

World Press Freedom Day: Freedom of Information

3 May 2010 - Since the fall of the Taliban in 2001 Afghanistan has seen a remarkable boom in the media scene. Today the Director-General of UNESCO, says the Day is "an occasion to remember the importance of our right to know."

Message from Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO on the occasion of World Press Freedom Day 3 May 2010

This World Press Freedom Day, whose theme is Freedom of Information, offers us an occasion to remember the importance of our right to know.

Freedom of Information is the principle that organisations and governments have a duty to share or provide ready access to information they hold, to anyone who wants it, based on the public's right to be informed.

The right to know is central for upholding other basic rights, for furthering transparency, justice and development. Hand-in-hand with the complementary notion of freedom of expression, it underpins democracy.

We may not consciously exercise our right to know. But each time we pick up a newspaper, turn on the TV or radio news, or go on the Internet, the quality of what we see or hear depends on these media having access to accurate and up to date information.

Obstacles in the way of our right to know take many forms, from a lack of resources and inadequate infrastructure to deliberate obstruction.

Far too many journalists exercise their profession in an environment where restrictions on information are the norm, where dealing with pressure, harassment intimidation or even physical assault are all in a day's work.

Last year UNESCO condemned the killing of 77 journalists. For the most part these were not war casualties but local reporters covering local stories.

I invite all those commemorating World Press Freedom Day around the globe to observe a minute of silence: to remember those whom it is too late to help; to honour the journalists who paid with their lives for our right to know. But today let us also acknowledge the significant advances that have been made.

More and more countries around the world are adopting freedom of information legislation. This makes it easier to scrutinize government actions, and it reinforces public accountability.

Meanwhile faster and cheaper technology means that more people in the world have ready access to information from outside their immediate environment than ever before.

Now is the time for us to capitalise on these advances, by strengthening institutions, by providing the necessary training for information professionals, by fostering greater open-ness within our public sectors and greater awareness among the public.

I call on governments, civil society, the news media and individuals everywhere to join forces with UNESCO in promoting Freedom of Information all over the world.



UN and Afghan Government call for "Freedom of Information" on World Press Freedom Day

3 May 2010 - The United Nations and the Government of Afghanistan today emphasized the need for freedom of information and the importance of a free press at a day-long event in Kabul to mark World Press Freedom Day, celebrated world-wide on 3 May.

This year's theme highlights the public's right to gain access to information, and the responsibility of governments and organizations to readily share information which is vital to a democratic society.

Among those present at the function included Dr Sayed Makhdoom Raheen, Minister of Information and Culture; Martin Kobler, Deputy Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General for Afghanistan; Shigeru Aoyagi, UNESCO Country Director; journalist union representatives and the media.

Addressing the press, Minister Raheen said: "Freedom of expression is a natural right of any human being anywhere in the world."

Martin Kobler, deputy special UN envoy, acknowledged the difficult conditions under which the media works and stressed the relevance of this year's theme.

"The need for accurate and timely information – from authorities and other influential figures – is essential not just for the media to do their jobs, but also so that the people can be better educated about issues that affect them," he added.

"We may not consciously exercise our right to know. But each time we pick up a newspaper, turn on the TV or radio news, or access the internet, the quality of what we see or hear depends on the media having access to accurate and up-to-date information," said Irina Bokova, UNESCO Director-General, in a statement released for the day.

Shigeru Aoyagi, UNESCO Country Director, said he hoped "World Press Freedom Day will be a starting point for a renewed commitment for all of us to further the notion of freedom of information and freedom of press in Afghanistan."

According to Abdul Hamid Mobarez, President of the Afghanistan National Journalists Union, "freedom of information is an important pillar of democracy."

UNESCO is the UN agency mandated to promote free, transparent and fair communications globally. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) is mandated to promote stability and governance in Afghanistan.

The UN called on the Afghan Government and media to foster freedom of information in Afghan society, as a cornerstone of freedom of expression, a fundamental human right seen as essential for building peace and making Afghanistan a sustainable democracy.



A tribune for Afghan journalists expresses optimism

2 May 2010 - A journalist by choice, Gulistan Ghalib needs no introduction in eastern Afghanistan. Having worked as a journalist for almost 40 years in Afghanistan's most difficult times, spanning from Soviet occupation to the post-Taliban years and beyond, his life of 56 years has, no doubt, been a true rollercoaster.

A 15-year-old boy from Jalalabad, who went to Kabul in the early 1970s seeking a job with Radio Afghanistan, the only mass media in the country at that time, Mr Ghalib rose to the post of director of the board of the Jalalabad office of the radio station after the branch was set up in 1982. In Kabul, he recalls working in the "drama section."

As Mr Ghalib's active journalism career started finding ground in the 1980s and 1990s, so did Afghanistan's most turbulent and difficult times. His life has flowed according to the social and political course taken by his country.

A rocket hit him in 1989, causing injuries in his head and legs. The Taliban – after taking control of the country in 1996 – fired him from his position of broadcasting director of the state-controlled Radio Television Afghanistan (RTA), besides stopping television broadcasting.

