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**CONFERENCE ON
JOURNALISTS' SAFETY, MEDIA FREEDOM AND PLURALISM IN
TIMES OF CONFLICT**

15-16 June 2015, Hofburg Conference Centre, Vienna

Hosted by the OSCE Representative on freedom of the media

**Remarks by Ivan Šimonović,
United Nations Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights**

15 June 2015

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to be back at the Hofburg, and I would like to extend my sincere gratitude for the invitation and to Madam Mijatovic for hosting this important and highly timely conference.

Around the world, journalists continue to be subjected to killings, torture, attacks and harassments, simply because of the crucial work they do. The risks for journalists are significant - and are considerably multiplied in conflict settings.

There is a worrying upward trend in the number of journalists killed in recent years. UNESCO data shows that almost half of the 593 cases of killings of journalists which occurred between 2006 and 2013 took place in conflict zones. It is not surprising that countries facing armed conflict - and a breakdown of the rule of law as a consequence - are ranked in the bottom part of the annual Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index.

However, while journalists may be disproportionately affected by conflict, by the very nature of their work bringing them to the front-lines, there is also an increase in the deliberate *targeting* of journalists to silence them. This means that journalists are not just getting caught in the crossfire - or stepping on a mine - but that they are also increasingly targeted for the very job that they do: collecting, analyzing and disseminating information related to the conflict.

Collecting information in an objective and impartial way, and then speaking out, makes us “relatives”, as this is exactly what the UN Human rights office, as well as numerous human rights defenders all over the world do. This is one of the many reasons why I am particularly pleased to be here with you today and participate in this important discussion.

I myself owe journalists working in the troubled areas a lot. I am always eager to meet with them when I visit conflict settings, not only to show respect and support, but also because I learn so much from the exchange with them. They are often the ones with the freshest and most relevant information. However, all too often, I come across journalists in fear of their lives or under pressure from one side of the conflict or the other.

Conflicting parties know all too well the important role the media, and journalists in particular, play in exposing unpleasant truths. They understand the media's ability to sway public opinion towards one side or the other, or even- to incite and encourage participation in the hostilities. These are precisely some of the very same reasons why they are targeted.

However, journalists can also be manipulated, for propaganda purposes, offered rewards or forced through pressure not to comply with basic standards of ethical reporting. Such manipulation can have very negative consequences. If they give in, it can transform journalists into a "legitimate" target, from the perspective of the other side and trigger their harassment. It is a vicious cycle, where ultimately the journalists themselves pay the price.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In my remarks, I would like to outline the importance of protecting the safety of journalists during the entire conflict cycle: before conflict; during the conflict and post-conflict.

Before conflict:

The focus of today's debate is the protection of journalists in conflict situations. However, let us not forget that the safety of journalists is also an issue of concern in non-conflict zones.

Data shows that more than half of the killings of journalists between 2006 and 2013 occurred outside, and especially in potential "pre-conflict zones", a context of armed conflict. Threats and attacks are committed by both State and non-State actors, often to silence journalists documenting and disseminating information or opinions perceived by these actors as sensitive, such as in relation to human rights violations, environmental issues, corruption, organized crime, drug trafficking or public protests. Systematic attacks against journalists constitute human rights

violations, but are also quite a reliable indicator of potential conflict, unrest or wider human rights abuse.

When I visited **Burundi** last year, for example, I was struck by the widespread attacks and harassment of journalists in the country, and especially against those critical of the Government. The treatment of the journalists and the general crackdown on freedom of expression was a clear precursor to the violence that took place in recent weeks in the context of the scheduled elections.

When the press is silenced, the direct consequence is that critical information on human rights violations, or early warning signs of pending violations- or of conflict itself- are also suppressed. By silencing journalists, in other words, the international community is also deprived of the information about potential threats against international peace and security. Journalists are watchdogs, who can raise alarm bells and shed light on situations that are unacceptable and need urgent action. It is thus essential that they are afforded the necessary protection to allow them to carry out their important work.

However, journalists can also be used in a propaganda war that incites hatred, fear and ultimately can lead to violence. In **Ukraine**, new restrictions on free access to information came with the beginning of the Crimea crisis. At that time, media monitors indicated a significant rise of propaganda on the television of the Russian Federation, which was building up in parallel to developments in and around Crimea. Cases of hate propaganda were also reported. For example, one Russian Television and Radio Broadcasting Company, portrayed Ukraine as a “country overrun by violent fascists”, claiming that the Russians in Ukraine were seriously threatened and in physical danger, thus justifying Crimea's “return” to the Russian Federation. On 6 March, analogue broadcasts of Ukrainian television channels were shut off in Crimea, and the vacated frequencies started broadcasting Russian TV channels. Later that month, Ukrainian broadcasters blocked three leading Russian television channels - in Kyiv and other locations in Ukraine. As a result, there were serious concerns that people – both in the Russian Federation and Ukraine and especially in Crimea – were subjected to propaganda and misinformation, through the widespread misuse of the media, leading to distorted perceptions.

