Statement

by

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to the United Nations

at the

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Check Against Delivery
I thank UNESCO and the DGC for organizing this important and timely event on the occasion of World Freedom Day. I am honored to be here with the PGA H.E. Maria Fernanda Espinosa Garcés, President of the 73rd session of the GA, and with USG Ms. Alison Smale, and with the other speakers, my sister H.E. Fatima Mohammad, ambassador of the African Union to the UN, and Ms. Valeria Robecco, ANSA news agency and president of the UN Correspondents Association.

Freedom of press and freedom of speech has been very personal for me. It is so personal that it defined me and a generation of Lebanese as well as Arab journalists for over four decades. It all started with a hand dipped in acid!

Lebanese journalist Salim Lawzi was the most prominent journalist in the Arab world back when I was dreaming of studying journalism and becoming a journalist in the early 1980s. Then he was kidnapped and disappeared. When he was found killed it was not killing him that shocked the people. It was his right hand. It was dipped in acid and destroyed! Journalists then wrote in long hand and did not use computers. The message of every journalist and anyone aspiring to be a journalist was in that hand. It simply said: This is what happens to you when you write what we do not like.

In the last decades the media and the world of communications went through a sea change. The internet entered our lives, and as Bill Gates put it “gave voice to people who would never have been heard”.

We started living in an instant world, and the news shrunk to 140 characters spreading at a dizzying pace. The tablet and the cell phone made every person with one, an instant journalist and the media was never the same again. It changed what we know about the world and how we know it, making every news story a local one, with the same speed and intensity that few years ago would have taken days or months to reach us. The power of the media and its reach made it as important in society and in politics as governments if not more sometimes. We thought the media would live its golden age. We thought with that power of the medium, we get immunity for its messengers.

But unfortunately not much has changed for journalists and for freedom of the press the world over.

Actually freedom of the press is living some of its worst days in terms of threats and violence against journalists.

In 2018, killing the messenger was the preferred way to get rid of the message and violence against journalists reached unprecedented levels and prompted the NY Times to call it the worst time “in recent history in which to be a journalist”. Last year, and according to Reporters without borders, 348 journalists were detained, 80 were killed (89% increase over the year before), and 60 were held hostages.

But what was unsettling was the fact that attacks on journalists were on the rise everywhere in the world including in the traditionally safe and liberal democracies that has the rights of freedom of expression enshrined in its constitutions. But it was not only violence. Inflammatory Rhetoric against journalists reached unprecedented levels of incitement also.

Trust in the media is also at a flat low level of 44% according to Reuters Institute for the study of journalism. Actually in the US, The Knight Foundation found that 90% of adults say their trust in the news media has fallen in the last decade.
We also live in the age of “fake news” and disinformation. Actors from governments, to political parties and groups, and individuals use the social media to disseminate hyper-partisan content and sometimes hate.

This is very bad news for all of us, especially for democracy. For our freedoms, for our politics, for our lives and for the future of democracy everywhere.

The media is very important for liberty, and for our freedoms. It is hard to think, of a free society, or free people, if their right to know the facts is taken away from them. It is the media and journalists, who help us make choices, educated ones, whether in politics or elections, by giving us the facts, and shedding light on the truth. This is how democracy thrives, through informed and enlightened citizens, who make the right choice, after studying all the options and knowing all the facts. That is why the Washington Post is right to choose its slogan: “Democracy Dies in darkness”.

I was impressed on a trip to Roosevelt Island yesterday by how the late president Roosevelt, put “freedom of speech and expression”, as the first pillar of his Four Essential Human Freedoms that the future world should be founded on. This was in 1946.

It is in this building where the will of the world is reflected and gathered, that these pillars of the foundation of the future of our world should be strengthened and maintained. It is here that we need to insist through speaking out and through binding resolutions and through example, to defend the defenders of our freedoms, the journalists and safeguard press freedom, freedom of speech, freedom of expression and every freedom. Freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. To quote President Roosevelt.

This is the world that we want to live in, this the world where democracy, human rights and dignity can live and flourish.

I thank you.