

Effective legislation for journalists' safety demanded

Islamabad/Rawalpindi - On World Press Freedom Day, speakers at an event urged the government to devise effective strategies and appropriate legislation for the safety of journalists in Pakistan.

It was proposed to establish a commission "National Commission for Safety of Journalists." It was suggested that a centralised authority is needed to bring investigation and support to the provinces in prosecution. It was also recommended that Protection and Welfare Draft bill should not merge the security, protection and welfare parts but rather create a Journalist and Media Workers Safety Bill.

The UNESCO Pakistan together with the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, Media Matters for Democracy and Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives organised the World Press Freedom Day 2016 in Islamabad. The event was attended by government officials, senior journalists and representatives of development aid agencies, civil society and media support organisations.

The World Press Freedom Day is celebrated every 3rd May across the world with the aim to advance the fundamental principles of press freedom and its evaluation, to defend the media from attacks and to pay tribute to journalists who lost their lives in their profession – these all are prerequisite to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development.

This year the World Press Freedom Day in Pakistan focused on two major themes; Right to Information and Safety of Journalists - Online and Offline.

The World Press Freedom Day event kicked off with preliminary group work on Right to Access to Information with special focus on key lessons from the Right to Information Legislation of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab provinces and the Safety of Journalists- Online and Offline with special reference to the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity and model draft of Journalists Protection and Welfare Bill.

Key recommendations from Right to Information working group included; process of Right to Information law should be transparent and participatory, laws, rules and procedures that have redundancies or are in conflict with the spirit of the Right to Information should be amended. Vibeke Jensen, UNESCO Representative to Pakistan highlighted that press freedom and access to information are essential for democracy, and there will be no sustainable development without strengthening the rule of law, and providing access to information for all citizens. She said that journalists help put new questions on the development agenda and they help empower citizens with information. Quality journalism provides a context in which the diversity of cultural expressions can flourish. She stressed that the newly agreed sustainable development goals recognise that access to information and fundamental freedoms are an integral part of the broader agenda.

Jeannette Seppen, Ambassador of the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Islamabad reiterated that without freedom of expression, other freedoms cannot be properly exercised.

Freedom of expression makes democracy more meaningful and institutions more accountable. It contributes to a free and better balanced debate. It acts like a catalyst: freedom of expression allows people to demand other human rights, such as justice, equality before the law and freedom of religion or belief. "In the Netherlands we go to great lengths to defend this freedom and we would like to continue to engage with Pakistan to forge a consensus between the government and the media sector on a roadmap for media safety to engender a safer environment for journalism and to combat impunity," the ambassador said.

Meanwhile, the journalist organisations yesterday took out rallies in Rawalpindi in connection with World Press Freedom Day and pledged to continue their struggle for freedom of expression. They also demanded the government to provide working journalists and their families with adequate security, besides solving their other issues. The journalists also denounced the ban imposed by President National Press Club (NPC) over holding functions of journalists' associations at Rawalpindi Press Club and National Press Club.

According to details, Crime and Court Reporters Association Rawalpindi (CCRAR), Rawalpindi Crime, Court and City Journalists Association (RCCCJA) and Photo Journalists Association carried out Press Freedom Rally from RPC to Rescue 15 Office.

The rally was led by CCRAR President Syed Sultan Shah, former presidents Sadaqat Ali and Syed Qaiser Shirazi, member NPC Governing Body Khalid Chaudhry, Malik Shaukat, Adeel Sarwar, former president RIUJ Khawar Nawaz Raja, RCCCJA President Dr Zahid Awan, General Secretary Malik Imran, Wasif Chaudhry, Raja Fahad, Irshad Qureshi, Waqar Zaidi, Rizwan Qazi, and members of civil society.

Addressing the participants, the speakers condemned suppression against the media organisations and demanded the government to provide the journalists with security. They said that the journalists were like ears and eyes of any society. They said that the media men in Pakistan have been living under state of fear and the government should take concrete steps to guard the journalists.

Similarly, Regional Union of Journalists (RUJ) Gujar Khan took out a rally to commemorate World Press Freedom Day. The rally was led by Raja Arshad and many other local journalists.

Raja Arshad, while addressing the participants, said that celebrating World Press Freedom Day is sign of living nations. He said that the societies having belief in freedom of expression could make progress swiftly. He said that the report of Reporters Without Borders was an eye opener and the government should protect the working journalists. Raja paid a rich tribute to the journalists who lost their lives in the line of duty.

The participants of the rallies were holding placards and banners mentioning slogans in favour of press freedom.

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