**WORLD PRESS FREEDOM DAY**

**[3rd May 2020]**

**Journalism Without Fear or Favour**

**Originated in Africa**

In 1993 African journalists in Windhoek agreed to what is known as the Windhoek Declaration. The Declaration calls for media pluralism and independence, not only in Africa but across the world. This landmark Declaration inspired the United Nations General Assembly to declare the 3rd May “World Press Freedom Day”. Since 1993, the United Nations Educational , Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) has sought to advance the mission of those present at the Windhoek Declaration throughout the world.

**Journalism Without Fear or Favour**

This year Press Freedom Day is being commemorated under the theme "Journalism Without Fear or Favour". There are three sub-themes these speak to:

* gender equality in the profession,
* the safety of journalists, and
* the need for journalists to be independent and free from political and commercial influence.

The theme and the sub-themes have a clear message: to stress the importance of excluding outside influence when relaying pivotal information to the world. This is reinforced In article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – everyone has the freedom to impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers. In Zimbabwe this right is domesticated by our Constitution in section 61:

***61  Freedom of expression and freedom of the media***

*(1)  Every person has the right to freedom of expression, which includes—*

*(a)   freedom to seek, receive and communicate ideas and other information;*

*(b)   freedom of artistic expression and scientific research and creativity;  and*

*(c)   academic freedom.*

*(2)  Every person is entitled to freedom of the media, which freedom includes protection of the confidentiality of journalists’ sources of information.*

**The UN Secretary General’s Speech**

In his statement on the day, the Secretary General of the United Nations, Antonio Guterres stressed the importance of press freedom especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. He noted that journalists are important in the battle against the pandemic for the provision of accurate, factual information and to counter the disinformation that can wreak havoc. Journalists' freedom is important in order to tackle "misinformation from harmful health advice to wild conspiracy theories" which makes it more difficult for governments and world organisations such as the United Nations to deal with the Corona Virus pandemic. Journalism without fear or favour is thus pivotal in this time. Important steps therefore need to be taken by all governments to ensure press freedom.

**A Time to Repeal all Repressive Media Laws**

This is an opportunity for our policy makers and lawmakers to reflect on the extent of press freedom in Zimbabwe, and to check on their record in aligning the laws to the Constitution. Parliament has passed a Freedom of Information Bill which is a step in the right direction – but only a step. It focuses on access to information, which is an important right guaranteed by section 62 of the Constitution, but does not touch freedom of information – the freedom that allows journalists and other people to disseminate news, opinions and all other types of information.

The Freedom of Information Bill is one of three laws expected to replace AIPPA, along with the Zimbabwe Media Commission Bill and the Protection of Personal Information Bill.

Veritas is concerned at the snail’s pace at which the Government of Zimbabwe has tackled the issue of media reform. More than seven years after enactment of the Constitution in 2013 we still do not have laws protecting journalists and guaranteeing them the right to carry on their profession without interference and repression.

**A time to fight Fake News**

This year’s World Press Freedom Day comes at a time when governments throughout the world are grappling with the COVID-19 pandemic, a task that is made more difficult by the misinformation, disinformation and fake news that is being disseminated widely through social media platforms. The mainstream media plays a very important role in fact checking and providing balanced news to anxious governments and citizens as they struggle to prevent and contain the spread of the deadly disease. At a time like this governments and citizens have a responsibility to call out peddlers of fake news.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has said that in order to fight the COVID-19 pandemic there is an urgent need “to promote facts and science, hope and solidarity over despair and division.” As Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director General of WHO, said: “Our common enemy is #COVID-19, but our enemy is also an “infodemic” of misinformation.”

At the same time we must beware lest the battle against fake news does not become a witch-hunt against journalists. Fake news is an elastic term, and it is all too easy for repressive governments to declare news that is true but embarrassing to be “fake” so that it can be suppressed.

**A time to improve the safety and welfare of journalists**

Journalists are the mainstay of a free press and therefore society should recognise the need to improve the welfare of media practitioners. They play a vital role in researching, processing and disseminating information for the benefit of the general public. Democracy cannot thrive without them.

Veritas calls on the Government to stop the harassment of journalists and on all media owners to respect the efforts of their journalists by paying them salaries commensurate to their work, so that they can carry out their mandate without “fear or favour”.

**Conclusion**

Let us take this time to reflect on what the world owes to the profession of journalism, on those wise and far-seeing African journalists who met to formulate the Windhoek Declaration, and how we can better the environment for all journalists. More and more, accurate information is becoming an important currency in the world and more and more journalists need to be protected, respected and appreciated.

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