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Press freedom more relevant than ever in digital era, UN stresses



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Freedom of expression remains as important as ever in the digital age, serving as a basis for democracy and human dignity everywhere, senior United Nations officials stressed today as the Organization observed **World Press Freedom Day** with a series of events around the globe.

From a book fair in Egypt to a march in Timor-Leste, and from an exhibition of photographs and blog entries in Moldova to a conference in Ecuador and a training session for journalists in Nigeria, the UN is staging events to coincide with this year's theme – "21st Century Media: New Frontiers, New Barriers."

In Washington, D.C., Irina Bokova, the Director-General of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (**UNESCO**), will award the UNESCO/Guillermo Cano Press Freedom Prize in absentia to the Iranian journalist Ahmad Zeidabadi, who is currently imprisoned in his home country.

Ms. Bokova, **Secretary-General** Ban Ki-moon and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay issued a **joint statement** to mark the Day in which they noted that new media and technologies offer the public "unprecedented opportunities" for expression.

"More and more people are able to share information and exchange views, within and across national borders," the trio said. "This is a blessing for creativity, for healthy societies, for including everyone in new forms of dialogue."

But the message warned that new threats are arising alongside the technology, noting that "measures to block, filter and censor information emerge every day."

The Internet must be a truly global resource to which everyone has access and where all voices can be heard, the officials stressed.

"This calls for action to defend the integrity and safety of online reporters. All principles of freedom of expression must be brought to the online world. And they must be protected. Over the last decade, more than 500 journalists lost their lives in the pursuit of their profession. Sixty killings were reported worldwide in 2010 alone. Every week brings more reports of journalists and bloggers suffering from intimidation and violence."

In a separate **statement**, Frank La Rue, the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, noted the vital role played by new media in the pro-democracy movements that have swept across North Africa and the Middle East this year.

"I commend and stand in solidarity with these courageous individuals, including journalists, bloggers and activists, who have risen above fear to express their legitimate grievances and to demand reforms, democracy and transparency, using at great risk their freedom of expression and new information communication technologies," he said.

Mr. La Rue voiced sadness that so many journalists, as well as human rights activists and opposition figures, continue to be targeted in such countries as Libya, Syria and Yemen.

"I believe that we are currently in a historic moment. Never in the history of humankind have individuals been so interconnected across the globe. Social networking platforms have given individuals the means to share and disseminate information in 'real time,' and have played a key role in the recent demonstrations.

"As one activist tweeted during the protests in Egypt, 'we use Facebook to schedule the protests, Twitter to coordinate, and YouTube to tell the world'."

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