

The Society of Publishers in Asia Annual Awards for Editorial Excellence 2021

Statement by Michelle Bachelet, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

24 June 2021

I am pleased to address this important event. A number of my staff at the UN Human Rights Office — formerly journalists in the region — have in some way been affiliated with the Society of Publishers in Asia over the years. I would like to convey their regards to you all.

This award ceremony rightly focuses our attention on individual journalists whose brilliance and courage merits particular applause. But all of you deserve honour – for your adaptability and resilience during the intense turmoil of the past 18 months, as well as your dedication to the fundamental rights to freedom of opinion, information and expression. I am also keenly aware that at least two of your previous keynote speakers – Maria Ressa and Jimmy Lai – have faced negative consequences for the exercise of their fundamental human rights.

As a ‘linchpin’ that keeps a wheel from falling off its axis, a free and independent press holds governments, institutions and policies to their task of delivering peace, development and human rights to the people without discrimination. It underpins the fundamental principles of transparency and accountability in government and fosters public trust and participation in decision-making.

And, yet, attacks on media freedoms, and on journalists, are widespread – and lethal, including in Asia and the Pacific region.

UNESCO has reported that since January 2019, at least 137 journalists have been killed worldwide, more than two-thirds of them in countries not experiencing armed conflict. Many died while reporting on demonstrations or while investigating organized crime, illicit financial flows, corruption, environmental damage or with State complicity.

This situation is perpetuated by impunity. UNESCO estimates that in almost nine out of ten cases, the killing of journalists goes unpunished.

Many reporters are routinely subjected to violence and threats of violence, smear campaigns and vicious online trolling. These attacks can be especially savage in the case of women journalists; journalists from indigenous, and minority ethnic, religious or linguistic communities; and LGBTI people. Public officials appear to be complicit in some of these cases. But obtaining impartial investigation of any such complicity is often very difficult.

Rana Ayyub, my distinguished fellow speaker, is one of many who have endured this kind of abuse. Last year my Office held consultations and trainings in protection for women journalists across the region, and this was one of their most urgent concerns. We highlighted a campaign of social media attacks against women journalists in Pakistan who had been critical of Government policies, including journalist and human rights defender Marvi Sirmed who was subjected to highly derogatory and violent language, including gender-based slurs, accusations of blasphemy, and death threats.

Legal harassment and attacks against environmental reporters, exposing problems of land-grabbing, abuse of natural resources and corruption, are also growing increasingly common, frequently perpetrated by State actors. Some of these incidents have resulted in the deaths of journalists.

Although the pandemic has exacerbated many challenges, long before COVID-19, we saw many governments, including in Asia, applying vaguely defined laws on national security, defamation, incitement, fake news, or cybersecurity to silence perceived critics both in print and online – including the independent voices of the press. In some cases, these are old, colonial-era laws that have been re-purposed.

The region has seen far too many examples of journalists, citizen journalists and media organisations subjected to threats of violence, legal harassment and arbitrary detention – often for lengthy periods, in unacceptable conditions.

In Myanmar, since 1 February at least eight independent media organisations have had their licenses revoked, and journalists have been harassed, intimidated, arrested and

detained arbitrarily. As of 27 May, at least 56 journalists remained in detention and 22 are still in hiding, with arrest warrants pending against them.

In Hong Kong SAR, the new National Security Law is leading journalists to increasingly self-censor, to avoid clashing with its vaguely formulated offences. The offices and finances of some independent news outlets have been investigated by the police on national security grounds. In China more broadly, numerous bloggers and reporters have been detained, and others intimidated, including for their documentation of the pandemic. Foreign journalists have also faced restrictions, including being refused visas or access, or being expelled.

In Bangladesh, my Office has been engaging with the Government to review the Digital Security Act, which has been used to detain journalists, activists and others, including in the context of COVID-19. My Office has recently taken up the case of Rozina Islam, a journalist who was recently arrested under the colonial-era Official Secrets Act following her critical reporting of the Government's response to the pandemic. She has since been bailed and I hope her case can be resolved promptly.

In Cambodia, the authorities have repeatedly used the Criminal Code to intimidate and imprison journalists, and the new COVID-19 law imposes further restrictions on media freedoms. Last month a notice was issued prohibiting journalists from reporting in areas designated as Red Zones, home to more than 300,000 people. Over the past 12 months our Office has documented the arrests of six journalists, while at least six licenses of online media outlets were revoked or are under review by the Ministry of Information.

Independent reporting on the handling of the pandemic has also led journalists to come under further pressure in India. Several state governments have even threatened crackdowns on online discussions that are critical of the Government's response – including factual reports of medical shortages.

In some countries, journalists are targeted as being engaged in “anti-state” activity.

In the Philippines, where four journalists were killed in 2020, my Office has also documented many cases of so-called “red-tagging” of those critical of the authorities. They

are accused of links to the Communist Party and New People's Army, putting them at risk of legal harassment, arbitrary detention and killing.

In Viet Nam, since January at least six journalists working for independent and state owned media outlets have been arrested on questionable grounds; five others were sentenced from seven to 15 years in prison.

Let me be clear: the United Nations stands strongly for media freedom, which is essential to our purpose: building sound and sustainable development and inclusive peace, in harmonious societies that have at their core the respect and protection of people's human rights.

The pandemic, if anything, makes media freedom *more* necessary. Clarity about what is happening, including the impact of public health policies, can only be established by independent sources. A free press is vital to combatting disinformation – deliberate falsehoods, intended to advance political ambitions or commercial interests, which intensify social polarisation and destroy public trust in important institutions.

The Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression recently [reported](#) that "There is growing evidence that disinformation tends to thrive where human rights are constrained, where the public information regime is not robust, and where media quality, diversity and independence is weak."

We need a new kind of governance to put societies back on course, as we aim to rebuild better after the pandemic. And we will not be able to do so without an enabling environment for clear-eyed, plain-speaking, independent journalists.

Thank you for the work you do: for your courage, your insights, and your support for the human rights of everyone.

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