



*Statement to mark World Press Freedom Day (3 May)*

**Arbour says harrassment and secrecy laws undermine press freedom**

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Louise Arbour marked World Press Freedom Day, which falls on 3 May, by underscoring the importance of the media's efforts to carry out their vital task of informing the public about key events and policies – a right that is enshrined in international human rights law.

“It is a sad fact that many governments across the world persist in undermining the freedom of the press to report facts and opinions and, by extension, the right of people in general to be informed about events and policies that are shaping our world,” Arbour said.

This is done in variety of ways. Some governments continue to threaten, detain, assault or even kill journalists as they try to go about their jobs – or fail to protect them sufficiently from similar acts by criminal or other forces intent on suppressing the truth.”

“Others, including ones in countries that in theory have a free press, resort to methods that subtly undermine the depth and accuracy of information reaching the public,” Arbour said. “Governments are increasingly resorting to secrecy in the way they operate, and to using sophisticated methods of sowing propaganda disguised as objective information – especially, but not exclusively, when the subject involves what the governments in question deem to be security-related issues. This trend has also helped gradually undermine the principle of protecting journalists' confidential sources -- a central pillar of press freedom.”

“The proliferation of new or strengthened secrecy laws means that the media are forced to resort to speculation, which can then be used against them to further undermine their credibility, or even as a justification for initiating legal proceedings against them. The situation is exacerbated by some media organizations' apparent willingness to make compromises with objectivity in order to get privileged access to government-controlled aspects of the story.”

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is devoted to the right to freedom of opinion and expression. ‘This right,’ she emphasized, ‘includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.’

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“It is no coincidence that many of the worst human rights abuses occur in countries where the media’s ability to criticize government is heavily circumscribed, or non-existent,” Arbour said. “Freedom of the press is in many ways a barometer of the progress of societies, and journalists are often some of the most articulate and influential defenders of human rights. The considerable number of corroborated reports we receive suggest there is no let-up in the number of individual journalists who are being detained, beaten, tortured and killed.”

“Some foreign correspondents have major international news organizations behind them which are in a position to galvanize support for them if they get into trouble. Many domestic journalists do not – and it is their plight in particular that I would like to highlight today.”