

DG/2003/071  
Original: English

UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,  
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address by  
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Director-General  
of the United Nations Educational,  
Scientific and Cultural Organization  
(UNESCO)

at the occasion of the celebration of  
World Press Freedom Day 2003

Kingston, Jamaica, 3 May 2003

H.E The Most Honourable Sir Howard Cooke, Governor-General of  
Jamaica,  
Mr Oliver Clarke, President of the UNESCO/Guillermo Cano Jury (2003),  
Mrs Anna-Maria Busquets de Cano,  
Ms Amira Hass, Laureate of the Prize,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to convey my warm greetings to all those who have come here for the celebration of World Press Freedom Day 2003. I would like to express my particular gratitude to Sir Howard Cooke for his gracious hospitality and to the Jamaican authorities for agreeing to host this event on their beautiful island. I am delighted to be here with you today for this important occasion.

Since it was launched six years ago, World Press Freedom Day has become a prominent item on the UN calendar, and rightly so. It serves as a timely reminder that press freedom, like all other freedoms, cannot and must not be taken for granted. Press freedom is too often the target of those who would impose their will upon us and deprive us of our rights and liberties. However, press freedom is endangered not only by heavy-handed oppression but also by public indifference. If we ever become indifferent to attacks on press freedom and the denial of freedom of expression, then you can be certain that democracy is in trouble. Indeed, it will be a sign that all of our freedoms and rights are in trouble. It has been wisely said that the condition of liberty is eternal vigilance, and this applies particularly to press freedom.

But some people may disagree. They may say that press freedom is a luxury in a world where 1.2 billion people live on one dollar or less per day. They may say that press freedom is an indulgence when there are an estimated 862 million adults who are illiterate and around 115 million children of school age who are out-of-school. They may say that press freedom is a side-show compared with the many threats to peace, civil order and security around the world. They may say that press freedom is irrelevant to such key tasks as preserving our freshwater resources, safeguarding our cultural heritage and protecting the environment from degradation. They may say that press freedom is actually a form of irresponsible licence in a world where ethnic and religious intolerance is growing, where racism, antisemitism, fundamentalism, extreme nationalism and ethnic hatred are on the rise.

I believe these views, no matter how sincerely they may be held, to be profoundly mistaken. The sacrifice of press freedom will not save the world

from the troubles I have just mentioned. Such a sacrifice will not make the world a safer, kinder or better place. On the contrary, it would needlessly constrain the flow of information and opinion and would thereby limit our choices, our capacity for creativity and our opportunity to make up our own minds. I fully agree with the 1998 Nobel prize-winner for economics, Professor Amartya Sen, when he argues that development and freedom go together.

Press freedom is necessary precisely because it may be discomfoting, challenging us to address painful issues and to question the assumptions which support our prejudices and biases. The British writer George Orwell once stated that “Liberty is telling people what they do not want to hear”. I think that this statement conveys the true spirit of press freedom as a vital means whereby any modern society remains honest with itself.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Since its foundation nearly sixty years ago, UNESCO has been dedicated to promoting what its Constitution calls “the free exchange of ideas and knowledge” and “the free flow of ideas by word and image”. Through information and communication as well as through education, science and culture, UNESCO’s purpose is to advance the goals of international peace and the common welfare of humankind. We recognize that the mass media are crucial for developing mutual understanding among the peoples of the world and for encouraging what our Constitution calls “a truer and more perfect knowledge of each other’s lives”.

In this age when there is talk of a clash of civilizations, UNESCO believes that the greatest threat comes from a clash between new forms of ignorance and prejudice appearing in our midst. To combat their spread, UNESCO is seeking to encourage intercultural dialogue, mutual understanding and respect for cultural diversity; the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001) has quickly become a key reference point in this regard. We bring to these matters a strong commitment to press freedom, freedom of expression and the development of free, independent and pluralistic media. These freedoms should be enjoyed by all peoples, regardless of cultural, religious, ethnic or other backgrounds.

Out of respect for these freedoms, UNESCO does not lay down a particular set of responsibilities or recommend a specific role for the media in regard to dialogue among cultures and civilizations. We believe that it is up to media professionals themselves to decide upon these matters. On the other hand, we certainly reserve the right to condemn any specific instances of media incitement to violence or fomenting of hatred.

