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Message from Mr Ian Martin
Representative of the United Nations High Commissioner
for Human Rights in Nepal
For World Press Freedom Day
To the Federation of Nepalese Journalists
3 May 2006 - Himalaya Hotel, Kathmandu

Delivered by Kieran Dwyer, Spokesperson for OHCHR-Nepal

Members of the Federation of Nepalese Journalists, distinguished guests,

Thank you for the invitation to speak today at your conference. I am sorry that I cannot be with you in person, though I am happy to say that I will be meeting with journalists, most of whom I am sure members of the FNJ, in Biratnagar today.

The fast pace of events in Nepal in the first four months of this year have highlighted the role of the media here in keeping citizens informed and in promoting public debate about important issues. In the context of the mass demonstrations in April, Nepali journalists and media workers were at the front line each day, in towns and cities across the country, and often took great risks to ensure that these historical events were brought to households across Nepal and the international community. We know from our own monitoring of demonstrations and the conduct of security forces that journalists suffered injuries while doing their work to cover this story, and that many were arrested and detained.

Our teams also witnessed, and we have also seen some extraordinary photographs of, journalists protecting members of the security forces from angry demonstrators. I would like to congratulate journalists and media houses for the courage you have shown in these months to bring the story to the people, even under extreme pressure.

The same fierce independence and commitment to report on events and bring information and ideas to people across the nation will be critical in the period ahead in Nepal.

Our Office has been established for almost one year. As you know, it was the human rights violations in the context of the long-running armed conflict that initially raised the concern of the international community and brought about the mandate of our Office. But we have also sought to protect fundamental democratic rights which have been challenged since 1 February 2005 – namely the right to freedom of expression and the right to peaceful assembly, as well as freedom from arbitrary arrest and detention.

The new Government in Nepal is faced with some specific challenges in relation to freedom of the media. Our Office has consistently been critical of a number of measures taken by the previous Government restricting freedom of the press, which violate international human rights standards. In particular, the Media Ordinance promulgated in October 2005 and re-promulgated just last month, which amended six separate statutes regarding media, strengthened already restrictive provisions and introduced new restrictions on freedom of expression and the right to seek and impart information.

The new Government should repeal this Media Ordinance at the earliest opportunity, and commit itself to upholding international human rights standards in relation to freedom of expression and the right to seek and impart information.

The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) have recently made important commitments to human rights, in their statement of 17 April this year, including rights directly related to political pluralism and freedom of expression. Item two of that statement says that “(e)veryone shall have freedom of opinion and expression”; item three states that “(e)veryone shall have freedom to exercise their political, social, economic and cultural rights”; and item five states that “(t)here shall be freedom to publish newspapers and magazines.” We know from our monitoring and investigation work that journalists have been subject to intimidation from CPN (Maoist) cadres in the past. It is essential that the leadership of the CPN (Maoist) ensure that their cadres are fully aware of and respect these commitments at all times. Our Office shall continue to monitor the actions of members of CPN (Maoist) and hold them to these commitments.

This commitment is fundamental to a flourishing democracy in Nepal. It is essential that political parties of all persuasions openly commit themselves to defending these fundamental democratic rights in the times ahead. As Nepalis of all political backgrounds seek to build a process to restore peace, and build a strong democracy, there will need to be lively public debate in which it is possible to challenge, peacefully, the views of others. Nepali media has a central role in fostering this exchange of information and ideas, and so in building a robust democracy.

I am confident from what I have seen in my past year in Nepal that the Nepali media will make this important contribution to the restoration of peace and the development of democracy. I am equally confident that the FNJ, as a professional organization of journalists representing members from districts across the country, will help to play a role in ensuring that the independence of the media is protected in Nepal. And so I would like to end today with this congratulations to the FNJ, and encouragement to all your members to redouble your efforts to support the growth of professional media in Nepal.

Thank you.