

*World Press Freedom Day*

*Statement by United Nations High Commissioner  
for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet*

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A free, uncensored and independent press is a cornerstone of democratic societies. It can bring life-saving information in moments of crises; provide a basis for public participation; and help ensure accountability and respect for human rights.

World Press Freedom Day is an opportunity to celebrate this fundamental work. Especially today, as we mark the 30th anniversary of the Windhoek Declaration, in which a group of African journalists set out key principles for press freedom.

But despite their highly relevant role, journalists routinely and increasingly face attacks, threats, harassment and criminal prosecution because of their work. Numbers have also shown a staggering rate of gender-based violence against women journalists, including sexual harassment and abuse online.

The number of journalists and media workers killed over the last decade is close to a thousand. The shocking number of attacks, including by State actors, armed or criminal groups, is as outrageous as the inaction with which they are met.

The very few cases when those responsible are prosecuted and punished are frequently the result of many years of advocacy for justice and come at great personal cost for the victim's families.

This almost absolute impunity contributes to the recurrence of such violations and a climate of fear among journalists, their families and the society at large.

The COVID-19 crisis has made it clearer that critical reporting on government policies or public figures is all too often met with prosecution. Laws adopted or applied to restrict and criminalise disinformation during the pandemic have also been used by States to target journalists.

Around the world, people have increasingly taken to the streets to demand their economic and social rights, as well as an end to discrimination and systemic racism, impunity, and corruption. Journalists fulfilling their fundamental role of reporting on these social protests have intolerably become targets. Many have been victims of unnecessary and disproportionate use of force by law enforcement, arbitrary arrests, and criminal prosecution.

Attacks, arrests and the criminal prosecution of a journalist has an additional chilling effect of dissuading other journalists from critically reporting on relevant issues. In this way, they impoverish public debate and hamper our ability to

respond effectively to societal challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic.

The work of journalists and media workers will be crucial for the world to recover better from the devastation of this crisis. Objective, trusted, fact-checked news will counter disinformation; help ensure resilient and sustainable solutions to current challenges; demand transparency and accountability; foster trust in institutions.

Contributing to humanity's well-being, accurate information is a public good. The silencing of a journalist is a loss to society as a whole.

In order to fully celebrate the bravery of journalists in their determination to keep the public informed, we must demand that their rights are respected, protected and fulfilled.