World Press Freedom Day is the day on which we remind the world of Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the right to freedom of expression. On this day, we seek to raise people's awareness to the fact that press freedom is still far from assured in many countries around the world. It can never be stressed enough that freedom of expression and press freedom are indispensable for the participation of citizens in the democratic life of their societies and, indeed, for the exercise of global citizenship.

Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Journalists are often caught in the cross-fire of different interests, ideologies and beliefs. All around the world, different forces – ranging from government, police and judicial authorities to paramilitary groups, criminal gangs, guerrillas, drug traffickers, and religious extremists – may seek to control and manipulate the work of journalists. Every year, journalists are killed during their coverage of violent conflicts and political crises, and the 2002 statistics provided by numerous NGOs, particularly on violence perpetrated against journalists, are especially worrying. It appears that more journalists have been subjected to harassment, physical threat, kidnapping and direct violence than in previous years. Numerous editors and journalists were also forced by difficult and life-threatening work circumstances to flee into exile.

Let us now devote one minute of silence to commemorate those journalists who lost their lives reporting on war during the past year.

*[One minute of silence is observed]*

Journalists know the risks that they sometimes must take in order to exercise their profession. But let there be no mistake: whether it affects a journalist or an ordinary citizen, abduction is abduction, torture is torture, murder is murder. These are crimes and they must be dealt with accordingly, otherwise the rule of law itself is destroyed or weakened. It is for this reason that, in my message released today for World Press Freedom Day 2003, I am calling for an end to impunity for those who commit crimes in their attempt to silence the truth. I call upon government authorities everywhere to ensure that crimes against journalists do not go unpunished. And I call upon citizens everywhere to make such impunity unacceptable.

The award of the World Press Freedom Prize has become an integral part of the annual celebrations of World Press Freedom Day. It is one way in which UNESCO expresses its deep commitment to freedom of speech and press freedom, and it is one means whereby we all can express our solidarity with

those journalists who suffer repression and persecution as a result of exercising their profession.

The award of the World Press Freedom Prize is also a way to broaden public awareness of the values of freedom of expression and press freedom. It is a way to draw public attention to the vital role played by press freedom in a healthy and vibrant democracy.

Created in 1997 by UNESCO's Executive Board, the UNESCO/Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize recalls and honours the Columbian journalist and editor, Guillermo Cano, who paid with his life for, quite simply, doing his job. We pay tribute to his memory and re-commit ourselves to ensuring that his ideals of a free press and freedom of expression live on. The World Press Freedom Prize honours journalists who have distinguished themselves in the cause of press freedom and have thereby brought credit not only to themselves but also to their chosen profession.

One such journalist is Mr U Win Tin, the former editor of the daily newspaper *Hanthawati* and the 2001 World Press Freedom Prize winner. On this day, let us remember the fate of this man, who was being held in a hospital prison even before he was awarded the prize. I would like to voice my concern over his continuing imprisonment in appalling conditions. I call once again upon the Myanmar government to demonstrate compassion by allowing him to receive the medical treatment he so urgently requires. Indeed, in the name of common humanity and justice, I call for his immediate release.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me now turn to the award of the prize for 2003. On the recommendation of the independent international jury, composed of leading media professionals from across the world, I have the honour to award this year's prize to Ms Amira Hass from Israel. Ms Hass is the first and only Israeli journalist living in the Palestinian Territories. She voluntarily moved to Gaza in December 1993 after the signing of the Israeli-Palestinian agreements and settled in Ramallah in the West Bank in 1997. Her independent and critical reporting on the policies and actions of both Israelis and Palestinians is widely considered outstanding.

Compared with previous recipients of this prize, Amira Hass is a fortunate journalist in many ways: she enjoys freedom in her investigative reporting; her writings are not censored; no harm will be done to her, however critical she is of her Government; and she carries the passport of a country where democracy prevails.

But Amira Hass lives in a region at war, where all the protagonists yearn for peace. She often risks her life to tell her stories. And her living conditions are difficult. She has put herself at odds with many of her compatriots. I suspect that her self-imposed isolation is harsh. I do not know if she is fearless, but she is certainly brave.

Amira Hass was taught very young by her mother, a Holocaust survivor, that indifference is the worst crime of all. Consequently, Ms Hass has chosen to “tell people what they do not want to hear”, to echo Orwell’s words.

The World Press Freedom Prize consists of a cheque for \$25,000, of which half is donated by the Guillermo Cano Foundation. I have the pleasure and honour of awarding this year’s prize to the most controversial and famous journalist of *Ha’aretz*, one of Israel’s leading dailies, Ms Amira Hass.