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Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

Written statement* submitted by the Press Emblem Campaign (PEC), a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[24 August 2012]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language received from the submitting non-governmental organization.

Impunity as an engine of journalists' killings

Introduction

As of 24 August 2012, according to Press Emblem Campaign records, 92 journalists have been killed in 2012. This figure is to be compared with the 67 registered for the same period in 2011: an increase of 37%.

The greatest number of them was murdered in countries experiencing internal strife, a situation of armed confrontation with a particular group or an internal conflict. For instance, among the most dangerous countries for journalists, besides the Syrian Arab Republic counting 29 killed so far, may be mentioned:

- Mexico where the Government is facing an armed confrontation with local mafia (10 killed)
- Somalia where the Government is facing different political armed groups (9 killed)
- Brazil where the Government is facing an armed confrontation with local mafia (7 killed)
- Pakistan where the Government is facing different political armed groups (6 killed)
- Philippines where the Government is facing different political armed groups (4 killed)
- Nigeria where the Government is facing different political armed groups (3 killed)
- Afghanistan where the Government is facing different political armed groups (2 killed)
- Iraq where the Government is facing different political armed groups (2 killed)

It is definitely impossible to argue that the majority of journalists killed around the world are victims in time of peace. Following the killings, the greatest concerning aspect is that far too few of them had led to the opening of a depth investigation by the national judicial authorities.

As highlighted by the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, Mr. Christoph Heyns, in his report presented at the 20th session of the Human Rights Council¹: «The most extreme form of censorship is to kill a journalist. The killing not only silences the voice of the particular journalist, but also intimidates other journalists and the public in general. The free flow of ideas and information is replaced by the silent warning of the grave. »

He further argued that: « Journalists deserve special concern ... because the social role they play is so important. ... Violence against a journalist is not only an attack on one particular victim, but on all members of the society. »

When the killing of a journalist (professional or non-professional) is not pursued by the national judiciary, an international mechanism, with investigative power should be instated and functional at all times.

The conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic

Since the beginning of the internal armed conflict, more than 30 journalists or media workers have been killed. Significantly, in 2012, 29 (almost 1/3) out of the total of the 92 journalists

¹ A/HRC/20/22

murdered, have been killed in the Syrian Arab Republic. Both parties to the conflict, the governmental forces and the anti-Government armed groups, are responsible of targeted attacks against journalists (professional and non-professional).

In recent weeks media workers seem to become hostages of the propaganda of the various parties to the conflict and a new and worrisome phenomenon has appeared: kidnapping of Media workers from the State or pro-governmental Medias seem to have become a target of the anti-governmental forces.

On Saturday 4th August, the anti-governmental forces attacked the State owned TV building in Aleppo.

On Monday 6th August, the headquarters of the official Syrian radio and television in Damascus was targeted by a bomb for the second time this year.

On Friday 10th August, a Syrian TV news crew was kidnapped while covering clashes between the Syrian army and armed groups in the suburbs of Damascus. Reporter Yarah Saleh, cameraman Abboud Tabarah, his assistant Hatem Abu Yehiah and driver Housam Imad were accompanying an army unit when armed men attacked the army vehicle and kidnapped the crew.

On Saturday 11th August, Ali Abbas, head of the Interior in the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), was assassinated at his home.

Recommendations

The PEC strongly condemns all attacks against Syrian and foreign journalists led by either by Government or anti-governmental forces and joins the call launched by the Syrian Journalists Association for an international investigation in the killing of journalists.

The PEC welcomes the decision of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry (IICI) to apply international humanitarian law, which is presently the only set of rules that protect journalists in situation of conflict. The PEC calls on the IICI to update the Council on violence against journalists and the measures taken by the various parties to the conflict to protect them and to ensure that perpetrators are prosecuted and convicted.

The International Humanitarian Law (IHL) does provide for the protection of journalists as civilians. However, repeatedly, the PEC has highlighted the fact that the nature of the media profession involves many risks including the basic right to life, hence the need for an instrument to build on IHL for effective applicability of protection. Add to this is the fact is that once the media worker is under physical protection, he cannot anymore be free of his moves and fully accomplish his mission. In addition, the International Humanitarian Law offers a very little space for combating impunity, considering that one has to access to the International Criminal Court in order to obtain an investigation into the case.

The PEC invites UN member States to consider the adoption of an international binding instrument for the protection of journalists which will allow combating effectively and efficiently the impunity that is prevailing today towards the psychological and physical damages suffered by journalists in situation of conflict or civil unrest.

The Press Emblem Campaign recommends to the Human Right Council to establish a specific thematic special procedure for the protection of journalists.