

FROM THE UN

SAFETY OF JOURNALISTS

Every year, on May 3, the UN commemorates World Press Freedom Day. This year the theme was safety. Press freedom is enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

It states that “everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers”

Today this liberty is in serious trouble. The year 2012 was a sad year for press freedom. Around the world, there was an alarming rise in the number of journalists killed and imprisoned. Independent reporters are especially subjected to repressive laws, government intolerance for dissent and outright impunity for the killers.

In 2012 alone 121 journalists were killed, This number is almost double the annual number of reporters killed in the line of duty in both 2010 and 2011 together.

Furthermore, harassment, arbitrary arrest and online attacks continue to be widespread. In 2012 alone, 35 journalists disappeared and 232 were imprisoned. In addition there is a high level of impunity: 9 out of 10 cases go unpunished.

In the majority of unsolved cases, local journalists were the victims. These journalists are not killed in combat crossfire but they are killed for reporting local stories of political corruption, exposing environmental issues such as land disputes, illegal logging, deforestation or mining. Government and military officials are often the leading suspects in murder case; as a result it is extremely difficult to prosecute cases of murdered journalists.

Some examples are:

Pakistan has failed to prosecute a single suspect in the 23 journalist murders over the past decade. There were five murders in 2012. One of few cases to progress from investigation to trial was derailed when an eyewitness to the murder of TV reporter Babar was gunned down two days before he was due to testify.

In the Philippines, 55 journalist murders remain unsolved for the past 10 years,. Ortega, a radio talk show host, who exposed corruption was shot in the back while shopping. The police made arrests and traced the murder weapon to a provincial governor's aide. In 2013 the alleged conspirator who had turned state witness was killed in prison.

Since the rise global communications some governments have challenged the universality of press freedom, maintaining that this right should be curtailed to accommodate culture, heritage and threats to national security.

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Consider Turkey which is a major jailer of journalists (49 imprisoned). Limits of critical expression go well beyond alleged threats to national security. Reporters are outlawed from writing something that could be seen as insulting to the Turkish people, The prime minister Erdogan told CNN's Christiane Amanpour in a September interview that while he accepts criticism he will not tolerate insult., apparently reserving for himself to distinguish between the two.

Threats to the universality of freedom of expression also come from leaders in the Islamic world. They have promoted various resolutions in the UN condemning blasphemy and defamation of religion.

Freedom of expression is not an absolute. Where to draw the line to this freedom is a difficult issue. A notorious example is the use of hate speech and incitement on the radio to kill in Rwanda. The human right to life supersedes freedom of speech. Some African governments have abused the concept of hate speech to justify restrictions on legitimate and lawful criticism.

In 2012 the UN approved a plan of action to improve the safety of journalists: more coordination of different agencies involved in the safety of journalists, extension of work already conducted by UNESCO and pressing governments to be more proactive in protecting journalists. and especially helping local free lancers who are particularly vulnerable.

Free speech is essential and a precious right. We need information to make decisions. What we don't know **can** hurt us.

In the early 20th century George Orwell said: .

"If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear"

For more information, look at
committee to protect journalists (www.cpj.org)
reporters without borders (www.rsf.org)

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