BACKGROUND NOTE

2nd UNITED NATIONS INTER-AGENCY MEETING
THE SAFETY OF JOURNALISTS AND THE ISSUE OF IMPUNITY
22-23 November 2012, Vienna International Centre, United Nations Office in Vienna, Austria

1. Introduction

The 2nd UN Inter-agency Meeting on The Safety of Journalists will be held at the Vienna International Centre within the United Nations Office in Vienna, Austria, from 22 to 23 November 2012, with the aim of formulating a concrete United Nations Implementation Strategy on The Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity for the period 2013-2014 in order to implement the UN Plan of Action on this issue, recently approved by the UN Chief Executives Board on 13 April 2012.

The meeting is co-hosted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes (UNODC). It is co-sponsored by the Government of Austria.

2. Rationale

The safety of journalists is essential in order to protect the right of all citizens to reliable information and the right of journalists to provide this information without fearing for their safety. It is the responsibility of the State and of society to create and maintain the conditions needed to preserve the fundamental right to freedom of expression, as ensured by Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and to combat impunity of the perpetrators of crimes committed against journalists. Freedom of expression; the right to receive and express opinion and impart information, is essential in building democratic societies which are just and participatory. Journalists play a vital role in this process. A safe working environment for journalists should therefore be guaranteed. “Attempts by State and non-State actors to silence or restrict journalists not only deny journalists their rights but also jeopardize the fundamental right of society at large to be kept informed.”

The continual killing of journalists is a disturbing reality. Since the year 2000, more than 500 journalists, media workers and social media producers have been killed worldwide with many more wounded or injured while carrying out their professional responsibilities. Attacks on journalists include murder, abduction, hostage-taking, harassment,

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1 In its General Comment No. 34 on article 19, the United Nations Human Rights Committee defines journalism as “a function shared by a wide range of actors, including professional full-time reporters and analysts, as well as bloggers and others who engage in forms of self-publication in print, on the Internet or elsewhere”. The Rapporteur on the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression states that “journalists are understood to be individuals who are dedicated to investigating, analysing and disseminating information, in a regular and specialised manner, through any type of written media, broadcast media, (television or radio) or electronic media. With the advent of new forms of communication, journalism has extended into new areas, including citizen journalism.”

intimidation, and illegal arrest and detention. Sexual attacks are also becoming increasingly common as a weapon for silencing female journalists.

According to the latest biennial UNESCO Director-General Report on The Safety of Journalists and the Danger of Impunity, presented in March 2012, the Director-General made 62 public condemnations against killings of journalists in 2010, with a further 65 public condemnations in 2011. Figures for the first half of 2012 portrayed a worrying trend, with the Director-General condemning a considerably higher number of killings compared to the same period in previous years. In the majority of cases, these journalists were not reporting on armed conflicts but on local stories, particularly related to corruption and other illegal activities such as organized crime and drugs.

3. Background

In light of the worsening situation, a pressing need has emerged for the various UN agencies, funds and programmes to develop a single, strategic and harmonized approach in order to have greater impact on this issue. The killing of journalists and its impunity impacts on the UN system in many ways, undermining much of the work being done to promote development, human rights, environmental sustainability and peace, amongst others. It is also in the interests of the UN to demonstrate to society and the media that it plays an active and effective role in this high visibility issue. Existing efforts should be aligned, additional activities should be initiated, and the profile of the whole initiative should be raised in order to communicate the value that UN actors can contribute both individually and jointly in combatting this scourge.

In recognition of this background, on 13 April 2012 the UN Chief Executives Board endorsed the UN Plan of Action on The Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity (Annex I). Its objective is “working towards the creation of a free and safe environment for journalists and media workers in both conflict and non-conflict situations, with a view to strengthening peace, democracy and development worldwide”.

