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Impunity must end

BY IRINA BOKOVA - UNESCO.ORG

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In turbulent times, freedom of expression becomes more important than ever, providing citizens with the information they need to make decisions about their lives and their societies.

For this, we rely on the news media, together with social media producers who practice journalism. But their safety is not guaranteed — they face threats, harassment, violence, and even death.

On average, one journalist is killed per week, and while fatalities include foreign correspondents, the vast majority of victims are local, covering local stories.

Worse, the majority of these crimes against journalism take place by a climate of impunity. This allows perpetrators to continue attacks without restraint, which can cripple the free flow of information.

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Impunity is poisonous — it leads to self-censorship for fear of reprisal, depriving society of important sources of information.

UNESCO's data shows that less than six percent of the 593 journalist murders between 2006-2013 have been solved. A quarter of the cases are considered "ongoing."

At the same time, for more than 60 percent of the killings that I have condemned in public statements, we have received no information from member states.

This cannot go on. I wish to encourage all governments to show their commitment to justice in these cases by responding to requests to

voluntarily report on judicial follow-up.

Civil society, a key partner in the struggle for the free flow of words, images and ideas, is increasingly mobilized, running important awareness raising campaigns, producing in-depth reports and safety training.

The United Nations is also sharpening its action, bringing all stakeholders to the table, and pushing for progress.

This is the aim of the *UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity*, spearheaded by UNESCO, and which draws in U.N. agencies, governments, the international community and civil society. On this basis, there have been significant steps forward in such countries as Pakistan, Nepal, South Sudan and Tunisia.

We must also shine a stronger light at the global level on the threat of impunity.

That is the objective of the U.N.'s *International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists*, which was celebrated for the first time on Nov. 2 this year.

This date marked the first anniversary of the assassination of French journalists Gislaine Dupont and Claude Verlon. We must make every use of this new platform to advance the cause of bringing perpetrators to justice.

I am convinced we can do more though — for instance, by encouraging governments to create dedicated investigation units for crimes against journalists and human rights defenders, or by strengthening special prosecution offices and bolstering preventive as well as protection measures.

Every journalist killed is a voice lost. It is a day without news, a day when freedom of expression is undermined and basic human rights are violated. The climate of fear created by impunity throws a shadow over the sustainable development of entire societies.

This is why we must all stand up for the safety of journalists at this time. To ensure every journalist can do their job safely. To protect human rights and dignity. To strengthen the rule of law and democracy. As the world shapes a new global sustainable development agenda, this has never been so important.

IRINA BOKOVA IS DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF UNESCO.

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