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**Contribution of Reporters Without Borders (a non-governmental organisation  
with special consultative status) about press freedom in Nepal**

**Introduction: Overview of press freedom situation**

Hardly a day goes by without an attack on the media in Nepal. The deteriorating state of press freedom in Nepal is seriously jeopardising the process of democratisation that is under way there. Journalists take great risks to do their work. Their equipment is stolen, their vehicles and offices are vandalised, and news media are directly targeted. The attacks, threats and harassment of media personnel and organisations have not let up and are forcing journalists to censor themselves, especially in the southern regions. The authorities are meanwhile failing in their duty to prevent, punish and redress the harm caused by such attacks.

It is of serious concern that some of the perpetrators of these attacks are linked to political parties, as it indicates that these parties accept or are even complicit in this violence. The Nepali constitution and the international covenants that Nepal has signed place an obligation on the state to prevent such abuses.

Reporters Without Borders noticed a sharp increase in press freedom violations in the second half of last year, including the torching of thousands of copies of newspapers and physical attacks on journalists by demonstrators, officials and police. In one case, a journalist was beaten by police and detained for 48 hours.

But the most traumatic development in Nepal's media environment occurred in early 2009. It was the murder of a young woman journalist, Uma Singh, on 11 January 2009. Violence against women journalists has continued.

In the south and east of the country, especially the Terai lowlands, armed groups terrorise journalists, above all the correspondents of the national media. Members of Janatantrik Terai Mukti Morcha (JTMM) and Madhesi Tiger Nepal (MTN), two groups

that claim to defend the Terai population's interests, post lists of "wanted" journalists together with offers of rewards. They are suspected of being responsible for several physical attacks and murders of journalists, including the March 2010 murder of Arun Singhaniya, the owner of an influential newspaper and radio station. A death threat was made against a journalist in Birgunj by a JTMM member around the same time. More than 80 cases of physical attacks or death threats were reported in the south in 2009. The constant threats from armed groups force the Terai-based media to censor themselves to avoid being targets.

Militants often intercept press vehicles in order to destroy the newspapers they are carrying. Tens of thousands of copies of the daily Kantipur were torched by armed groups in 2009. Although they are supposed to have laid down their arms, the Maoists also continue to target the local press in some regions. For example, the journalist Teeka Bista was found unconscious in a ravine in the western district of Rukum on 8 December 2009 after writing a story implicating Maoist activists in a political opponent's death. The Maoists are in a position of strength and enjoy the same level of impunity as the security forces. Two people suspected of involvement in the 2007 murder of journalist Birendra Shah were promoted within the Maoist Party in 2009.

More recently, there were assaults, threats, and verbal attacks on journalists in many districts during and after the nationwide demonstrations that the Maoist Party organised in May 2010. At least 25 journalists were victims of violence by Maoist Party members.

In conclusion, Nepal is a country with a free press but the government fails to protect media personnel from violence. Attacks on journalists by armed groups are the leading factor in the deterioration of press freedom in the country.

No journalists or netizens are currently imprisoned by the government. As regards online media, it is worthy of note that Nepal is not on the Reporters Without Borders 2010 list of Enemies of the Internet and the Nepalese government does not impose strict censorship on netizens.

## **2. Government steps to improve the situation**

Most of the press freedom violations are by non-state actors. But cases of police harassment still occur and government officials often put pressure on the media. The main issue is the failure of the authorities in their duty to prevent, punish and redress the harm caused by physical attacks on journalists.

The state has not been fully implementing its international commitments, including ensuring respect for the UDHR. The right of victims to redress is not respected properly, and impunity is widespread and flagrant.

The behaviour of local officials in remote areas fosters self-censorship. The right to information is limited in every section of the society because of a lack of proper monitoring.

Promulgation of the Right to Information Act-2064 and the Working Journalist Act-2064 (Second Amendment) and the Interim Constitution's guarantees of media freedom and free expression have been the biggest achievements for press freedom since the return to democracy in 2006.

Because of the lack of proper monitoring, the right to information is limited in every section of the society, including in NGOs, and the Right to Information Act has not been implemented in practice. An information culture has not even begun to be established and transparency, accountability and good governance are still distant dreams. Democracy cannot be sustained and strengthened in such a situation. The media have tried to shed light on the lack of transparency within international NGOs but the reporting has been poor.

### **3. Working with non-governmental organisations (NGOs)**

Thousands of national and international NGOs operate in Nepal. The NGO Federation of Nepal (NFN) is an umbrella organisation of NGOs working in various areas of social welfare and development. Around 4,500 NGOs are affiliated to it through 75 district chapters.

NGOs are registered by the District Administration Office (DAO), while the Social Welfare Council Nepal is the entity that is supposed to monitor the activities of international NGOs. But in practice, there is no control and surveillance of either national or international NGOs, which are made very welcome.

### **4. Recommendations**

1. Despite Nepal's many positive steps, the press freedom situation still falls far short of international standards. The future constitution must therefore guarantee both press freedom and the independence of media regulatory bodies.
2. Political parties should publicly proclaim their support for the safety of the media and should adopt measures to put this support into practice.
3. The government must assume its responsibility for ensuring that all pending cases of murders and physical attacks against journalists are properly investigated in an impartial manner and that the guilty parties are punished. Impunity for crimes of violence against the media must end.
4. Safety training should be provided through existing training organisations and international organisations that are specialised in the relevant fields. The training should be specific to Nepal and made accessible to all journalists throughout the country. News media should provide basic safety equipment to their personnel when necessary.

*The information in this report was gathered and checked by Reporters Without Borders, which has a network of correspondents in 130 countries and partner organisations in about 20.*

*There are countries where journalists can spend years in prison because of a word or a photo that offends. Reporters Without Borders has been working tirelessly to defend press freedom since 1985 because it believes that imprisoning or killing a journalist eliminates a vital witness and threatens everyone's right to be kept informed.*

**Reporters Without Borders**

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