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Journalist Safety

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There is no greater threat to the freedom of expression and communication than violence committed against journalists.

So it is entirely appropriate that this conference should address the critical issue of safety for journalists in conflict and crisis.

Unhappily, I have to report that despite declarations by UNESCO, the World Electronic Media Forum (WEMF), the UN Commission on Human Rights et al, these continue to be nightmare times for journalists and other media workers in many parts of the world.

Last year was the bloodiest on record for news media deaths. This year proceeds apace.

We count 146 journalists and critical support workers who died on reporting assignments in the course of 2005.

Twenty have died in the first three months of this year.

Of course, people say, the terrible war in Iraq accounts for it.

There is some truth in that. A total of 110 news media staff, mostly Iraqis, have died in Iraq in three years. It is the bloodiest war for the news media in modern times, outstripping the much longer conflicts in Vietnam and Algeria.

Murder was the main cause of death, overtaking crossfire and other acts of war.

And two-thirds of the victims were Iraqi reporters and camera teams, trying to use their newfound "press freedom" to keep their countrymen and the rest of the world informed.

Most news media personnel who die on assignment are not international war reporters, but workaday professionals trying to do their jobs, covering low level conflict and disorder, corruption, crime and the like.

The Philippines was the most dangerous place in the world last year outside Iraq, with 10 journalists murdered because they exercised what they thought was their freedom of expression.

Other black spots, with multiple deaths, were Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Colombia, Haiti, Brazil, Afghanistan and Mexico.

Most of the victims were targeted because of their work – shot, blown up, stabbed and/or beaten to death.

Drug traffickers in Latin America have exacted a terrible toll over the years on journalists trying to expose their activities. Corrupt police and other authorities let them get away with it.

For the criminals it is the cheapest and most effective form of censorship – silence forever a troublesome reporter and intimidate his or her colleagues, friends and family.

There is much evidence that this is working. More and more reporters, denied official support and protection, are settling for a quiet life, leaving the traffickers alone to pursue their trade in peace.

Around the world something like 90 per cent of killers of journalists get away with it. At best, the authorities do not seem to care. At worst, they collude because they don't like prying journalists either.

It was concern over such bloodshed that led the global news industry – news organisations, journalist support groups and humanitarian concerns -- to set up the International News Safety Institute (INSI) on Press Freedom Day in 2003.

Through training, exchange of information and other informed guidance, INSI aims to equip journalists to cope better with danger.

No conflict reporting can ever be safe, of course, but at least we can begin to help journalists look after themselves. It is abundantly clear no else is going to.

INSI began by stating a series of simple aims and objectives.

We drew up a Safety Code for journalists and news organisations and others to adopt.

We put forward some suggestions for best practice in trouble spots.

These are all available on our website www.newssafety.com

Since we began, we have managed to raise sufficient money from international donors such as UNESCO to provide basic safety training for more than 500 journalists in 11 countries.

We have created regional safety networks in East and South Asia, Latin America, Africa and the Middle East to enable us to reach journalists in need and to provide information on danger spots.

We have begun a series of safety debates for news media professionals, focusing on lessons learned in wars and other danger spots where journalists have died.

We initiated behind-scenes discussions with leading military organisations – American, British, Israeli and NATO -- aimed at improving understanding and communication between armies and journalists on the battlefield, which hopefully will help avoid needless casualties in future.

We achieved a breakthrough this year with the British military who, for the first time, agreed to inscribe journalist safety measures in its “Green Book” bible for media operations in time of war.

Most importantly, INSI has undertaken a global inquiry – the first of its kind -- into the rising number of journalist deaths around the world.

Led by an investigative committee comprising news organisations, individual journalists, journalist support groups and international legal experts, the inquiry aims to produce a report and recommendations by next May.

We need the facts before going to governments and international organisations with demands for effective action, whether changes to the laws that govern conflict, changes to attitudes that provide impunity to those who kill journalists or changes to the rules of engagement that govern armies in war.

Alongside this initiative, INSI and the International Federation of Journalists, the world’s biggest journalist organisation and one of our founder members, are proposing a UN Security Council resolution on the safety of news workers.

Both from the inquiry findings thus far and from our daily experiences of violence committed against journalists we know that impunity is a major factor behind journalist deaths.

As with any crime, absence of prosecution leads to contempt for the law and more offences.

UNESCO, admirably, led the charge on this issue.

Secretary-General Koïchiro Matsuura declared war on impunity on World Press Freedom Day 2003.

Recalling Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that “everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression” he appealed to all governments to fulfil their responsibility to ensure that crimes against journalists do not go unpunished.

“It is essential that all violations are investigated thoroughly, that all perpetrators are prosecuted, and that all judicial systems and processes are capable of punishing those found guilty,” he said.

Encouraged by this – and drawing from UNESCO’s work -- INSI and the IFJ drafted a proposed Security Council resolution on the safety of journalists.

It was supported by the World Electronic Media Forum (WEMF) in Tunisia on the sidelines of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) and was presented to UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who expressed sympathy.

“The United Nations ... defends your right, as journalists, to be free from physical intimidation and harm,” he told the WEMF meeting.

“I will continue to press Governments to uphold their responsibility both to create conditions in which journalists can do their job safely, and to bring to justice those who commit crimes against them,” he pledged.

However, INSI and the IFJ were subsequently advised that it was unlikely the Security Council would pass a resolution on journalist safety.

So we cut it down to a paragraph to be included in a resolution on the safety of civilians in conflict. This read:

Recognising the critical importance of freedom of information and expression,

Noting Article 79 of the Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions which states that journalists engaged in dangerous professional missions in areas of armed conflict shall be considered as civilians,

Concerned by increasing evidence of acts of violence and, in particular, deliberate attacks against journalists and media staff and associated personnel

Urges States to ensure that crimes against journalists, media staff and associated personnel, when perpetrated to prevent the exercise of freedom of information and expression, are properly investigated and do not remain unpunished, and

Requests the Secretary-General to address in all his country-specific situation reports, the issue of the safety and security of journalists, media staff and associated personnel including specific acts of violence, remedial actions taken and actions taken to identify and hold accountable those who commit such acts, and to explore and propose additional ways and means to enhance the safety and security of such personnel.

Unfortunately, we are now advised that even this may be too much for the Security Council to swallow.

But we press on, with support suddenly emerging from an unexpected quarter, the UN Commission on Human Rights.

Its Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, Ambeyi Ligabo, delivered an unequivocal defence of press freedom to the Commission’s 62nd Session in Geneva on 16 January.

Citing INSI statistic of journalist dead, he said the INSI/IFJ proposal for a resolution “is worth careful consideration”.

In his opinion, he said, there was a need for international guidelines and rules which could be adopted by the general Assembly concerning the protection and security of journalists and media staff.

The Rapporteur recommended that governments “take the necessary measures” to increase the protection of journalists and other media workers against attacks “by officials, law-enforcement officers, armed groups or terrorists”.

He recommended that the Commission on Human rights consider a comprehensive, impartial study of the issue of journalist security.

And he added, lest anyone had forgotten: “Media security remains one of the core elements to guarantee pluralistic information in a period marked by polarisation of opinion and widespread violence.”