



Statement by Richard Bennett
Representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in Nepal
Delivered at the Launch of a Program to Mark World Press Freedom Day
Freedom of Expression, Access and Empowerment
2 May 2008, Kathmandu

Honourable Krishna Bahadur Mahara, Minister of Information and Communications; Mr Colin Kaiser, Head of Office and UNESCO Representative; Mr Bishnu Nisthuri, President of the Federation of Nepalese Journalists (FNJ); Mr. Arjun Bhattarai President of the Federation of Development Journalists (FODEJ); colleagues, participants.

First I would like to address all of the journalists here today, both those participating in this program and others who will soon rush off to file their stories. Your work is very important. Access to information is empowering and the media is tasked with informing the people about their government, their society, and increasingly about the world around them and the impact it can have on their lives. In a post-conflict society such as Nepal, where tensions are sometimes high and challenges remain to human rights, governance, development and durable peace, the media plays an even more central role where accuracy and depth of reporting is especially crucial.

The activities of the media are not without controversy, as the CA elections again demonstrated. Some journalists were said to be favouring one political party or the other; certain media were said to be fanning ethnic tensions and others were accused of sensationalism. However, as the Press Council's intensive media monitoring project revealed, in general the media did its job of reporting in a balanced and responsible manner.

My Office, OHCHR-Nepal, is concerned about the incidents against journalists that were reported during the election process, including 20 cases of physical attacks; 12 cases of threats and intimidation, and numerous other attempts to stifle freedom of expression, according to the FNJ. As the report to be released by the Federation of Development Journalists today reveals, the number of incidents in which media workers were targeted jumped in the past year, from 294 to 474. These included the murder of Bara-based Birendra Sah on 5 October and the disappearance of Prakash Thakuri in Kanchanpur on July 5th. Anyone who has pertinent information should assist the authorities to bring the perpetrators to justice.

In March, OHCHR-Nepal organized a training for journalists on human rights. Held in Janakpur, it included two sessions on the security of working journalists. It also discussed how the media can report on specific issues, such as discrimination and ensuring accountability for past and current human rights violations. In our second training next month, we will devote more time to the media's role in reporting on the Constituent Assembly, including the drafting of a new constitution that will enshrine

respect for human rights, including freedom of expression, which is essential for the work of the media.

We were pleased to have so many women participants at our Janakpur training (about 40% of the total). However, we were surprised to learn that for most of them it was their first chance to participate in an external training; such opportunities were usually 'reserved' for men. Women journalists face other barriers, for example being routinely assigned to minor 'women friendly' beats, such as children and entertainment, and conversely, being passed over for the 'major' beats of politics and international affairs. The report to be released here shortly provides more details about the situation of women journalists.

The themes for World Press Freedom Day are freedom of expression, access and empowerment. Enshrining guarantees of freedom of expression and access to information in the new constitution will be important tasks for the Constituent Assembly and will require the close participation of all those dedicated to human rights and the media. However journalists, and all Nepalis, will be empowered only when those written guarantees are translated into real access to information on the ground. My Office is ready to work with others to help ensure that the right to freedom of expression and information is respected by all.

Thank you.

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Speaking Points for Opening of Photo Exhibition

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