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World Press Freedom Day -- Journalists risk life and limb to report the news

Governments have a human rights responsibility to secure freedom of speech and stop the harassment, torture and killing of journalists, Amnesty International said today on World Press Freedom Day.

“Governments around the world are continuing to control and suppress information by violating the human rights of the individuals whose job it is to report it. In some cases authorities are literally shooting the messenger - the journalist,” Amnesty International said.

By exposing human rights abuses, journalists frequently become the victims of the kind of intimidation and harassment they have been reporting.

Escalating armed conflict in Aceh, Indonesia, has resulted in a crackdown on those who attempt to report human rights violations. On 9 January 2000, three journalists were assaulted by police officers during a security operation aimed at a group of suspected members of the armed opposition in the town of Lhoksukon in North Aceh. The police officers intervened when the journalists were about to take pictures of a fire that had started during the incident. The reporters were beaten by the police and their camera equipment was confiscated. The police later stated that they would be investigating the case.

Harassment against independent journalists is continuing in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Zeljko Kopanja, editor of an independent newspaper in Banja Luka, had to have two legs amputated when a bomb exploded in his car on 22 October last year. The attack was apparently related to reports he published on human rights abuses against the non-Serb population during the war which alleged that local officials had covered up these crimes to shield the perpetrators. No one has been brought to justice for this incident. In April two journalists working for an independent radio station in Livno in the Federation were reportedly harassed as a result of their criticism of local Croatian politicians.

In Iran, the government's recent condemnation of certain sections of the press has led to the interrogation and arrests of journalists and writers, and 13 newspapers and periodicals have been closed down over the past week. Journalist Akbar Ganji faces 10 charges relating to articles he wrote implicating senior Iranian political figures in the 1998 murders of a number of intellectuals and writers and statements he made at a conference on “Iran after the elections” in Berlin in April.

In Bolivia, journalists from the TV Network *Periodistas Asociados Television* (PAT) received anonymous death threats after the network broadcast footage of an army officer firing at a crowd of anti-government protesters on April 8.

Equally, investigative journalists who reveal corruption often put themselves and their families at great risk.

Bolivian national newspaper *Presencia* has been publishing reports into corruption. On April 13, journalists at the paper received anonymous death threats against themselves and their

families. The same day an anonymous caller told the editor's office that a bomb had been planted in the building.

Journalists in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) accused of publishing articles critical of the government have been subjected to torture during arrest and in custody. Following the publication of an article alleging that a military commander was plotting to kill President Kabila, Freddy Loseke, editor of La Libre Afrique newspaper, was arrested in Kinshasa on 31 December 1999. Now detained on charges of spreading false information, he has been held incommunicado, kicked, punched and whipped, denied medical treatment, brought before a military court and members of his family have been arrested.

On World Press Freedom Day, governments should make public declarations recognizing the rights of those in the media to have their physical integrity assured as they carry out their legitimate and important work.

Where journalists are targeted, governments should conduct full investigations into all complaints, bring to justice those responsible, guarantee the protection of members of the media and their families, and guarantee the right to reparation for the victims and their relatives.

"That attacks and harassment have become occupational hazards for journalists is totally unacceptable. The authorities should make sure that journalists can do investigative reporting -- a legitimate media role -- without suffering human rights violations," Amnesty International said.

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