



World Press Freedom Day May 3, 2016 And 25th anniversary of the Windhoek Declaration

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Media Release on the Occasion of World Press Freedom Day 2016 and the 25th anniversary of the Windhoek Declaration

The theme of World Press Freedom Day 2016 ‘Access to Information and Fundamental Freedoms: This is your right’ comes at a critical juncture for the world’s media.

In the words of Unesco, May 3 is “a date which celebrates the fundamental principles of press freedom; to evaluate press freedom around the world; to defend the media from attacks on their independence, and to pay tribute to the journalist who have lost their lives in the exercise of their profession”.

World Press Freedom Day this year is all the more significant because it coincides with the 25th anniversary of the Windhoek Declaration adopted in 1991 at a meeting of African journalists who produced this groundbreaking document.

The main event this year, which will be co-hosted by Unesco and the Government of Finland, will be held in Helsinki from May 2-4, and the Chair of the NMT, Gwen Lister, who was also chair of the conference which adopted the Windhoek Declaration, will be a keynote speaker at the event.

In keeping with the global theme for this year 25 years of the Windhoek Declaration provides opportunity for African media to do some stocktaking on the status of journalism as well as some soul-searching on the current status of free speech and media as well as access to information on the continent, says Lister.

She adds that aspects which need to be put under the microscope include the status of Freedom of Information legislation in Africa and whether it helps or hinders the cause of access; the deteriorating situation vis-à-vis impunity, and the general safety and wellbeing of journalists working in both traditional and online media; the issue of digital freedoms and the repression of citizens increasingly finding voice online, among others.

She was pleased to note that although there are concerns around access to information, Namibia, home of the NMT, tops the list of freest countries in Africa in

terms of press freedom. But the scenario is very bleak for journalists in some other parts of the continent.

There've been severe setbacks to press freedom in Burundi in the face of a clampdown on media, in particular radio and TV, journalists have been forced to flee and there is a prevailing lack of internet access. Uganda saw a media blackout and restrictions on the eve of national elections; in Congo, too, a telecommunications shutdown as Congolese went to the polls in 2016; in Ethiopia, worst jailer of journalists on the continent after Eritrea which restricts access to information despite an FOI law, anti-terrorism laws are used to silence and censor journalists and bloggers. In Zimbabwe, President Robert Mugabe has also threatened to police the internet following the China example.

While there are depressing signs of a retrogression in freedoms in various parts of the continent, and increasing threats to access, especially when it comes to citizen voices online, there are positives for journalism itself which include a new wave of cross-border, global investigative reporting on excesses of power and wealth which inhibit the war against poverty, and African media are part of the process. These are especially important when it comes to sharing skills and resources in the interests of a world media which speaks truth to power.

Both journalistic and activist collaboration in the interests of free speech and access to information will go a long way towards realization of these rights, and enable citizens to be informed and vocal participants towards democracy and their own development.

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