



UNITED NATIONS  
HUMAN RIGHTS  
OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER

# National Frameworks for the Safety of Journalists: a global perspective

The present briefier was developed based on a [study](#) that the Geneva Graduate Institute conducted at the initiative of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), with a view to identifying good practices in the development of national frameworks for the safety of journalists.

“National frameworks for the safety of journalists” should be understood as any policy, mechanism or set of measures that are adopted or set up at national level to protect journalists and media workers from threats and violations they face while doing their work.

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*Thanks to the United Nations Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists, national protection systems to prevent and punish attacks on journalists were created or strengthened in nearly 50 countries. Multiplying and strengthening such systems must be at the forefront of our efforts.*

**Volker Türk,**  
**High Commissioner for Human Rights**

The High Commissioner for Human Rights, on [various occasions](#), underscored the need for governments to put in place such frameworks. He also emphasised that to be effective, those frameworks should encompass **prevention, protection and prosecution** components – an approach that is in line with the United Nations (UN) Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity.

Endorsed by the UN Chief Executive Board and launched in November 2012, the [UN Plan of Action for the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity](#) aims to create a free and safe environment for journalists and media workers, both in conflict and non-conflict situations. It includes measures such as the establishment of an inter-agency mechanism co-chaired by OHCHR and UNESCO to enhance UN-wide coherence; cooperation with States to develop legislation and other mechanisms to ensure freedom of expression and the safety of journalists; the establishment of partnerships; and the conduct of awareness-raising activities. In 2022, in a conference held in Vienna to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Plan of Action, States committed to foster a “[coherent, coordinated and comprehensive policy approach that encompasses the three pillars of prevention, protection and prosecution](#)”.



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## — KEY GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR THE CREATION OF NATIONAL FRAMEWORKS FOR THE SAFETY OF JOURNALISTS:

### COUNTRY SPECIFIC APPROACH:

To be effective, any framework for the safety of journalists should be **tailored to the situation in the concerned country** and address the specific threats that journalists face. For example, in countries with ongoing armed conflicts or high rates of organized crime, rapid response mechanisms are essential. In this regard, the National Protection Programme for Journalists in **Columbia** and the Federal Protection Mechanism of Human Rights Defenders and Journalists in **Mexico** provide physical protection measures such as armed escorts, bodyguards, armored vehicles for transportation, emergency evacuations and relocation support, for journalists at risk.

### STRONG POLITICAL SUPPORT:

Unequivocal political commitment to ensuring that journalists can carry out their work safely is a critical prerequisite to any system of protection. **A clear public position should be taken at the highest levels of government** regarding the important role of journalists in society and the need to ensure their full protection from violations of their rights. In 2018 for example, the government of **Sweden** published its National Action Plan to Safeguard Freedom of Expression, effectively affirming its commitment to protect the safety of journalists.

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*To respond to threats that journalists face, it is imperative to put in place national protection mechanisms sustained by strong political commitment and grounded in human rights*

**Nada Al-Nashif,**  
**Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights**

## HUMAN RIGHTS BASED APPROACH:

**National frameworks for the safety of journalists should be grounded in international human rights law** and aimed at promoting and protecting the human rights of journalists, their relatives and sources. For example, in [Guatemala](#) and [El Salvador](#), the safety of journalists is the responsibility of the Human Rights Ombudsmen, appointed to protect international human rights and rights enshrined in the constitutions of these countries.

### **The right to freedom of expression is protected under Articles 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).**

Article 19 of the ICCPR requires that States guarantee everyone the right to freedom of expression, which includes the “freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice”. As such, the freedom of expression encompasses, on one hand, the right of the public to receive a wide variety of information provided by the media; and, on the other hand, the journalists’ right to seek and convey information, as well as access information on public affairs.

**Article 19 (3) of the ICCPR** provides for restriction to freedom of expression to the extent that such restriction be provided by law, pursue a legitimate aim, such as the protection of the rights or reputations of others, such as the protection of national security, public order or public health or morals; and be necessary and proportionate.

Frameworks grounded in human rights should **take into consideration vulnerable groups**. For instance, the national protection mechanism of [The Netherlands](#), named “PersVeilig”, provides a flexible protection package for freelancers, who face additional safety risks as they often do not have enough funds to invest in their own equipment and training and do not receive the same protection from their clients as hired journalists do. The “PersVeiling” programme includes therefore the free provision of training courses and equipment, such as helmets and vests for freelancers.