The UN Plan of Action on The Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity is the result of a process that began in 2010 when the Intergovernmental Council of the International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC) unanimously requested the Director-General of UNESCO to consult with Member States on the feasibility of convening an inter-agency meeting of all the relevant UN agencies “with a view to formulating a comprehensive, coherent, and action-oriented approach to the safety of journalists and the issue of impunity.”

Consequently, the first UN Inter-Agency Meeting on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity took place at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris on 13-14 September 2011. Representatives of United Nations agencies, programmes and funds met at UNESCO to draft an Action Plan to improve the safety of journalists and combat impunity. The meeting was also attended by a wide range of international and regional institutions, professional organizations, NGOs and Member States that provided recommendations to the UN family on the draft Plan. Further consultations were additionally carried out with a variety of stakeholders, including Member States, to design the final draft for its approval by the UN Chief Executives Board.

UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity

The UN Plan of Action on The Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity is aimed at “working toward the creation of a free and safe environment for journalists and media workers in both conflict and non-conflict situations, with a view to strengthening peace, democracy and development worldwide”.

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3 idem

4 According to the 2012 Decision on The Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity approved by the Intergovernmental Council of the IPDC (International Programme for the Development of Communication), the Director General of UNESCO condemns “the killing of journalists, media workers and social media producers who generate a significant amount of public-interest journalism who are killed in the line of duty or targeted for murder because of their journalistic activities”

The Proposed Actions (Section 5) recommend a series of decisive steps within the following fields: Strengthening UN Mechanisms, Cooperating with Member States, Partnering with Other Organizations and Institutions, Raising Awareness and Fostering Safety Initiatives.

The measures in the UN Plan include, among others, the establishment of a coordinated inter-agency mechanism to handle issues related to the safety of journalists, as well as the involvement of other intergovernmental organizations at international and regional levels to encourage the incorporation of media development programmes focusing on journalists’ safety within their respective strategies. The plan also foresees the extension of work already conducted by UNESCO to prevent crimes against media workers. This includes assisting countries to develop legislation and mechanisms favourable to freedom of expression and information, and by supporting their efforts to implement existing international rules and principles.

To further reinforce prevention, the Plan recommends working in cooperation with governments, media houses, professional associations and NGOs to conduct awareness-raising campaigns on a wide range of issues such as existing international instruments and conventions, the growing dangers posed by emerging threats to media professionals, including by non-state actors, as well as various existing practical guides on the safety of journalists. Emphasis is also given to the importance of disseminating good practices on the safety of journalists and how to counteract impunity. Journalism education institutions will also be encouraged to include in their curricula, materials relevant to the safety of journalists and impunity.

5. Objective of the meeting

The purpose of this meeting is to formulate a concrete United Nations Implementation Strategy on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity for 2013-2014. This strategy will be designed primarily by UN agencies, programmes, funds as well as UN Special Rapporteurs but will involve consultation with other intergovernmental organizations, Member States, media houses, professional associations and NGOs. The meeting will include working sessions based on the structure of the UN Plan of Action in order to design concrete specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and time-bound results of the main actions proposed in the Plan.

6. Structure and suggested topics

The modality of the meeting will be oriented at working discussion rather than information-sharing. The outcome will be a thoroughly canvassed Implementation Strategy of the UN Plan, drawing on the views of all stakeholders active in the field of safety and impunity. The meeting will take place on Thursday 22 and Friday 23 November 2012. The provisional agenda will be updated on the meeting’s website.

7. Streamlining

Stakeholders will be informed on the meeting and the information will be available on the meeting’s website. In addition, a draft implementation strategy will be circulated before the meeting.

8. Contacts

- Sylvie Coudray, Chief of Section, Section of Freedom of Expression, Division of Freedom of Expression and Media Development, UNESCO. s.coudray@unesco.org
- Silvia Chocarro-Marcesse, Division of Freedom of Expression and Media Development, UNESCO. s.chocarro-marcesse@unesco.org
- Ming Kuok Lim, Division of Freedom of Expression and Media Development, UNESCO. mk.lim@unesco.org

9. Website: