Opening Remarks by Mr Jānis Kārkliņš, Assistant Director-General of Comunication and Information on the Initiative on Impunity and The Rule of Law

Outlook for the UN Inter-Agency Dialogue on countering targeted violence and ending impunity

London, 1 June 2011

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to thank Professor Howard Tumber for his welcome remarks, and for underscoring the significance of the issue at hand.

It is a great honour to be here and I would also like to convey UNESCO’s gratitude to the City University, the University of Sheffield, Norwegian PEN, the Open Society Foundation, and the Swedish National Commission at UNESCO - for their support and facilitation of this working conference.

As you know, over the last decade, more than 500 journalists and media workers have been killed worldwide
with many more wounded while carrying out their professional responsibilities. Most were not even working in a conflict zone. In the first half of this year alone, UNESCO’s Director-General has condemned the assassination of 24 journalists (an “average” of 4 a month… 4 too many.

The violence that journalists continue to suffer has distorted our reality by creating a climate of fear and self-censorship. This cannot continue. The safety of journalists and combating impunity go hand-in-hand. They are fundamental prerequisites for achieving freedom of expression and democracy.

In 2010, Director-General Bokova was asked by the Intergovernmental Council of the International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC) to consult with Member States on the feasibility of convening a UN Interagency Meeting for the express purpose of formulating a comprehensive and action-oriented approach to securing the safety of journalists and combating impunity. This meeting is scheduled to take place this September in Paris.

As the title of our first session indicates, there are a variety of mechanisms at the disposal of inter-
governmental and international organizations to meet these ends.

In 2006, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1738, which is binding, and which states that “journalists, media professionals and associated personnel engaged in dangerous professional missions in areas of armed conflict shall be considered civilians, to be respected and protected as such”.

There is also UNESCO’s General Conference Resolution 29, adopted in 1997, which condemns violence against journalists and calls on its Member States to uphold their obligations to prevent, investigate, and punish crimes against journalists.

The Medellin Declaration, issued in 2007 in conjunction with World Press Freedom Day, reiterated the call upon Member States made in UNESCO’s Resolution 29, and focused on Securing the Safety of Journalists and Combating Impunity.

The issue is not an absence of international legal instruments, but rather a failure in their implementation. The problem is partly that governments, even democratic ones, had been negligent in respecting and carrying out
the provisions outlined in already existing declarations and conventions.

To this day, a majority of news media victims are deliberately targeted; and, in more than 9 out of 10 of those cases, no one was brought to justice.

We must confront impunity. And, we must also bear in mind that ensuring the safety of media professionals will require additional measures.

Have governments and international organizations taken all possible steps to guarantee the safety of journalists? And, what can journalists and media institutions do to improve their own safety?

We know that governments can contribute to the safety of media workers by providing information on dangerous conditions in the field, and by educating their militaries on the rights of journalists.

We know that press agencies, news outlets, and other employers of media professionals can provide training, peer-coaching, proper insurance, voluntary acceptance
of dangerous assignments, and access to post-traumatic counselling and help for stress management.

We know that the United Nations and its agencies are equipped with an evolving set of tools and instruments to address the issue of safety of journalists and to combat impunity. These instruments draw their strength from being internationally recognized and legally binding, as well as serving as moral touchstones.

Today, we must ask ourselves: How can we leverage the strength of multiple agencies? How do we address the distinction between new media journalists and traditional media professionals? What unique challenges do we face as inter-governmental bodies?

Traditionally, the issue of the safety of journalists has been mostly approached as a legal issue. Therefore, the main goal of many organizations, such as UNESCO, is to ensure that Member States abide by international laws and standards concerning protection of journalists and media workers.

However, many acts of violence against journalists and media workers are increasingly perpetrated by non-state actors, which include organized crime syndicates, drug cartels, private security companies, and militias.
Local governments are either unwilling or incapable of carrying out investigations to bring the wrong-doers to justice. This compounds the phenomenon of impunity and the net effect is a vicious cycle of escalating crimes and fear.

UNESCO is committed to work towards ending this cycle. The Agency’s mandate is to defend and promote freedom of expression and its corollary press freedom, as well as to foster the safety of journalists and media workers. Over the years, this has involved safety training and workshops for journalists and media workers, creating awareness campaigns, and advocating with Member States to end impunity through means in our hands: public condemnation, discrete diplomacy and encouragement of investigation.

Most recently, we commemorated the 20th Anniversary of the Windhoek Declaration with the celebration of World Press Freedom Day on May 3rd at which the Washington Declaration was adopted. Each year, in cooperation and consultation with several media experts, NGOs, and intergovernmental agencies, UNESCO drafts a document that fully reflects the challenges and potentials faced in ensuring press freedom, and calls on all stakeholders to act.
In preparation of the UN Inter-Agency Dialogue, UNESCO has drafted an unofficial list of suggested objectives and topics of discussion. These will be distributed to you along with a preliminary version of the Concept Note. We would very much appreciate your comments and feedback, particularly on the objectives and topics, which you will find at the end of the Concept Note.

Thank you all for joining us. I very much look forward to hearing your thoughts and wish you a successful conference.

END