During:

Let me now move to the conflict-setting: As already mentioned earlier, journalists play an often crucial role in conflict settings.

Let me give the example of **South Sudan**. I visited South Sudan in early 2014, just after the power struggle among the political elite escalated into an outbreak of violence, pitting two ethnic factions against each other: Nuer and Dinka. When speaking to victims from each ethnic group, it was striking to me the different narratives they had on the exact same events. It was almost like they were living in different realities.

In such highly politically charged contexts- at the height of a crisis- there is an enormous responsibility borne by the media to perform their role of reporting accurately on events. Accurate reporting helps dispel misconceptions and it helps avoid manipulation by one side or the other, thereby preventing the fuelling of further tensions.

But what if it is impossible for journalists to report accurately, for various reasons- be they a limited democratic space restraining freedom of expression, pressure from one side or the other to take sides, or worse, life threats or other harassment?

That is where the international community has a role to play in ensuring better protection of journalists, particularly in conflict settings.

Since the beginning of the conflict in **Ukraine**, at least 8 journalists have been killed in shelling in the east. The UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission has collected information about at least 78 journalists who have been captured and held by armed groups. Some, that I have met, have been subjected to torture and ill-treatment. Although such incidents have become less frequent and less violent than in 2014, new cases are still reported. The initial struggle by the armed groups for control of the media outlets earlier this year resulted in seizure of editorial offices and TV towers, obstruction of lawful activity of journalists, intimidation and threats to media professionals by armed groups, some of which persist until now. At this time, eastern Ukraine remains one of the most dangerous places in the world for media professionals.

At the same time, let us not forget the case of the Oles Buzyna, a Ukrainian journalist, known for his criticism of the Government, in particular in relation to the Maidan events and the conflict in the east who was shot dead near his home on 16 April by unknown gunmen. This is a case that

casts many doubts and the longer the accountability process is delayed, the further these doubts are reinforced.

After:

Now turning to after the conflict.

It is not too often that we speak of the role of journalists in the post-conflict setting, but I believe that in this phase of the conflict cycle, as much as before conflict and during conflict, journalists have an important role to play. For instance, they often support transitional justice processes, including individual accountability for violations as a way towards attaining reconciliation and sustainable peace.

With regard to reconciliation, depending on the manner in which they report, they can play a constructive role in mending divisions between communities. They can help promote tolerance and messages of peace – but they equally can encourage victor's justice, discrimination and reignite divisions.

Journalists and the media, through their reporting, can sensitize the wider population about human rights concerns in the aftermath of conflict. The very nature of their work, allows them to document human rights violations in ways others can't. The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, for instance, has said that war correspondents play a vital role in bringing to the attention of the international community the horrors and reality of conflict and that the information uncovered by war correspondents has on more than one occasion provided important leads for the investigators of that Tribunal.

The way forward:

Finally, let me conclude with a few words on the way forward.

On 27 May, the UN Security Council in an open debate on the Protection of Journalists, under the agenda item "Protection of Civilians", strongly condemned impunity for attacks on journalists, which significantly increased globally. It called on parties to conflict and all Member States to create a safe environment "in law and practice" for media professionals to do their important work. Dunja raised the issue of its practical effects.

In its subsequent adoption of resolution 2222 (2015), it then encouraged the United Nations and regional organizations to strengthen coordination on the protection of journalists and affirmed that United Nations peacekeeping and special political missions, should include reporting on abuses against media workers. The Council also requested the Secretary-General to include a sub-item on the topic in his reports on protection of civilians.

This is an important step forward, which will hopefully go a long way in keeping the issue alive and on the agenda of the international community.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Some recent killings of journalists have grabbed the headlines throughout the world, including those of Ghislaine Dupont and Claude Verlon who were killed in Mali in November 2013, Camille Lepage who was killed in the Central African Republic in May 2014, and the murders of James Foley, Steve Sotloff and Kenji Goto in Syria more recently. Yet, we must not forget that the vast majority, more than 95 percent, of the killings of journalists in armed conflict situations concern locally based journalists.

Ensuring the safety of journalists is complex and requires a multi-faceted approach. The challenges for journalists reporting from an armed conflict situation may not be the same as for those who are engaged in investigative journalism; the security concerns of foreign correspondents are not necessarily the same as those of locally based journalists. Women journalists may face different challenges than their male colleagues. But there is no doubt that it requires our attention and our increased efforts. Journalism, if conducted properly, significantly contributes to peace, justice and human rights. If journalists are not adequately protected, we lose their important contribution.

Thank you.