

Press Freedom Advocates Call for Better Protection and Safety of Journalists

By Buya Jammeh

A group of press freedom advocates, including media, civil society, and government representatives discussed the urgent need for member states, the UN Security Council and the International Criminal Court to investigate and prosecute perpetrators of crimes against journalists.

The May 7, 2015 event, *Finding Security in Unsafe Passages*, held in commemoration of World Press Freedom Day, was co-organized by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and the Communications Coordination Committee for the United Nations (CCCUN). The event was co-sponsored by the National Writers Union, the Metro New York Labor Communications Council and PEN World Voices Festival. The event was webcast from the United Nations Headquarters. Distinguished speakers included diplomats, media and civil society representatives.

Jon Williams, ABC News managing editor for international news said that Reporters Without Borders requested the UN Security Council to refer the situation in Syria and Iraq to the ICC, as war crimes are being committed against journalists. He said the UN General Assembly also adopted a resolution on impunity and crimes against journalists in 2013 and 2014.

Dr. Elizabeth Carll president of the Communications Coordination Committee for the United Nations (CCCUN), gave a brief history of her organization. She further highlighted the important contribution of journalists to the promotion of good governance and democracy.

Alexandria Faiz, O.P. trustee of the National Writers Union and ECOSOC NGO representative for the International Federation of Journalists, emphasized the significance of World Press Freedom Day, She said the protection of the journalists is being discussed because it is the most difficult situation that journalists face.

Dr. Patrice Keats, associate professor at Simon Fraser University, presented her research about how journalists face trauma. She highlighted that at times, journalists are unexpectedly caught in the middle of dangerous circumstances, which have long terms consequences for their work.

Karin Deutsch Karlekar, director of PEN America highlighted the role of the fight for press freedom around the world. Ms. Karlekar said “PEN advocates for press freedom and defend writers should they be prosecuted for carrying out their work. We also issue awards to highlight the cases of imprisoned journalists. Thirty-five imprisoned journalists were released after receiving their awards.” She emphasized the important role that the international community could play, adding that more needs to be done to combat impunity against journalists.

Benedicte Frankinet, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Kingdom of Belgium to the United Nations, noted during her keynote address, that despite growing attention to the killing of journalists little progress has been made in both limiting the numbers of journalists imprisoned or bringing perpetrators to justice.

According to Ambassador Frankinet, freedom of the press is an indispensable part of any democratic society, which is essential for the fulfillment of a wide range of other human rights. Ambassador Frankinet stated that member states have a direct responsibility to respect freedom of expression under international human rights law.

She expressed concern for the lack of implementation of treaty obligations and the need to remind the U.N. member states of their obligations. Ambassador Frankinet said the European Union has undertaken a vast array of actions to support the freedom of expression and democratic values.

Francois Delattre, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of France to the United Nations, said “Perpetrators of crimes against journalists live in total impunity, as ninety percent of the crimes against journalist are not prosecuted. The primary responsibility in this area lies with the states, which must systematically investigate such crimes and prosecute perpetrators. The International Criminal Court (ICC) must also play a role,” added the French Ambassador.

According to Ambassador Delattre, the year 2014 has been deadly as sixty-nine journalists have been killed, sometimes in gruesome conditions, He further stated that in 2015, twenty- four journalists have already lost their lives in carrying out their job.

Ambassador Delattre revealed that “The protection of journalists and press freedom is vital if you want to protect fundamental freedoms. In 2006, France proposed resolution 1738 to the UN Security Council which seeks to protect journalists in armed conflict. This is a major step that we try to seek today.”

He said the proclamation of November 2, 2014 was established as the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes Against Journalists in memory of the French journalists Claude Verlon and Ghislaine Dupont, who were killed in Mali in 2013, and is a powerful symbol on which we must build together.

He said the UN Security Council will hold a meeting on this issue, adding it is an opportunity to reflect together on how to improve the protection of journalists.

Frank Smyth, founder and executive director of Global Journalist Security, stressed the need for creating awareness to ensure that impunity against journalist is tackled. He also highlighted security and safety techniques to be used in war and conflict zones and methods of risk assessment.

The event concluded with a panel of speakers which included Herb Boyd, an award winning freelance reporter; Susan E. Davis, from the National Writers Union; and Charles Seife, from New York University. They discussed issues relating to protecting sources.