



UNITED NATIONS
OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS IN NEPAL



**Remarks by Richard Bennett, OHCHR-Nepal Representative
World Press Freedom Day 18 May 2010**

Mr. P. Kharel, Chairperson NPI, Hon. Minister Shanker Pokharel, FNJ President Mr. Dharmendra Jha, Nepal Press Council Chairman Narayan Sharma, my colleague Axel Plathe Representative of UNESCO; other NPI and FNJ colleagues; members of the media; members from the human rights community; students and friends;

I am honoured to join you today to celebrate World Press Freedom Day and I congratulate the Nepal Press Institute, Federation of Nepalese Journalists and the National Information Commission for organising this programme. World Press Freedom Day is an occasion to celebrate the fundamental principles of press freedom; to evaluate press freedom in the society; to defend the media from attacks; and to pay tribute to journalists who have endured tremendous challenges in fulfilling their duty, especially those who have tragically lost their lives.

This year's World Press Freedom Day theme is "freedom of information: the right to know". I look forward to hearing this concept discussed in greater depth today, but I would like to stress a couple of key points in relation to the promotion and protection of human rights. The first is, to encourage us all to think about the direct link between the right to know and the fulfilment of many other rights. Access to information – particularly information held by the state – can provide for the empowerment of citizens and the ability to fully participate in the democratic process, and therefore it can be the platform to realise other human rights.

Secondly, I want to emphasise the importance of the right to truth in relation to human rights violations, including those committed during the armed conflict. Facilitating truth seeking is an essential element in the promotion of accountability in Nepal and building a society based on the rule of law.

Laws that compel the government to allow access to information and facilitate the right to know are critical. I note the recent Brisbane Declaration calls on members to enact legislation guaranteeing the right to information in accordance with the internationally-recognized principle of maximum disclosure. How many commissions of inquiry have been established in Nepal but their findings have never seen the light of day? Journalists of course also have a vital role to play in this process. OHCHR considers you - the media professionals - as a very valuable ally in the human rights movement. The media should be a watchdog of the state and the private sector, promoting accountability and transparency; and at the same time, by providing the necessary information, helping to empower ordinary people. As such, a free, independent and professional press is crucial in any society based on respect for human rights.

However, OHCHR remains concerned that journalists are frequently prevented from exercising their rights and are directly targeted for reporting wrongdoing or corruption, or simply for not following a particular political line. During the recent Maoist general strike, OHCHR monitoring teams observed once again the threats, intimidation and even violence that journalists in Nepal have to contend with while discharging their duties - and the

consequent self-censorship that many are forced to practice. The attacks on journalists in Surkhet on 6 May, and Singha Durbar on 9 May, was illustrative.

Threats and restrictions of this kind are a benchmark for the human rights situation in the country as a whole. I urge the government – and every political party – to take all steps necessary to protect and promote the rights of journalists to collect and disseminate information freely and without threat or fear. And I reiterate that – as an example of genuine commitment – the existing warrants for the arrest of those accused of murdering journalist Birendra Sah in November 2007 must be enforced.

Finally, I will take this opportunity to note with appreciation the press release issued by a number of Nepali journalists' associations, including FNJ and NPI, condemning the horrific series of attacks on journalists in Honduras which has left seven dead the past two months. The struggle for press freedom is truly universal and this expression of solidarity is welcome and commendable.

Thank you.