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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

SECURITY COUNCIL

OPEN DEBATE ON “THE PROTECTION OF JOURNALISTS IN CONFLICT SITUATIONS”

STATEMENT BY MR. STEFAN BARRIGA

MINISTER, DEPUTY PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE

Mr. President,

I would like to thank you for organizing today’s open debate on this timely topic. Journalists continue to be frequent targets in conflict situations. More than 20 journalists have lost their lives during conflict since the beginning of this year, more than half of them in countries which are regularly discussed in this Chamber. Each preceding year, the number of deaths reported by Reporters Without Borders was equally jarring: 69 in 2014, 79 in 2013, and 87 in 2012. Many journalists have also been imprisoned, held hostage, tortured, and had their freedom of movement restricted by oppressive governments and armed groups.

Local journalists, freelancers and women are in a particularly vulnerable position. Female journalists share similar abuses as their male counterparts, but have also endured appalling levels of sexual violence. Despite these obstacles, female journalists have continued to display impressive dedication to their work, relaying important stories of people caught in some of the world’s deadliest conflicts, such as the one in Syria.

Mr. President,

This Council has an important role to play in promoting the safety of journalists, media professionals and associated personnel in conflict situations. It is not just an important aspect of the Council's work on the protection of civilians, but also an issue of self-interest: after all, the Council itself has to rely on information received from journalists. Such independent reporting is particularly crucial in situations of escalated violent conflict, when other reliable sources of information may be hard to come by.

In considering the Council's role for the protection of journalists, we must recognize the dramatic changes in the world's media landscape. Technology has altered the ways we consume news, social media have opened new channels for distribution of information, and widespread availability of smart-phones has fueled the rise of the 'citizen-journalist'. Furthermore, some extremist groups in particular consider journalists as enemies rather than neutral observers. They will not hesitate to target them openly, just as they routinely disregard other basic rules of international humanitarian law.

It is therefore time for the Council to pay greater attention to the protection of journalists. We particularly welcome the adoption of the resolution today, and its strong references to international humanitarian law. The Geneva Conventions of 1949 and Article 79 of the Additional Protocol guarantee equal protection for journalists as for civilians. In many conflict zones, however, respect for IHL has completely eroded. We therefore strongly support efforts aimed at increasing compliance with IHL, in particular the joint initiative by the ICRC and Switzerland. We also welcome the *UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity* adopted in 2012.

Attacks against journalists in conflict situations are not only serious violations of IHL, but also in and of themselves attacks on freedom of expression. Governments are thus obliged to protect journalists as a matter of human rights law, in particular the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). We must increase efforts toward accountability for these crimes, with a view to increasing deterrence.

The primary responsibility in this regard falls upon domestic justice systems. The ICC, where it has jurisdiction, could also play an important role in this regard.

Media organizations also have a clear obligation to ensure the safety of journalists in armed conflicts. Proper training and resources must be made available to local staff, freelancers and war correspondents alike. All of them are at risk, as they strive to report the facts on the ground in order to inform the public as well as policy-makers.

Mr. President,

Freedom of expression and information are essential human rights and among the main pillars of a free society. The work of journalists is also an indispensable tool for Council, be it in the context of early warning and prevention or amidst violent conflict. Their activities are not only under fire by missiles and bullets, but also threatened by other means, such as illegal surveillance, censorship, reprisals and violence. Oppressive governments and groups wage silent wars by suppressing access to information and imprisoning those who dare to report the truth. Countering these actions should be high on the Council's agenda.

I thank you.