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Office of the Special Coordinator
for Lebanon

Bureau du Coordinateur Spécial
pour le Liban

**UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon Sigrid Kaag
Remarks to the Opening of “Let Journalism Thrive” UNESCO
Symposium on World Press Freedom Day**

Beirut, Lebanon

Monday, 04 May 2015

Excellencies,

Colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to be here and also delighted, before I start my remarks, to see the gender balance in the room and the high number of women in the media. We would also like to see more women in politics and decision-making positions and in Parliament. So I think the fact that almost two-thirds of this room is filled by women is an indication of prospect and change.

To go back to the pillar of our debate, yesterday we celebrated World Press Freedom day and today we mark this occasion in Lebanon. The UN General Assembly decided in 1993 to commemorate this day in order to stress that freedom of expression is a fundamental right for every person as stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Human rights are not only important for individual development but it is particularly the right of freedom of expression, as reflected primarily through the media, of course not only, and freedom of the press that is critical for promoting long-term peace, security and stability as well as sustainable inclusive development. The Arab Uprising, which is now long overtaken by tragedy, events and conflict, has shown how important and fundamental it is to allow people to express their opinions and their views, including their opposing views. Dialogue, debate is part of a healthy society. As you know myself as the Special Representative of the Secretary-General, I lead colleagues in 24 different UN agencies covering mandates that range

from peacekeeping to peacemaking, development and humanitarian assistance but all focused on the promotion of human rights. We work with all of you to support a whole of Lebanon approach looking at peace and security, development, humanitarian assistance and human rights.

Much of our work at the United Nations in Lebanon is actually fed, cultivated and influenced by things we hear through you the media in this country, be it the written press, the audiovisual media, the bloggers or individuals who chat on facebook, twitter politely or less politely. It is all important and part of engagement. So your role as official media representatives is critical.

I would first of all like to pay tribute to all Lebanese Media. Vibrant, creative, perhaps sometimes stretching the boundaries of what I have been used to in other countries but it is phenomenal. Each and every one of you commit to getting the word out, spreading information, driving change, or putting your finger on the sensitive issues. You've got your finger on the pulse, and that is so important for a dynamic, young, and globally connected country, which is Lebanon. You also ask for political reform, you focus on economic disparities, you speak to the sensitive issues be it the impact of crisis, be it the wellbeing of domestic workers. Today I opened the newspapers, I read about demonstrations, I read about these kinds things that maybe don't get discussed everywhere but it is important. And once again you also speak to the role of women in all areas of life, be it at home, from domestic violence to the role of the mother as a parent but equally so as a decision maker.

Freedom of the press, media, be it in all forms is making knowledge accessible to each individuals, and let us not forget students, young people. It is not just people my age, it is everybody that needs information, they need to be able to access date, facts or fiction, analysis identification is that of the author. But as long as the facts are provided we have a very good starting point. Lebanon can pride itself as having always been and remaining, despite all the pressure around you, an oasis of freedom of speech. It is a strength. Its strength is also its diversity at local and national levels. It offers all of us, the international community included but above all you serve the citizens and the region, it offers different veins of political perspectives and opinions and you are a role model for many media outlets outside this country, particularly in this region and as my colleagues highlighted, that do not enjoy even the remotest degree of freedom of speech and expression the way that the Lebanese media and citizens can cherish. So you become a channel for decision-making, I would say both nationally, but

also a drive for change and modelling for the wider region. Lebanon is a treasure, it is an example that we should look at to cultivate and also to shield.

So diversity of opinion in this country is critical. But with diversity and the access you enjoy also comes responsibility and for me also accountability to ensure that media is not fact light, it is full of evidence, it is checked, checked and counter checked because there is a responsibility. Ethical reporting and at the UN we attach great value to ethical reporting, particularly by the media from life to death. I am often shocked by the pictures I see in a lot of the Arab media, in press reports. There is dignity in one's life as there is dignity in the way you die. We show too much, we show the horrors of war, we can do that in many ways. There are a number of guidelines and I would like to use this platform to invite you to inform yourself one more time to see what you can do as an individual correspondent or actor. It is very important for the society we want to build and we want to protect. Everybody has rights at every stage of their lives.

With this also we come to the digital age. Digitalization is with us, it empowers, it also sometimes renders anonymous. And although media has been able to break down barriers between individuals, it breaks down the control of the State over the access of information. We can also hear the silent majority, they find their ways. It also comes back to the point of accountability. Be responsible for what you put out. Anonymity cannot be a safeguard. Reputations can easily be broken through anonymous channeling. In the media everything is public but I think we have a role to remind others that what you put out can go global and as they like to say in American English, it goes "viral" and I still associate virus with diseases so I don't think something going viral sound so positive. It is meant widely read and widely accessed and therefore has an impact, maybe. But access, digitalization, needs again, we have to be very careful and appropriate in what we put out, that we stimulate debate and dialogue rather than foster divisions.

We in the UN also obviously like to make use of social media. I would like to say we are not the most adventurous yet but because we have a name and a brand and a responsibility for the UN Charter to protect. Media however in times of conflict are sometimes the only channel of communication, the only way to get a message of despair out, need, conflict and the impact of conflict. But with that I would always like to think that you in particular will promote the wellbeing of the other, whomever they are, that we look at the human beings as one of us. As we extend our voice and you use the power of

voice and dissemination of information, you do that to promote a better world, a world that we can share, we can be proud of, a planet we leave behind for future generations. As my colleague has already referenced, I would also like to use this opportunity to pay tribute to all those journalists and activists who use their field of expression through the media or reporting who cannot be with us. I think Mazen Darwish is a symbol of all of them and the UNESCO Press Freedom Award was given to him for a very specific reason but he is a symbol of all the other individuals and journalists, male or female, who are not here, precisely because they use their voice and their status as individuals to speak for human rights of others.

Last but not least, I really truly hope we can next year look back on a year of continued progress in Lebanon and that Lebanese journalists will lead, you will pave the way for many others and that the reflections of this symposium will benefit all the ethical, responsible and accountable reporting on all the sensitive issues and the United Nations, through my colleagues at UNESCO or at the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the UNIC, we are here, we want to work with you for a better, safer, more secure and protected Lebanon.

Thank you.

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