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Issued on behalf of Sweet & Maxwell

Human Rights law undermining traditional British freedom of the press to report trials

∞ Need for British Bill of Rights to guarantee right of press to cover trials

Comments below attributable to 'Geoffrey Robertson QC, speaking at the Sweet & Maxwell/JUSTICE 8th Annual Human Rights Conference':

"The UK's adoption of the European Convention of Human Rights has led to a growing number of trials being held in courts from which the press are excluded. So many cases, the Ricin case being just one example, are of huge public interest, but are now unreported. This is a worrying trend."

"The principle that the justice system should be transparent has deep historical roots in British law and would be a basic principle if we had a British Bill of Rights. It was firmly entrenched until the adoption of a more wishy-washy approach in the European Convention, and judges have too often allowed defence applications that reporting be postponed until after the trial has ended when the news is stale. Judges and defence counsel should recognise that open justice is the guarantor, not the enemy of a fair trial."

"Relations between the Muslim community and the police would be greatly improved if evidence presented by the police in terrorist trials was subject to press scrutiny. Closed trials foster a climate of suspicion and paranoia, which makes combating terrorism all the more difficult."

"Press freedom to report trials is being restricted using all sorts of justifications. The latest bogus claim is of damage to our relations with the US. Did George Bush propose bombing Al-Jazeera to Tony Blair? This is a matter of grave public concern, because it would be a war crime, but the press won't be allowed to cover the trial next April."

ENDS

Notes to Editors:

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