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**Op-Ed on the Occasion of World Press Freedom Day
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THE FREEDOM – AND RESPONSIBILITY – OF EXPRESSION

Foreign diplomats assigned to Lebanon are often struck by two certainties: the depth of Lebanese hospitality, and the vibrancy of its press. The Lebanese media performs its mission of keeping the public informed relentlessly, but also in the most dynamic manner across the Middle East. Its latest challenge is to contribute to making the 7 June parliamentary elections a free, fair and democratic process.

Today, the international community marks World Press Freedom Day. This day commemorates and pays tribute to journalists who have lost their lives in the lines of duty and to defend the media from attacks but also to evaluate press freedom around the world. Over 100 journalists have been killed in the past two years alone and this year already, 11 further have perished.

Journalists here in Lebanon have suffered too. Some of Lebanon's most prominent journalists have been exiled, threatened, intimidated or targeted. But Lebanese journalists have never been silenced. Through the wars, terror attacks, assassinations and assassination attempts and crippling political conflict that this country has witnessed, the media was always on the frontlines, making sure that citizens were exercising their right to know.

This year, Lebanon faces a new – and positive – challenge: the parliamentary elections on 7 June. The media's role in the period leading up to the elections and on that day will be central to guaranteeing a free and transparent electoral process.

This implies ensuring that candidates and political parties can express and disseminate their political views through the media and that a wide range of opinions and perspectives are communicated to the public. It also means informing the public of its

rights and duties during the elections and allowing the public to make an educated choice when they submit their ballots.

Naturally, the media's freedom of expression comes with significant responsibility: because of its pivotal role in keeping the public informed, it is essential that the media maintain the highest level of ethical standards, objectivity and accuracy.

The media has huge responsibilities, to write responsibly, to avoid slander, not to subdue its resources to political battles and local feuds, but rather play the role of guardian of human rights, protector of civil rights, and a freedom fighter for the overall benefit of every citizen in the country. This is why UNESCO is always trying persistently to establish and promote journalists all over the world to adopt a code of conduct. Such a code would entrust every journalist, publisher, editor, and media vehicle owner to commit to moral standards, and to promote true journalism.

This year's commemoration of the World Press Freedom Day is held under the theme of Media, Dialogue and Mutual Understanding. Lebanon's media can play an important role in encouraging dialogue, whether between the country's political groups, confessional groups or citizens.

In addition, this year's UNESCO/Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize will be awarded posthumously to Sri Lankan journalist **Lasantha Wickrematunge** who was clearly conscious of the dangers he faced but nevertheless chose to speak out.

Today we honour the thousands of publishers, editors, columnists, correspondents, reporters, writers, cameramen, photographers, website experts, technicians and all others who make it possible every single day for millions of people to learn about the world around them. In the run-up to the elections here in Lebanon, they play an extremely important role that must be safeguarded. But they also bear great responsibility, and must exercise it in accordance with the significance of the task assigned to them.
