

Check against delivery



Remarks by Richard Bennett
Representative of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Nepal
Delivered at a Programme to Mark World Press Freedom Day
Organised by the Federation of Nepali Journalists and UNESCO
With Support From OHCHR-Nepal
3 May 2009, Kathmandu

Hon. Pres. Ram Baran Yadav; Hon. Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal, 'Prachanda'; Hon. Upendra Yadav, Foreign Minister; United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression, Hon. Kedar Nath Upadhaya, Chief Commissioner of the NHRC; FNJ President Mr. Dharmendra Jha; other FNJ leaders and members of the media; leaders of political parties; colleagues from the human rights community; friends:

I am honoured to join you today to mark World Press Freedom Day. My Office, OHCHR-Nepal, welcomes the effort by FNJ and Unesco to bring together journalists and other people engaged in the South Asian media to share experiences and discuss ways to improve the working environment in the region. I note with some concern trends in the region towards growing insecurity for journalists and other media workers, including physical threats and worrying trends caused by the global economic recession, as documented in the IFJ's seventh annual report *Under Fire* to be launched today.

OHCHR remains concerned about the state of media freedom in Nepal. In January, Uma Singh became the latest journalist to be killed in the post-conflict era. Although the Nepal Police appears to have duly carried out its investigation in this case, my Office calls on the NP to expand its investigation beyond those immediately responsible for the killing in order to delve more deeply into the suggested possible motives for this murder.

Two weeks ago I attended the opening of a workshop organised by OHCHR-Nepal for journalists in four Terai districts of the Western Region. This was the third such workshop by my Office in the past two years, but the first time that we devoted a full day to raising journalists' awareness about their own security, after receiving feedback from them about their most pressing needs. That request is a telling indication of the lack of freedom for many of those working in the media in this country today. Also notable is that the expert delivering the security module at the workshop was a Sri Lankan journalist who now spends much of his time in India because he fears for the safety of himself and his family. Obviously, media freedom is threatened in other parts of the region also.

Nepal's media has been praised for its role in recent decades in promoting democracy. Observers have also recognised that the media here, as in other places, is not perfect - that some media houses are partisan and that some journalists do not have sufficient training. But Nepal's media is young and still maturing. However, there is no excuse for the numerous recent incidents against the media. The majority of these threats and other forms of intimidation were carried out by "armed groups", by organizations affiliated to political parties and by myriad other groups and individuals who simply do not agree with the media's reporting. Incidents against the media have become so prevalent that some journalists have had to relocate, becoming in effect internally displaced; women reporters in the central Terai now avoid the daily early morning and evening 'tea sessions' that are invaluable for making and strengthening sources; and many other journalists simply don't report what they know, fearing the repercussions if they publish.

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Ironically it is at this critical phase in Nepal's peace process that a functioning, responsible media is needed most. How else will Nepalis be informed about the work of those they elected to draft a new Constitution; who else will report on the activities of those engaged in building the 'new Nepal'?

Respect for the right to freedom of expression includes respecting the rights of others to express opinions that we might disagree with, or might even loathe. I have been encouraged by various statements made the Prime Minister and by others members of the Government in support of media freedom. However, those commitments have been cast into doubt by yet other statements that have called into question the requirement to respect the media's right to freedom of expression. My Office would like to urge the Government to make it clear beyond doubt that respect for media freedom is not conditional, and to demonstrate this commitment by investigating and prosecuting killings and disappearances of journalists and other serious incidents against them. A significant first step would be to reverse the withdrawal of charges against those accused of abducting journalist Prakash Thakuri in Kailali in 2007.

Besides advocating publicly for media freedom – in fora such as these, in the media and in our reports to the Human Rights Council and General Assembly – my Office is also part of the European Union's Human Rights Defenders working group, which is concerned about the promotion and protection of the rights of journalists. That group is developing advocacy strategies in this regard and is also discussing the creation of a system of 'safe houses' for human rights defenders, including journalists, facing imminent threats.

I mentioned earlier the role that the media plays in conveying information about the Constitution-writing process. I am happy to inform you that OHCHR-Nepal is working with various national and international partners to organise a week-long programme for journalists from outside Kathmandu to come to the capital for training on reporting about the Constituent Assembly. Empowering the regional media in this way will in turn empower Nepalis in general, who will benefit from increased and better informed reporting. I see from your programme that there is a session devoted to this topic tomorrow. While I might not be able to attend, my Office will be represented.

In closing I would like to wish you the best in your deliberations over the next two days, and assure you that OHCHR-Nepal will be following this conference with great interest.

Thank you.