After losing hope of returning to journalism during the Taliban regime, he moved to his birthplace in a village called Shaga near Jalalabad and continued his village life, bought nine sheep, and became a shepherd in 1997. "At that time, I thought my career was over," said Mr Ghalib, on a recent morning after he finished recording a talk programme for Sharq television, in Jalalabad, where he currently hosts talk shows on current affairs.

The day's guest was Dr Rafiullah Baidar, the eastern regional head of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, and topics included the role and the effectiveness of the commission, transitional justice and corruption.

After he learned that the Taliban were after him, the journalist-turned-shepherd quietly sold everything he owned for a mere US\$ 2,000 and fled his village along with his wife, two sons and four daughters to Pakistan, where he would spend two years as a refugee in 1999.

"I didn't go to Peshawar (where most Afghan refugees went) because there were too many Talibs," said Mr Ghalib, dressed in a Western-style suit and tie, adding, "rather, I went to inner hinterlands of Lahore."

After the Taliban were toppled from power, Mr Ghalib also returned from Pakistan and headed straight to Jalalabad and took up the position of television director at RTA in December 2001.

One year later, he was promoted to the overall director of RTA and continued in that position until 2007, when Nangarhar Governor Gul Agha Sherzai fired him after "RTA covered a news report about corruption involved in the release of perpetrators in an abduction case."

The man of conviction, who draws inspiration from the likes of Mahmood Tarzi (the first journalist of Afghanistan), Indian novelist, author and social reformer Munshi Premchand, and Soviet-era writers Lev Tolstoy and Maxim Gorky, said he is saddened by some "unethical journalists" and the vices surrounding Afghanistan's modern-day journalism.

"A very good question" was his first response followed by a long pause when asked about his assessment of journalism in Afghanistan.

"Journalism shouldn't be a source of income generation. Journalists should be driven by their instincts," he said, and continued that "very few might be good in Afghanistan, but most are not because they are working for money and can't reflect the reality."

"I have worked for many decades as a journalist, but I am still living a poor life economically because I have never accepted a bribe, which was offered to me several times in my life," said one of the shining stars of Afghanistan's Fourth Estate, who was also was one of the journalists who began the first journalist association in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Sharq television, where he works now, pays him 15,000 Afs (US\$ 300) a month.

As the world celebrates World Press Freedom Day on 3 May with the theme "Freedom of Information," there is widespread fear among media persons like Mr Ghalib of attacks on the media.

However, Afghanistan has made significant strides in the media sector in recent years. In the 2009 Press Freedom Index of Reporters Without Borders (RSF), a Paris-based press freedom watchdog, Afghanistan at 149 among 173 countries – a progress from 156 in 2008 – is ahead of Pakistan (159), Iran (172), Russia (153), Uzbekistan (160), Sri Lanka (162), Saudi Arabia (163) and China (168).

"When the war was raging (in the 80s and 90s), the situation was very bad – probably worse than the Second World War. Everyone wasn't too sure if they would be alive tomorrow, so they didn't think too much about their own future, let alone journalism," he said of the past.

"Now, this war is worse than that war. There was a distinction between the warring parties in that war. Now, there is no distinction. Journalists are under pressure from both the Government and insurgents. They can't reflect realities because they will be killed. Still we have some hope for the future of journalism in Afghanistan because we are supported by the international community."

Mr Ghalib regrets that he couldn't realize his wish of starting a "truly independent" radio, television and newspaper dedicated to true journalism.

"Existence of several media outlets and the firm support provided by the international community are extremely good. It may pave the way for empowerment of journalism in Afghanistan," he expresses optimism.

On World Press Freedom Day, journalists demand safety and freedom of expression

3 May 2010 - About a dozen journalists based in Afghanistan's eastern regional hub of Jalalabad today endorsed a resolution calling on the Government to ensure the safety of journalists and the freedom of expression.

At a ceremony organized by a journalism training group called Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan to mark World Press Freedom Day in Jalalabad, journalists from different media houses also agreed that Afghanistan's media needs to improve their quality of reportage.

"We, the journalists of the eastern provinces of Afghanistan, are strictly requesting the Government and anti-government elements to promise to uphold the freedom of expression of the media and journalists as stipulated in the Constitution of Afghanistan," said the five-point resolution, adding, "specifically regarding the freedom of expression, we request the abolition of censorship of the media."

Given the complex challenges facing Afghanistan, stated the resolution, all groups directly involved in the ongoing conflict are requested not to disrupt the duties and activities of independent media and journalists.

"The Government of Afghanistan is greatly requested to take serious steps to ensure the safety of journalists' lives, especially those working in conflict zones. We are strictly requesting that all groups facilitate access of journalists and media groups to accurate, factual and timely information."

According to Wahida Kakar of Nai, the resolution will soon be submitted to the Governor of Nangarhar province.

Speaking on the occasion, Babrek Miakhel of BBC Pashto Service charted out three main problems facing journalism in the country.

The first two problems, he said, are dealing with the Government and anti-government elements. "The third problem is the conflict among journalists themselves," said Mr Miakhel.

While highlighting the increasing number of media outlets in Afghanistan, the director of the Information and Culture Department of Nangarhar province, Awrang Samim, said, "it's high time we thought about their quality."

