

Kabul Declaration on “Freedom of Expression in Afghanistan”

Afghan journalists, media and civil society organizations and other concerned stakeholders met today to raise their voices in concern about the fast shrinking space for the free expression of ideas and opinions and increasingly limited access to information for the media and citizens of Afghanistan. We, moreover, are united in our concern that Afghanistan is increasingly unsafe for journalists, civil society and ordinary Afghans to gather and relay information and views and to make informed decisions about their lives and their country. Our concerns are made more urgent by the upcoming elections.

We, the concerned stakeholders, affirm that:

1. Freedom of expression, including the right to receive and impart information is an inalienable right of the Afghan people guaranteed by Constitution and international law, to be respected and protected in all Afghan laws and actions by government and others;
2. All parties, including state, international military forces, opposition groups, insurgents and other armed groups have a responsibility to protect and respect this right and to refrain from threatening, attacking, killing, abducting and incarcerating journalists and others in pursuit of their mission to seek and impart information or purely on the basis of expressing an opinion;
3. We strongly endorse the findings and recommendations made in the report “Situation of Freedom of Expression in Afghanistan: Summary of Consultations”¹; and
4. We remain committed in our obligations to ensuring that respect for human rights and the rule of law prevails and that the transition to a peaceful and democratic Afghanistan succeeds.

We, the concerned stakeholders, conclude that:

5. Freedom of expression and information are integral to free and fair elections, to sustainable social and economic development and to legitimate and accountable democratic institutions as well as the building of an open and just society based on the rule of law;
6. The safety and security of Afghan civilians, especially journalists - in particular women – as well as human rights and civil society actors are of paramount concern, therefore, we call upon Afghan and international authorities to take immediate steps toward improving security in the country;
7. Afghan media and civil society is compromised by ethnic, linguistic and ideological divisions which further fuel problems within society, therefore, we welcome calls for unity, collective action, transparency and accountability with regards to external financing and a common stand against hate propaganda;
8. The production and dissemination of information and ownership of media infrastructure by Afghan media entities is essential for ensuring debate on key issues pertaining to democracy and development and for facilitating nationwide, regional and international dialogue to inform the public;
9. Policy and legal frameworks need to be improved to ensure that they respect and protect the free flow of information and plurality of opinions and ideas.

We, the concerned stakeholders, commit to:

10. Continue our collective efforts to address issues of concern, including those related to the Mass Media Law and to follow-up on progress and engage in dialogue with the government and the international community to improve the situation of freedom of expression in particular and human rights more broadly;
11. Adopt a Code of Conduct for journalists and media to self-regulate the production and dissemination of information and to create a mechanism to ensure adherence to the code, and in doing so limit the need for government regulations to police the media;

¹ The report is available at <http://unama.unmissions.org>

12. Expand and enrich partnerships, which are locally owned and empowering to help enhance professional capacity and improve coverage of key issues and outreach to the public;
13. Enhance unity and collaboration among media organizations and journalist unions in order to collectively counter the growing trends of media partisanship, biased reporting and divisions within the media which are exploited by some politicians, political groups, government, foreign powers and the insurgents;
14. Work with the government and the international community to improve the conditions for transparent and accountable conduct by media organisations and journalists, including measures for coordinated funding of media and civil society organisations and reasonable taxing of revenues earned by the media;
15. Improve lobbying capacity and partnerships with national and international organisations, including the United Nations and international human rights and journalist defence groups to afford greater voice to issues of concern and better protection of journalists, civil society and human rights actors.

And we, the concerned stakeholders:

16. Demand that the Afghan government investigate cases of abuse, abduction, incarceration and killing of Afghan journalists, human rights and civil society actors in order to grant justice to victims and their families, to combat the growing culture of impunity and to restore faith in the country's security, legal and judicial institutions;
17. Call upon the international community and the Afghan government to make freedom of expression and protection of journalists and media institutions a policy priority, and take immediate steps to improve the rule of law and freedom of expression throughout the country, especially in the provinces;
18. Call upon the Afghan Government and national parliament to reach consensus on the Mass Media Law and pave the way for the immediate and swift implementation of the law, and request the international community to support us in this process;
19. Call upon the Afghan government and the international community to take immediate steps to support Radio Television Afghanistan to fulfil its mandate as a Public Service Broadcaster;
20. Demand immediate action by the Afghan government and more robust support by the international community to significantly improve access to information, centrally and in the provinces in order to improve coverage of vital issues, including national elections and security and development efforts;
21. Call for greater and coordinated funding and political support by the international community to Afghan media, journalists, human rights and civil society actors and organisations that are promoting and protecting freedom of expression, access to information, safety and protection of journalists and other vulnerable groups;
22. Call on Afghan media groups, journalist unions, donors and the Afghan government to create a joint mechanism to facilitate information sharing and to review and monitor funding of non-state media organisations in order to improve transparency and accountability and address the 'politicisation' of media;
23. Encourage Afghan journalists, media and civil society to improve unity, common agenda setting, and collective action to preserve freedom of expression and enhance protection of journalists and media workers and institutions.

Multi-stakeholder Consultation on "Freedom of Expression in Afghanistan"
Kabul, Afghanistan.
30 March 2009.