminalize working journalists," he said. Consequently, AJI Batam rejected the trial against Neil and Rebecca. Prosecuting them is a violation to the spirit of the Press Law No. 40 Year 1999.

AJI Indonesia records that before the case of Neil and Rebecca, the Indonesian Government have also arrested two journalists from France, Thomas Dandois (40) and Valentine Bourrat (29) in Wamena, Papua. Both were named as suspects of immigration violation and eventually were deported to France.

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