Mr Samim said there are 21 media outlets in Nangarhar including eight radio stations and two television channels, which are the most effective.

Earlier, Saber Fahim of Nai gave a general picture of the media situation in Afghanistan.

Mr Fahim said there are 719 media outlets in the country including 109 radio stations, 53 television channels, 17 news agencies, 34 newspapers and 506 magazines.

Mr Samim and Dr Rafiullah Baidar, the eastern regional head of Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, echoed journalists' views to see a functioning press club in Jalalabad, so as to give journalists a platform to discuss and interact openly.

By Tilak Pokharel and Shafiqullah Waak, UNAMA



UN welcomes Afghanistan's commitment to protect children from conflict

2 May 2010 - Afghanistan's Government has made important commitments to protect children from the impact of armed conflict, according to a new United Nations report.

"The Government has shown political will to deal with issues related to children and armed conflict," Radhika Coomaraswamy, the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, told reporters at the end of her visit to the Asian nation in February.

She has welcomed the appointment a high-level official in the Foreign Ministry to follow up on all Government commitments and to coordinate efforts to protect children, including the prevention of child recruitment into the armed forces and police and to protect children from sexual abuse and exploitation.

In the new publication, which covers her 7-day mission, Ms Coomaraswamy highlights the need to keep schools and health centres from being used as polling centres for the upcoming September parliamentary elections.

Last August during the presidential elections, there was a marked increase in attacks against these sites, she said.

The report noted that it is difficult for the UN to engage with non-State groups committing violations against children. "It is critical that the UN communicate to them their responsibility to respect and comply with international law and to cease and desist on-going violations against children and to alert them on their responsibility to engage and to conclude action plans to bring these grave abuses to an end," it stressed.

Ms. Coomaraswamy voiced hope peace jirgas – or gathering of elders – will work to protect children.

"Peace remains the only hope for the future of Afghanistan and its children," she emphasized.



Afghan and Indian cricket teams join hands to bowl out polio

5 May 2010 - For the first time ever last week, the cricket teams of India and Afghanistan came together on - and off - the playing field, within the International Cricket Council World Twenty20.

On the eve of the game in St. Lucia, West Indies, captains Nowroz Mangal and Mahendra Singh Dhoni of the Afghan and Indian teams exchanged 'Bowl Out Polio' cricket bats, signed by the 11 members of each team in a gesture of solidarity to eliminate polio from India, Afghanistan, Asia and the rest of the world.

"Together we can bowl out polio, fielding education," stressed Afghan team captain Nowroz Mangal. While India won the game by seven wickets, the success of the encounter goes far beyond the playground.

The teams have joined hands to 'Bowl out Polio,' a virus that cripples and kills young children. Today polio is endemic only in Afghanistan, India, Pakistan and Nigeria. Progress is underway. Compared to 383 during the first four months of 2009, there have been 84 cases of polio this year, including 19 in India and eight in Afghanistan.

In Afghanistan, insecurity is the key hurdle in eradicating polio, since vaccination teams can't reach all children in conflict-affected areas. While lack of community participation was a major hurdle in the past, the frequentation of health centers was boosted with the increasing number of children enrolled in education. Today, over 6.8 million Afghan children are enrolled in primary education, including 1.8 million girls. At the same time, the polio virus has been limited to 13 insecure districts.

As India nears the goal of eradication, the frequency of polio vaccination rounds has been intensified, increasing children's immunity. Since 2007, more than 40 per cent of polio cases outside the endemic Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar occurred in migrant communities. "If we do not end polio in India, the rest of the world will suffer," said Indian captain MS Dhoni.

Cricketers in India have been intensively involved with polio eradication efforts since 2003, when the 'Bowl Out Polio' campaign was launched by Sourav Ganguly, Rahul Dravid and Zaheer Khan. Today, the team promotes oral polio vaccination countrywide.

In Afghanistan, cricket is gaining momentum as a national sport. In the 1990s, the game became popular among Afghan refugees residing in Pakistan, who continued to play cricket upon return to their home country. Unlike music and other sports, the Taliban eventually authorized cricket. "My future as a cricket player was secured a long time ago, when I was a child," says Raees Ahmadzai, member of the Afghan cricket team and founder of the Afghan Youth Cricket Support Organization (AYCSO).

In 2009, UNICEF and AYCSO organized a cricket training camp for 50 children in Kabul; similar activities are planned for this year. As long as India and Afghanistan continue to see polio transmission, all of their neighbours are at high risk of re-infection. In fact, in recent weeks, both Nepal and Tajikistan have been re-infected with the virus.

Dr Bruce Aylward, the Director of the Polio Eradication Initiative at the World Health Organization (WHO), paid tribute to the Afghanistan and India cricket teams for raising awareness on polio at such a critical time. "Right now we have the best chance we've ever had to end polio forever," he said. "The greatest threat to finishing the job by end of 2010 remains the US\$ 1.2 billion funding gap. The world must not squander this unique opportunity to bowl out polio, once and for all."

Meanwhile, Afghanistan play South Africa in their second match this evening in Barbados.

By Cornelia Walther, UNICEF

