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Организация
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вопросам образования,
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联合国教育、
科学及文化组织

**Address by Mr Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO,
on the occasion of the celebration
of World Press Freedom Day and the award ceremony
of the UNESCO World Press Freedom Prize**

Doha, Qatar, 3 May 2009

Your Highness,
Minister of Culture, Arts and Heritage,
Chairman of the Board of the Doha Centre for Media Freedom,
President and Members of the Jury,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to welcome you to this celebration of World Press Freedom Day 2009 in Qatar. It is a very special occasion, as it is the first time that this important event has been held in the Arab States region.

Allow me to begin by expressing my gratitude to His Highness Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al-Thani the Emir of Qatar and Her Highness Sheikha Mozah Bint Nasser Al-Missned for accepting to host this award ceremony. This morning, when I had the honour to be received by His Highness, I thanked him sincerely for his hospitality. However, I would like to express my gratitude again publicly.

I would also like to pay special tribute to Her Highness Sheikha Mozah for her work as UNESCO Special Envoy for Basic and Higher Education since January 2003. Your Highness, in this role you have demonstrated an unwavering commitment to UNESCO's values, especially in the field of education and intercultural dialogue – two of our top priorities.

You have tirelessly spearheaded activities and projects in basic and higher education, not only in Qatar but around the world, especially in conflict zones such as Iraq and Gaza.

You have also demonstrated a firm commitment to intercultural dialogue. In your inspiring speech at last year's High-Level Conference on Youth for the Alliance of Civilizations held in Baku, Azerbaijan, you observed that: "When we seek knowledge, we should do so without having an expectation of what we will find. We should develop our positions only after we have had a chance to listen, always being aware that those who differ from us may be right." These wise words go to the heart of what we are here to celebrate today – freedom of expression.

UNESCO is very proud of its bilateral cooperation with Qatar in all fields of the Organization's competence: education, the sciences, culture and communication. In this regard, I would like briefly to mention the Memorandum of Understanding that I signed in July 2006 with the Al Jazeera Media Training and Development Centre in Doha. This important agreement opened the way for cooperation in fostering the development of independent and pluralistic media of the highest professional standards, in the framework of UNESCO's International Programme for the Development of Communication.

We are also very honoured today by the presence of Dr Hamad Bin Abdulaziz Al Kuwari, Minister of Culture, Arts and Heritage. Thank you very much for being here.

Special thanks go to His Excellency Sheikh Hamad Bin Thamer Al Thani, Chairman of the Board of the Doha Centre for Media Freedom. Launched in the autumn of 2008, the Centre has quickly established itself as an active partner of UNESCO in organizing today's events. I am confident that this cooperation will blossom further in the future.

I am also delighted to welcome the representatives of the sponsors of the UNESCO World Press Freedom Prize: the Cano Foundation, the Ottaway Foundation and JP/Politiken Newspaper Limited.

Finally, allow me to pay special tribute to Mr Joe Thloloe, who has once again presided over the Jury of the UNESCO World Press Freedom Prize with great wisdom.

Your Highness,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The celebration of World Press Freedom Day is an occasion to broaden our understanding of the issues surrounding freedom of expression and its corollary, press freedom. They are fundamental pillars on which peace, democracy and development reside.

Freedom of expression represents the core of UNESCO's mandate to advance mutual knowledge and understanding of all peoples, and to promote the free flow of information. This freedom was recognized as a fundamental right in 1948, in article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, whose 60th anniversary we celebrated last year. Its message is as clear today as it was in 1948:

The Article states that: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."

I may add that it is because of freedom of expression that countries and individuals are able to act, at this very moment, to protect themselves against the new influenza virus known as H1N1. At times of crisis, the free flow of accurate information is vital to human security.

Your Highness,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The theme for World Press Freedom Day 2009 is Dialogue, Mutual Understanding and Reconciliation.

The need for a culture of dialogue has become ever more compelling in our increasingly interconnected world, in which people from different cultural backgrounds daily come into contact. Unfortunately, such encounters are not always positively embraced. We see daily evidence of how ignorance and intolerance lead to mistrust and conflict.

UNESCO is working with its Member States and with all sections of society – schools, faith based and secular civil society organizations and NGOs – to turn this

around. To enhance intercultural dialogue, improve mutual understanding and build peace.

The media has a central part to play in these matters.

By challenging attitudes and stereotypes about other cultures, religions and peoples, the media can help to strip away the prejudices and ignorance that breed suspicion. It can promote an acceptance of difference that values diversity as an opportunity for learning and understanding.

This must be based on high ethical and professional standards, an independent and pluralistic media and strong education policies that teach citizens to become critical thinkers.

Your Highness,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Awarding the UNESCO World Press Freedom Prize is an integral part of the celebrations of World Press Freedom Day.

The Prize seeks to draw attention to the importance of press freedom and the danger media professionals face in many parts of the world. It was created in 1997 as an annual award in honour of the Colombian journalist Guillermo Cano, whose murder in 1986 became a symbol of the courage displayed by journalists in writing the truth and maintaining the free flow of information.

On the recommendation of the jury, comprising distinguished media professionals from around the world, it is my great honour to award the UNESCO World Press Freedom Prize 2009 to another journalist who paid the ultimate price in defence of this right – the late Lasantha Wickrematunge.

Allow me to say a few words about this extraordinary man.

Lasantha was one of South Asia's leading journalists and press freedom campaigners. He was shot dead on 8 January 2009 in a targeted assassination.

Having initially trained as a lawyer, Lasantha Wickrematunge decided to dedicate his life and career to journalism. In 1994, he started *The Sunday Leader* with his

brother and his wife. He used the publication to campaign strongly against the war between the Tamil rebels and the Sri Lankan Army.

Throughout his career, Lasantha Wickrematunge fought for freedom of expression and exposed corruption and failures in governance. *The Sunday Leader* was regularly awarded prizes and Lasantha became an intellectual celebrity in Sri Lanka. In this context, I would like to pay tribute to the efforts of his brother Lal Wickrematunge to ensure the continuity of *The Sunday Leader*.

Lasantha Wickrematunge was aware that his life was in danger. Indeed, he prepared for it by writing an editorial for publication after his death. Allow me to share with you an extract, where he explains his commitment to freedom of expression:

“Why then do we do it? I often wonder that. After all, I too am a husband, and the father of three wonderful children. I too have responsibilities and obligations that transcend my profession, be it the law or journalism. Is it worth the risk? Many people tell me it is not (...) But there is a calling that is yet above high office, fame, lucre and security. It is the call of conscience.” End of quote.

His brutal assassination represents a loss not only for his family, particularly his children, Avinash, Ahimsa and Aadesh, his friends and his country, but also for journalism and the universal right to freely express one’s opinion.

Today we pay tribute to Lasantha Wickrematunge’s struggle for freedom of expression and give thanks for the life of this remarkable journalist.

Unfortunately, his widow, Sonali Samarasinghe Wickrematunge, who is herself a distinguished journalist, was at the last minute unable to join us to accept the award. She has designated her niece, Ms Natalie Samarasinghe, to receive the Prize and deliver a statement on her behalf.

Madam, it is my honour and pleasure to present the UNESCO World Press Freedom Prize for 2009.

Thank you for your attention.