## PARTICIPATORY APPROACH:

National frameworks for the safety of journalists that have proved efficient are always the result of a process involving **the consultation and the participation of multiple actors**, including law enforcement officials (Police and public prosecution); State departments, including the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Defense; national councils and lawmakers concerned with freedom of expression and safety of journalists; professional associations representing journalists; NGOs advocating for the rights and protection of journalists; journalists’ employers such as media houses and broadcasters; and international organizations like OHCHR or UNESCO, as observers. Such approach was adopted in countries like [Brazil](#), [Colombia](#), [Denmark](#), [Ghana](#), [The Netherlands](#), [Indonesia](#), [Kenya](#), [Montenegro](#), [Rwanda](#), [Serbia](#), or [Tunisia](#).

## GENDER BASED APPROACH:

In recent years, the safety of women journalists has taken a worrying trend, with a [2020 UNESCO/ICFJ survey](#) finding that 73 per cent of the 635 women journalists interviewed reporting experience of some form of online violence with repercussion offline. National frameworks for the safety of journalists should take into account that reality and include measures to tackle attacks against women journalists online and offline, such as establishing a **monitoring system that specifically tracks violence against women journalists**; providing **comprehensive resources for female journalists**, including capacity-building sessions; and/or developing **specific protection programmes for women journalists, staffed with female safety specialists**, to address gender-specific challenges. For example, in Iraq a digital platform, managed by female police officers, has been put in place for women journalists to report on violations they face and ensure that a follow up is provided. Similarly, the [Colombia’s](#) National Protection Programme for Journalists incorporates a gender perspective, requiring authorities to take into account the specific needs of women journalists by providing specialized assessments for women seeking protection. This includes the option for women to have their case assessed by an all-female committee.



### STRATEGIC APPROACH:

Such approach requires **a risk analysis**, i.e. identifying not only the threats journalists face, but who or what the causes are, and what factors can mitigate those threats, what activities can be carried out safely and which threats can realistically be addressed. This also involves **a prioritization exercise** to determine what initiatives are feasible, with potential for impact. For example, one objective of the “National Action Plan for the Safety of Journalists” in **the United Kingdom** is to increase understanding of the problem by collecting evidence and surveys. The Home Office therefore issued a call of evidence in 2021, with the intention of building a better understanding of the volume and type of threats and abuses against journalists, as well as their impact, in order to develop a targeted approach to tackling the issue.

### GROUNDING APPROACH:

To be effective, national frameworks and mechanisms for the safety of journalists require the presence of implementers and other committed stakeholders on many levels. In this regard, **well-regarded organizations with national reach (including outside the capital city) committed to coordinating stakeholders are needed to drive the development and implementation of national frameworks.** For instance, the National Union of Journalists in **the Philippines**, which represents Filipino media workers and has over 60 sub-offices in the country, manages a hotline, where threats and violence against journalists can be reported.

### SUSTAINABLE APPROACH:

Creating an enduring national framework for the safety of journalists relies very much on sustaining funding. **One way to secure funding is to nestle the protection mechanism within a State department or to delegate specific safety measures to different State agencies.** For instance, in **Italy**, the measures taken by the “Coordination Centre on the Phenomenon of Acts of Intimidation against Journalists” are part of the Ministry of Interior’s regular activities.

**Another way is to create a specialized agency in charge of the implementation of the protection mechanism.** In **Colombia** for example, the National Unit for Protection was created as an autonomous organization with a clear mandate and a designated budget to ensure the protection of journalists. In November 2021, the Parliament of **Pakistan** passed the Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals Act, which, among others, provides for the establishment of a Commission for the Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals that shall include representatives of the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists, the National Press Club, the Ministry of Human Rights, and the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting.

**In many countries, civil society organizations also provide protection measures for journalists.** They often depend on funding from international donors. While sustainable funding can be an issue for such organizations, their structure guarantees independence and transparency, which is critical in countries where attacks against journalists frequently originate from State actors.

## — THE THREE “P” COMPONENTS OF EFFECTIVE NATIONAL PROTECTION FRAMEWORKS:

Experience shows that effective national protection frameworks integrate the three key pillars (prevention, protection, and prosecution) that are highlighted in the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity.

### PREVENTION COMPONENT

National frameworks for the safety of journalists should not only focus on addressing past violations of journalists’ rights but should also provide measures to prevent future attacks and threats. These include:

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*We need to be better at anticipating violations and reacting more promptly. By seeing the warning signs, which restrict the space for journalists to operate.*

**Volker Türk,**  
**High Commissioner for Human Rights**

- **Awareness-raising** through the organization of events and publication of contents to improve public recognition of the value of journalists and raise awareness on threats to their safety. For example, in the context of the National Action Plan for the Safety of Journalists, the government of **the United Kingdom** developed an “Online Media Literacy Strategy” to support wider public understanding of the role of journalism.

