

United Nations Human Rights Council



TOPIC 1: Measures to Ensure the Safety of Journalists in Conflict Zones

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The United Nations Human Rights Council

The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) is a body of the United Nations, established in 2006 by the General Assembly subsequent to the UNCHR (United Nations Commission on Human Rights), consisting of 47 shifting member states equally spread over the whole world. These members of the HRC are elected yearly for a three-year period by the General Assembly while a specific number of seats is reserved for each continental region.

Furthermore, the mission of the HRC is to protect and secure human rights in the UN member states as well as to investigate and report on specific human rights violations. The Council is also able to make recommendations to its member states and the international community covering the political, economic, social, and cultural rights, and the rights of vulnerable groups such as women, children, indigenous people, and migrants.

Located in Geneva, Switzerland, the HRC meets three times a year regularly but can be called into a special session as needed. Although the implementation of resolutions passed by the HRC is not mandatory, there have been several successes in the last years:

In 2007 the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) was introduced with a period of four years meaning that each of the 193 member states (48 each year) must undergo a special investigation with the goal to adequately report the situation and improvement of human rights.

Additionally, the HRC responded strongly to human rights violations in Syria, Myanmar, and North Korea taking action and establishing mechanisms to obtain independent information and to protect human rights.

Today, the HRC is in possession of over 50 expert and working groups, called the "Special Procedures", investigating specific human rights violations and holding criminals as well as governments accountable.

Introduction to the topic

For centuries journalists all over the world have had the essential mission to report news about human right violations, political events, natural disasters and much more independently and dependably. However, journalists are often hindered by authoritarian governments, armed groups or influential people or organizations who pursue other goals than free speech and reports of journalists would disclose their secrets. One may think that the most dangerous regions for reporting are territories with active armed conflicts like Ukraine with eight dead journalists only in 2022. Indeed, many journalists, according to the UNESCO about 24 in 2020, have been killed in regions with active armed conflicts, nevertheless, 61% of killed journalists came to death without being in these regions. In Mexico, for instance, 11 reporters were killed in 2022 alone.

But concerning the safety of journalists there is a severe discrepancy between the Global North and the Global South. While in Europe and North America almost no journalists came to death, Latin America, the Asian-Pacific region as well as Africa and the Arab States are much more dangerous and free speech, not even objective reporting is permitted in most states.

Furthermore, most of the victims are men, but the small proportion of 6% women of all killed journalists increased rapidly to 11% in 2022. The cause of death and the

circumstances as well as the perpetrators remain unclear in most of the cases. Only 13 per cent of 1167 murders from 2006 to 2019 have been fully resolved, 650 investigations are ongoing or have failed and in 31 per cent of the cases, there is not even any information available.

Moreover, violence is not limited to physical violence or even assassination. A survey from UNESCO in 2021 points out that almost three quarters of the 901 consulted journalists have been affected by online violence. The mental safety of journalists may not be neglected as hate speech on social media and instant communication evolves.

Events and actions on the protection of journalists

Firstly, it must be pointed out that in general the preventive protection of journalists is the safest way to secure their independence and wellbeing. Starting way earlier than the physical protection of journalists, the legal rights of citizens for free speech and their respect as well as the governmental enforcement and protection of these rights are essential to prevent attacks on media correspondents.

If free speech about any topic, any person or any organization is an ordinary right, there is no reason for violence against people with opinions or interests different than their own. However, in most conflict zones the implementation of this right is not possible. In times of war, journalists are mostly treated like enemies because information they publish might reveal secrets to the disadvantage of one war party.

In this case, as mentioned, physical protection is the next important measure to ensure safety. But still, most journalists don't want bodyguards accompanying them and are willing to take risks as approaching the front line of the battlefield.

That's why "Free Press Unlimited", an organization located in Amsterdam supporting independent and reliable media all over the world, set up a fund in 2011 to provide medical assistance, legal defense support, work provisions and much more to reporters who became victims of unjust.

Besides Non-Governmental-Organizations, the UN also contributed its part passing several resolutions on this matter to ensure human rights, the right to freedom of

expression, including media freedom, and other rights of journalists and media workers.

For 13 years now, the UN, particularly UNESCO and the UNHRC, have been working on a [“UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity”](#). In 2012 the plan got approved by the UN Chief Executives Board and since then, this action plan is the gist of many resolutions. In future summits the HRC (OHCHR) and the UNESCO expanded the implementation of the original action plan and in November 2022 the latest meeting, a global conference, took place in Austria [reflecting the achievements so far as well as identifying new challenges](#).

The latest [report](#) of the HRC, however, deals with the state of free press in Cambodia. There, the government, a constitutional monarchy, actively adopted new legislation restricting free press, consequential leading to the surveillance of media workers who sometimes even got legally punished and sued for their work.

The latest [resolution](#) on this matter was passed in the 49th session lasting from 28th February until 1st April 2022. The main emphasis of this report is the concern of restricted free speech and media work associated with greater danger of media workers. As Covid-19 restrictions emerged, people had to stay at home, and it was easy for authoritarian governments to also limit independent reports of journalists in one go. Also, the quality of media itself was threatened when governments wanted their citizens to believe something different than the scientific facts about Covid-19.

In regions with an active armed conflict journalists are protected by several international laws. For instance, in 1977 in Article 79 of the [Additional Protocol I of the Geneva Conventions](#) it was agreed on a customary rule: “Journalists engaged in dangerous professional missions in areas of armed conflict shall be considered as civilians [...]”. Furthermore “They shall be protected as such under the Conventions and this Protocol”, if they don’t support any war party actively.

Besides that, the Security Council passed resolutions [n. 1738](#) in 2006 and [n. 2222](#) in 2015 emphasizing the importance of the protection of journalists and the crime of violence against them.

Even the General Assembly agreed on resolutions [68/163](#) in 2013 and [69/185](#) in 2014 urging all member states to work together to prevent violence against journalists from happening.

All in all, sufficient protection of journalists is not guaranteed everywhere. Although many resolutions and treaties determine how journalists are supposedly treated, hundreds of reporters lose their lives when they report in conflict regions. Frequent reports and active encouragement of the UN and its member states are necessary to successively solve this problem.

No one should die providing independent media for those who can't do it themselves.

“There is no democracy without journalism” (Scott Pelley) and “journalists should be watchdogs, not lapdogs” (Newton Lee).

Useful links

<https://www.freepressunlimited.org/en/themes/safety-journalists>

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/safety-of-journalists>

<https://www.unesco.org/reports/safety-journalists/2022/en>

<https://en.unesco.org/courier/2021-4/journalism-dangerous-profession>

[https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents-listing?field_content_category_target_id\[180\]=180&field_content_category_target_id\[186\]=186&field_entity_target_id\[1219\]=1219&field_entity_target_id\[1349\]=1349&field_entity_target_id\[1350\]=1350&field_subject_target_id\[766\]=766&sort_bef_combine=field_published_date_value_DESC](https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents-listing?field_content_category_target_id[180]=180&field_content_category_target_id[186]=186&field_entity_target_id[1219]=1219&field_entity_target_id[1349]=1349&field_entity_target_id[1350]=1350&field_subject_target_id[766]=766&sort_bef_combine=field_published_date_value_DESC)

https://www.bmeia.gv.at/fileadmin/user_upload/Zentrale/Aussenpolitik/Menschenrechte/SoJ_2022/UN_PlanOfAction_Consultations_Outcomes_Report_Oct20_final.pdf