International Expert Group Meeting on the Safety of Journalists

Presentation
By

Jānis Kārkliņš
Assistant Director-General
Communication and Information Sector
UNESCO

Moscow, Russian Federation
16 December 2011
Ladies and gentlemen,

Yesterday I attended the Memorial Day event organized by the Russian Union of Journalists to honour those journalists who have lost their lives to disclose the truth.

This Memorial Day was an occasion to remind the world and more specifically Russia of the importance of protecting the fundamental human right of freedom of expression enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

It is an obligation of the State and of the society to create and maintain the conditions needed for this fundamental human right to be enjoyed by all.

The safety of journalists is essential to protect the right of all citizens to reliable information and the right of journalists to provide it without fearing for their security. A safe environment should therefore be guaranteed.

However, when crimes against journalists go unpunished, the State’s commitment to fundamental freedoms and its willingness to enforce the rule of law become unconvincing. States must therefore take a firm stance to
prevent the murders of journalists and to ensure that the perpetrators of crimes and acts of violence against media professionals and associated personnel are duly prosecuted.

Impunity creates more impunity. It is a vicious cycle. If violence against journalists prevails, media cannot be free, information cannot be pluralistic and democracy cannot function.

Since 2000, more than 500 journalists and media workers have been killed. In Russia alone, the Committee to Protect Journalists has investigated the murder of 22 media professionals.

Their lives represent a powerful reminder of why freedom of expression is so important. Their deaths should summon us to action.

UNESCO is committed to take action to promote the safety of journalists and to end impunity for attacks against them. Often in collaboration with other organizations, UNESCO has taken a number of decisive actions for supporting safety training courses and
workshops for journalists and media workers worldwide, creating awareness-raising campaigns and advocating with Member States to end impunity on crimes against journalists and media workers.

UNESCO has also enriched the international legal field by endorsing resolutions and declarations that have been in some cases catalysts for the advancement of a climate where journalists are safe and consequently citizens find it easier to access quality information.

The importance of this issue was further highlighted by the Medellin Declaration of 2007, which specifically focuses on securing the safety of journalists and combating impunity in both conflict and non-conflict situations, and the Belgrade Declaration of 2004, which focused on supporting media in violent conflict-zones and countries in transition.

The continuing and widespread assassination of journalists for exercising their profession, and the impunity which often surrounds such crimes, has been repeatedly condemned by UNESCO. In line with Resolution 29, of the 29th session of UNESCO’s General Conference, the Director General has, since 1997,
publicly condemned the killing of individual journalists and media workers, as well as massive and repetitive violations of press freedom and urged the competent authorities to discharge their duty of preventing, investigating and punishing such crimes.

While UNESCO is the only UN agency with a mandate to defend freedom of expression and press freedom, other parts of the UN regularly deal with these issues as part of their broader remits. If UNESCO is to better fulfil its mandate and stated objectives around the safety of journalists and countering impunity, it is essential that it coordinates more closely with other parts of the UN.

In this sense, UNESCO has laid the foundation of a document that will be central not only for our work but also for the whole UN family.

This document is the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity which constitutes an example of how we can ensure better implementation of existing standards for the protection of journalists and how we can more effectively address the issue of impunity. This document is the result of the UN Inter-

A draft of this plan is now being finalised after the discussions which took place during the UN Inter-Agency Meeting and additional consultations undertaken within the UN system and other major stakeholders that attended the meeting, such as many international and regional institutions, professional organizations, NGOs and Member States.

The final draft of the Plan of Action will be submitted to UNESCO’s International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC) for endorsement at its next session that will take place from 21 to 23 March 2012. Then it will be submitted to the bodies in charge of UN-wide coordination.

I would like to highlight some of the issues included in this document. The measures in the prepared draft Plan include the establishment of a coordinated inter-agency mechanism to handle issues connected to the safety of journalists and impunity. This will involve monitoring of progress as well incorporating this issue into UN strategies at both national and international levels.
The draft Plan also foresees the strengthening of the office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, as well as the mandate and resources of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression, and of the Special Rapporteurs on Extra-judicial Summary or Arbitrary Executions, Violence Against Women and Torture.

The document encourages Member States to explore ways of broadening the scope of Security Council Resolution 1738 to non-conflict situations as well.

Cooperating with Member States is also one of the main priorities. This notably includes assisting countries to develop legislation and mechanisms favourable to freedom of expression and information, and by supporting their efforts to implement existing international rules and principles, especially the 1997 UNESCO General Conference Resolution concerning violence against journalists. This stipulates that there should be no statute of limitations on crimes against freedom of expression.

This document also considers measures to comply with the IPDC’s Decisions on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity, and a process to submit information on
the actions taken to prevent impunity for killings of journalists, and also on the status of the judicial inquiries conducted on each one of the killings condemned that is by UNESCO.

To further reinforce our common action, the draft Plan describes a series of measures to cooperate with other intergovernmental organizations, at both international and regional levels, and encourages the incorporation of media development programmes, in particular on the safety of journalists, into their strategies;

In addition to that, the plan elaborates on partnerships with civil society organizations and professional associations dedicated to monitoring the safety of journalists and media workers at national, regional and international levels. This cooperation could include sharing up-to-date information and best practices with partner organizations and field offices and conducting joint missions and investigations into particular cases. It could also include work with journalist organisations to develop good practices on reporting on corruption, in line with the principles of the UN Convention against Corruption.
To further reinforce prevention, awareness-raising campaigns will also be conducted with Member States, civil society, non governmental organizations and concerned bodies about issues of freedom of expression, journalists’ safety and the danger of impunity to democracy.

An important issue raised in the plan is to disseminate good practices on the safety of journalists and counteracting impunity and also including the subject in journalism education institutions curriculum.

The final Plan of Action will be soon in your hands. We hope it will provide ideas for developing new initiatives, for expanding those already existing and for enhancing cooperation and partnership at all levels.

We would like to appeal to all to get involved. The realization of human rights to freedom of expression is our common responsibility. Its achievement will depend entirely on the contribution that each and every one of us is willing to make.

In this journey, UNESCO will be with you, every step of the way.

Thank you.