

Speech of Erik Bjerager, Vice President of the World Editors Forum,
Editor-in-Chief and Managing Director, Kristeligt Dagblad, on the
occasion of the UNESCO International Conference “News organisations
standing up for the safety of media professionals”, Friday, 5th February
2016.

Excellences,

Madame Bokova, Mr Boumelha,

Ladies and gentlemen, friends and colleagues.

On behalf of the World Association of Newspapers and News

Publishers, I would like to welcome you here today for what promises to be an opportunity for dialogue and discussion, as well as one for promoting friendship and closer collaboration. I am honoured to be standing before you and wish you every success.

At the same time, I would like to express my deep regret and profound sadness that we find ourselves here at all. That so many of us are in

attendance is indeed a sobering reminder of what I suggest is a collective failure, and of what remains to be done.

Seventy-one of our colleagues were killed last year; Sixty one the year before that; Seventy three in twenty-thirteen; Seventy four in twenty-twelve. As you are fully aware, the list stretches on.

Nearly twelve hundred journalists have been lost since the early nineties.

Not forgetting the many thousands who have been attacked, injured, jailed, kidnapped, or otherwise targeted in the name of this profession, and what it represents to those who wish to undermine it.

Many of you here in this room today can testify far more eloquently than I as to how it feels to be targeted in this way.

When I mention collective failure, I intend rather bluntly to call your attention to our inability so far to reverse these worsening trends. We,

the media, must accept our own share of responsibility for this, and more on that in a moment. But protecting journalists is a collective endeavour that relies on a conscious choice being made.

Be it political, financial, ethical, moral, or otherwise – the will to make that choice is conditional on media, civil society, inter-governmental agencies, and governments worldwide each taking charge over the elements that are within their power to change. If even one element is missing, the whole mechanism falters. We must work hard, together, to ensure it remains on track.

In reality, judging the success of the various initiatives designed to better protect journalists is, of course, far more nuanced. The efforts that are represented here today, for example, are to be embraced and highly commended, supported and endorsed. I urge you not to leave without doing so.

But the headline figures remain the most arresting part of this on-going tragedy; it is on these, ultimately, that our success will be judged.

So let me be the first to hold up his hands and say we, the media, can do more. While acknowledging that every step along this process has been crucial, with some important victories and necessary milestones achieved, we must also admit that we can - and should - work together far more effectively to address the many, many issues that can improve journalist safety. Each of us has their own responsibility in this, as I'm sure our discussions today will reemphasise. But I urge you to leave here with a clear idea of what you can commit to, and most importantly, deliver on.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu once told WAN-IFRA that journalism is “a noble calling.” That we, the media, [QUOTE] “have one of the most powerful instruments in helping our societies to value the truth,” [END-QUOTE].

He is right, of course. But the “truth” of the matter is that more needs to be done, at every level in the media, to ensure the safety and protection of the most essential elements in that process. I'm talking, of course, of the men and women who have answered that “noble

calling”, whose dedication, perseverance, tenacity, and sense for a story can ultimately place them in harm’s way.

No story is worth dying for. No editor worth their salt sends their people into dangerous environments without proper consideration for their safety and wellbeing. But multiple iterations of this scenario play out in real life, and there are numerous challenges that affect the ability to live up to this principle - depending on where you are in the world, and what resources are available. I’m sure our conversations today will reflect on these discrepancies and attempt to find solutions for them.

None of this changes the fact that people are dying to bring us the morning headlines, yet rarely receive mention. What message does it send our society if we can barely address the dangers of our own profession between our own pages?

We in the media need to do better at amplifying the indignity felt when a journalist, anywhere in the world, is murdered, attacked or otherwise

targeted because of their work. We must explicitly connect journalist safety with the 'vital signs' of freedom in our society as a whole. Our fallen soldiers return as heroes: why not those whose pens are so often said to be "mightier than the sword"? The media have the power to influence this perception, and we must.

To the killers, and to those who commit crimes against journalists, this would signal the beginning of the end. The impunity they stoke, the indifference they promote, destroys more than just the individuals and their families in question; it is a wrecking-ball through the very heart of our society.

However, I repeat: we all share responsibility for this. Without the power of the state to guarantee a safer environment, working justice systems, and the rule of law, the media can only do so much. For this we look to the United Nations Plan of Action, and I am pleased there will be the opportunity to discuss its implementation here today with member states.

The organisation I represent was founded sixty-eight years ago. We were created here in Paris, in parallel with UNESCO and the newly created United Nations system, to ensure, among other things, the horrors of fascism would never again see light on this continent.

Back in nineteen forty-eight, our founders, the few remaining newsmen of the Resistance press, felt the press had failed the people of Europe. Failed as an industry in being the watchdog of democracy; failed to sound the alarm when it needed sounding the loudest; and failed when solidarity against the evils of National Socialism was most called for.

It was recognised back then that we represented more than just an industry. As news providers, we were more than simply a product in a marketplace, a way to make money and do business. Newspapers were vital members of their communities, often, necessarily, their loudest and boldest voices. We were inherently designed to ask the questions that irritated power, keep those with the responsibility for building the new society in check, and scrutinise the frailties of our democracies.

And ultimately they recognised that it was impossible to do all of this alone. In the 1930s, we failed. By 1948 we had found our way to alliance, making the bold commitment to set aside differences and unite in defence of journalism, freedom and democracy. We have since attempted to live up to these principles.

Faced with the urgency of providing a safer environment, I believe it is time to renew this commitment with the same courage and determination. The stakes are simply too high – for our journalists, for the freedom of expression that is so valuable to us all.

Thank you.