

Declaration on Media Freedom in South Asia

We, the representatives of professional media unions, associations and organisations from South Asia, meeting in Kathmandu to observe World Press Freedom Day, May 3, take note of the rapid deterioration in the situation for the functioning of a free media in a region that is home to a fifth of humanity.

We reaffirm our belief that free media institutions are an essential part of each of our countries' efforts to build a truly democratic and representative political order. As working journalists, media practitioners and organisers, we are committed to the fostering of a democratic media culture with a responsibility to the public interest. We believe in professional freedom not as a privilege but as a responsibility, embodying respect for the truth and the right of every individual citizen to know.

We deplore the evident deterioration in the media freedom situation in the countries in this region and note that the most challenging issues for journalists are violence directed by state and non-state actors engaged in war, and bureaucratic and legislative efforts to silence dissent.

The hazards facing the free media in the region are epitomised, since World Press Freedom day last year, in the murder of Lasantha Wickrematunge in Sri Lanka, Uma Singh in Nepal and Musa Khankhel in Pakistan. In India, which has despite other hazards, been a relatively safe place for journalists, there have been four murders, three arrests of editors or publishers, and one case of a news organisation being charged with sedition.

In Sri Lanka, J.S. Tissainayagam, arrested in March 2008 and charged with terrorism six months later, continues to face trial for articles written in 2006 that were critical of the military strategy of the government in its combat operations against separatist guerrillas in the east of the country.

Another Tamil newspaper editor in Sri Lanka was snatched from his home in February and held for two months, while senior officials of the government publicly branded him an accessory in terrorism. He was unconditionally discharged by a court in April 2009.

We demand that state authorities in our countries explicitly denounce these acts of lawlessness against the media and institute appropriate sanctions against those responsible. We call upon the enforcement authorities in our countries to bring to justice those responsible for acts of violence against journalists.

We resolve to remain united in cross-border solidarity, in our shared pursuit of an environment of respect for press freedom in our region. We underline our belief that an inclusive relationship between media communities and civil society is key to bringing about such an environment.

We pledge our commitment to working together as a cohesive network to support each other in our common aspiration to improve and assert press freedom and the rights of journalists in the South Asia region.

We express our gratitude to UNESCO, OHCHR and the Federation of Nepali Journalists for hosting and supporting this conclave on the occasion of World Press Freedom Day.

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