After Frustrating Officials, a Longtime U.N. Blogger Has His Access Curtailed

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The seats for the daily noon press briefings here are not assigned, but everyone knows who has a claim to the front row chair on the far left.

It is Matthew Lee, 50, a gadfly who has long covered the [United Nations](http://www.nytimes.com/topic/organization/united-nations?inline=nyt-org). Mr. Lee has fans and detractors — some call him a tough, in-your-face questioner; others call him a loose cannon who makes it almost impossible for other journalists to ask questions.

Either way, he elicits passions.

Ten years ago, Mr. Lee gained a coveted slot as an early blogger at the [United Nations](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/organizations/u/united_nations/index.html?inline=nyt-org), earning him free office space and a press pass granting wide access to the agency’s complex.

Over the years, he has asked plenty of provocative questions of the organization’s officials, and has used a wild tabloid style in blogging about perceived corruption, such as an [internal United Nations audit related to a bribery scheme](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-un-corruption-exclusive-idUSKCN0X00VD).

Even though his blog, [Innercitypress.com](http://www.innercitypress.com/), wields little influence outside the walls of the United Nations and is not respected by many of his fellow journalists, Mr. Lee has become a controversial figure among agency officials for his inflammatory posts, his obsessive claims of malfeasance and a combative style that has prompted Stéphane Dujarric, the spokesman for the United Nations secretary general, to occasionally cut short briefings after barrages of questions from Mr. Lee, which sometimes has left other journalists grumbling.

Now, after years of frustration, the United Nations seems to have had enough. Mr. Lee was disciplined after refusing to leave a January meeting held by his colleagues in the United Nations press briefing room. He showed up uninvited and started posting on Twitter and live-streaming the gathering, setting off an argument between Mr. Lee and United Nations press staff members and security officials.

Workers recently cleaned out his office at the direction of Cristina Gallach, the head of the United Nations’ Public Relations Department and a target of Mr. Lee’s wrath. The United Nations also revoked his resident correspondent status, which is granted to about 200 journalists who cover the organization regularly.

Since then, Mr. Lee has been working using a four-month pass “non-resident correspondent” pass.

He called the downgrading an attempt to censor him and accused United Nations officials of siding with journalists who disliked him. He also said the move was retaliation for his critical coverage of the secretary general, [Ban Ki-moon](http://www.nytimes.com/topic/person/ban-kimoon).

“This is a totalitarian country’s answer,” he said. “You ask the wrong question, and they turn against you and turn the media against you.”

Some fellow journalists called Mr. Lee’s reaction typical of his overstatements and said he had a persecution complex. But Mr. Lee claimed he was being kept from doing his work. He has difficulty getting into some events and must be escorted by a press office official in areas beyond those allowed by his new credentials, he said. The presence of a “minder,” he said, deters sources from speaking with him.

Mr. Dujarric said the new status was not meant to, and did not, prevent Mr. Lee from entering any areas for reporting.

“It’s not exactly the same access,’’ Mr. Dujarric said, “but if he has an issue, there is a staff of media liaisons to help him resolve the problem and get where he needs to go.”

The disciplinary action had nothing to do with Mr. Lee’s reporting, Mr. Dujarric said. Instead, it was his refusal to leave the room during the January meeting, which violated press guidelines, said Mr. Dujarric, who often must field Mr. Lee’s questions about press office issues as dozens of international journalists stand by, seeking updates on global issues.

“At some point, I might decide I’ve had enough, if it’s just about him,” said Mr. Dujarric, who did just that during a recent briefing, which began calmly enough, with correspondents asking for updates on stories about Congo, Gaza and Syria.

Then, Mr. Lee raised his hand and began grilling Mr. Dujarric on corruption topics and how he was being treated by the agency. Exasperated, Mr. Dujarric walked out of the room.

Much of Mr. Lee’s ire is directed at the [United Nations Correspondents Association](http://unca.com/), the group to which most resident correspondents belong. Mr. Lee, a former board member, left the group in 2012 after running unsuccessfully for president against Giampaolo Pioli, an Italian journalist and the current president.

Mr. Lee said he grew up in Europe and Washington, and after dropping out of Harvard College, eventually earned a law degree from Fordham University.

He said he had survived on donations to his website, advertising revenue and the income from freelance articles he wrote.

Mr. Pioli and several other colleagues described Mr. Lee as a talented journalist derailed by increasingly unpredictable behavior. Some of them characterized him as vengeful and accused him of printing gossip, rumors and lies. Confrontations with Mr. Lee have led journalists to call the police and United Nations security.

“The guy is brilliant and can ask smart questions, but accuses people of things that don’t exist,” Mr. Pioli said.

Despite the headaches of having to work alongside Mr. Lee, some journalists called his punishment excessive. “To limit a journalist’s access just because he’s critical, that’s not in line with the principles of the U.N.,” said Maurizio Guerrero, a correspondent for Notimex, the Mexican government news agency.

Mr. Lee said he had broken many stories over the years, which had been picked up by larger media outlets. Last year, [The Independent](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/inquiry-says-diplomats-at-un-hq-sold-positions-on-international-peacekeeping-missions-10049851.html), a newspaper in England, credited him with reporting a finding that diplomats from Africa had sold positions on peacekeeping missions. And an article published by [Vice.com](https://news.vice.com/article/head-of-the-uns-central-african-republic-mission-booted-amid-allegations-of-child-rape) credited him with reporting the resignation of a United Nations peacekeeping official in the Central African Republic after allegations that a child was raped by a soldier under his control.

On a recent Saturday, security guards emptied Mr. Lee’s office after a disagreement over their offer to ship his boxes of files. They left them outside the United Nations on First Avenue, and Mr. Lee set his laptop atop the boxes and began writing a post on his blog about losing his office and about what he described as “U.N. Hotel Fraud” in Western Sahara.

Mr. Lee vowed to continue working, saying, “I don’t care if I have to do it from the park outside.”