- **Capacity-building** activities for journalists, journalists’ associations, civil society organizations, but also for law enforcement personnel, the military, prosecutors and the judiciary regarding their obligations under international human rights law and international humanitarian law. In **Ghana** for example, the “Framework on Police Media Relations and Safety of Journalists” provides for periodic training sessions for members of the Ghana Police Force to update their knowledge on freedom of expression and safety of journalist.

- **Information sharing** through the setting up of multi-stakeholder forums, bringing together representatives from media, local governments, and civil society. For instance, the NGO Burj-Babel in **Iraq** implemented the “Dialogue between Journalists and Security Forces”, a programme aimed at enabling information sharing between journalists, security forces and personnel of the Ministry of Interior. It also includes multi-stakeholder meetings between parliamentary committees and representatives from Burj-Babel, other civil society organizations, journalists, activists and lawyers;

- **Monitoring and public reporting**, especially to international and regional human rights mechanisms are also a key part of prevention (see the [briefing](#) that OHCHR released on how international human rights standards and mechanisms help protect journalists).

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## PROTECTION COMPONENT

Protection measures constitute the core of effective national frameworks for the safety of journalists. They include, among others:

- **the adoption of a legislative framework that provides special protection for journalists** through, for example, amendments to civil and criminal codes. In particular, any restriction to freedom of expression must be only imposed for one of the grounds set out in article 19(3) of the ICCPR (see above). States should also ensure that legislative measures, such as counter-terrorism or national security laws, are not used to threaten or undermine the safety of journalists (see the [briefing](#) published by OHCHR on that matter);

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*We need stronger and more comprehensive national legislation to safeguard media freedom, in line with international human rights law.*

**Volker Türk,**  
**High Commissioner for Human Rights**

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- **the setting up of channels to report and analyse attacks or threats against journalists.** This can be done through the establishment of a **hotline** where journalists can report physical, verbal, sexual and other threats and receive information on what to do. For example, in **Belgium** the programme “Persveilig.be” provides for a hotline and an e-mail address, where journalists can report physical or verbal aggression or strategic litigation against public participation (SLAPPs). A **claim desk** can also be set up at a specific entity or the Police. The “Framework on Police Media Relations and Safety of Journalists” in **Ghana**, for instance, requires the Police to create a desk to receive all complaints made by journalists. **Formalized analysis schemes**, such as a risk assessment matrix evaluating the violations reported under different variables, also proved to be effective. In **Colombia**, the National Unit of Protection in charge of the safety of journalists, when receiving a complaint, uses a risk assessment matrix that evaluates three variables (threat, risk, and vulnerability) to determine the most appropriate protection measures and the duration of those measures;

- the setting up of **rapid response mechanisms** that should be able to provide material measures of protection, including mobile phones and bulletproof vests, as well as safe havens and emergency relocation plans to safe parts of the country or other countries. For example, the “Federal Protection Mechanism of Human Rights Defenders and Journalists” in **Mexico** includes the provision of safe houses, police protection, or a panic button for journalists deemed to be at risk to call for help.

- the provision of **mitigating measures**, such as free medical, psychological, and legal support to concerned journalists and their families. For example, in **Nepal**, the Federation of Nepali Journalists has a fund to provide among others for medical treatment for journalists. The “Freedom Fund for Filipino Journalists”, for its part, provides financial assistance for journalists to cope with legal fees. Equally critical are funds or other mechanisms that provide support to families of journalists who have been killed, including financial support, education grants, and medical and psychological treatment. In **the Philippines** again, the National Union of Journalists manages a fund for orphans of killed journalists, which provides for scholarships.



## PROSECUTION COMPONENT

Ensuring accountability for attacks against journalists is key not only for justice, but also for prevention purpose. Such accountability could be strengthened through:

- **an effective and functioning domestic criminal justice system** able to investigate on and prosecute all attacks against journalists;

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*If we are serious about accountability for crimes against journalists, we need to see an uptick in effective prosecutions and in the administration of justice overall.*

**Volker Türk,**  
**High Commissioner for Human Rights**

- **the setting up, where needed, of a special investigative unit or an independent national mechanism**, established by law and sufficiently funded and staffed to conduct investigative work. For example, in **Sweden**, the National Action Plan to Safeguard Freedom of Expression has provided for the establishment of a “Specialist Democracy and Hate Crime Unit” as well as a “National Cybercrime Centre” under the authority of the Police;
- **the establishment of information-gathering mechanisms** to facilitate the collection of verified information needed for prosecutions. In **Italy** for instance, a “Coordination Centre on the Phenomenon of Acts of Intimidation against Journalists” was set up by the Ministry of Interior to monitor, analyse, and exchange information on acts of intimidation against journalists. The data gathered by the Commission is discussed on a quarterly basis during meetings chaired by the Ministry of Interior to identify adequate responses in coordination with police forces;
- the provision of **remedies** to the victims, in accordance with international law.



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