

Check against delivery



Talking Points for Richard Bennett
Representative of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Nepal
Delivered at the Closing of the UNESCO/FNJ Conference *Media & Dialogue*
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Ms Iskra Panevska, UNESCO New Delhi, Mr. Dharmendra Jha, FNJ President;
Participants; Colleagues; Friends:

They say a good reporter has a 'nose for news'. If that's true, then you're all great journalists, as you've come to Nepal in the midst of one of the best stories of the year! However, I see that the news of the political crisis hasn't completely distracted you from your task at hand in this conference: the *Declaration on Media Freedom in South Asia* is testimony to your commitment to responsible journalism and to reinforcing the existing links between South Asia's journalists in order to improve respect for media freedom region-wide.

While my remarks at yesterday's inauguration focused on attacks against the media, particularly in Nepal, I'd like now to talk briefly about the theme of the conference – Media and Dialogue – from a human rights perspective.

IFJ's annual report notes a growing trend of anti-media attitudes held by ordinary citizens throughout the region. These are people who the report says are frightened by insecurity and sceptical about the promise of positive change. They feel let down or marginalised by transitional processes because they are not seeing a rapid return for their investment in democratic change, and they blame the messenger – the media – for all of the forces opposing that transition, and whose agendas are most visible in the media.

IFJ concludes that journalists, their unions and professional associations must stand together in a regional alliance that is committed to defending and upholding press freedom, so that the ordinary people recognise and feel the benefits of those hard-won freedoms. In addition, I would encourage all of you, and your colleagues throughout South Asia, to renew your efforts to ensure the participation of people in their societies. This is a two-way process: on one hand, taking steps to see that the news get to all people – including those in urban and rural areas, and in a variety of languages and suitable formats that they can understand – and on the other hand, facilitating the communication of those people's voices to decision-makers.

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Obviously this is not simple: it requires spending precious time and resources to visit people who are hours, sometimes days, away. It also means a shift in mindset: from one that sees decision-makers and their actions and utterances as newsworthy to one that recognises that all people deserve – in fact have the right – to be seen, heard and to participate in decisions that affect their lives. As the High Commissioner for Human Rights said in her statement for World Press Freedom Day, “International legal instruments give every citizen the right to receive information and ideas of all kinds, through any media of his or her choice.” You, the media, are the only channel that most people will ever have to decision makers.

Let’s look at a Nepal example. Earlier this year, nearly all of the more than 600 members of the Constituent Assembly left Kathmandu for towns and villages where they collected the opinions of ordinary people about the Constitution-making process. Another such undertaking is scheduled for later this year, after a draft of the new Constitution is completed. In the meantime, it is essential that all Nepalis are updated about the ongoing drafting process, receive adequate information to ascertain if their previous comments have been incorporated, and are able to form opinions for the next CA survey. Unless this is done, it will be difficult for people to feel ownership of the new Constitution, so I would encourage all of you to mull over how you might strengthen your efforts in ensuring participation of all people in the life of your country.

Unfortunately, this will be extremely difficult in countries where journalists work in fear. Toiling under constant threats and intimidation the media cannot be expected to travel to areas where a war is raging, or to challenge a belligerent state that does not even have in place laws to protect media freedom. Thus, I would like to end by supporting your commitment to strengthen your network in order to improve and assert press freedom and the rights of journalists. And again, I’d like to quote the High Commissioner for Human Rights: “We urge all states to translate their formal concerns about safety of journalists – as elaborated in international forums and treaty law – into real, concrete measures to enhance the safety of journalists and other media personnel.”

As you might know, OHCHR has been considering opening a South Asia regional office, so in the days ahead we will be following even more closely the state of the region’s media, as we continue simultaneously to support efforts in Nepal to ensure respect for the rights of its journalists.

Thank you.

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