

# **SPEECH BY AMBASSADOR ANGELINA EICHHORST, HEAD OF THE DELEGATION OF THE EUROPEAN UNION TO LEBANON**

**« RECEPTION IN HONOUR OF THE LEBANESE PRESS »**

**31 JANUARY 2012**

\*\*\*\*\*

## ***CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY***

Excellencies,  
Dear friends,

I am pleased to welcome you and I am overjoyed to see so many Lebanese and foreign journalists at the residence of the European Union, the home of Europe in Lebanon.

Lebanon has always been a very open society and is a unique model of diversity and pluralism in the region. It has one of the most diverse and counts amongst the freest climates for media in the Middle East, with a large concentration of media outlets and journalists.

The media landscape has changed. Social media has played a crucial role in the current events in the Arab world, giving journalists and bloggers the tools to go beyond the traditional means of communication, to overcome the barrier of fear in their expression of ideas by simply sharing information or denouncing injustices. These recent developments also show that the age-old battle between the "sword and the pen", the battle between weapons and words, is an unequal battle.

You need the space and the liberty to develop your work without fear of intimidation or reprisals. You should not have to worry about censorship or feel the need to submit yourself to self-censorship, censorship risks crowding-out a debate at the expense of the public interest and national interest.

The uprisings in the region show us once again how freedoms are fragile. In 2011, the barometer of freedom of the press was worrying. According to "Reporters Without Borders" in 2011 alone 66 journalists were killed, including 20 in the Middle East, that is twice the number in 2010. Moreover, 252 were arrested, 553 physically attacked or threatened and 30 abducted. 2012 has already started badly with three journalists killed, including 2 in Syria. Recalling these statistics, which

places the Near and Middle East at the bottom of the scale, the names of these fallen journalists remain engrained in people's minds. The Lebanese are aware of the fact that many journalists have paid with their lives for daring to express their views. According to the Skeyes centre, 17 sites were hacked, 55 journalists were attacked and 11 journalists were threatened with death in Lebanon in 2011. In addition, some press institutions were closed and several journalists have lost their jobs due to economic conditions.

When such acts are committed against journalists, the authorities, as protectors of freedom of expression and guarantors of justice, must take steps to punish the guilty. To those who want to undermine freedom of the press, I say, "you are fighting the wrong battle."

Freedom of the press is also a challenge in Europe with some countries classified by "Reporters Without Borders" in its global overview on press freedom in the 61<sup>st</sup>, the 70<sup>th</sup> or even the 80<sup>th</sup> place.

However, we must remember that while freedom of speech is a right, it is also a responsibility. The duty of objectivity must be a continuous effort, regardless of the multiple interests, political or otherwise that impinge upon us. Information has to be checked and rechecked. As such, it seems to me that the responsibility of the press is even weightier than before, as some pieces of information circulate the world before being checked, discussed or corrected.

The European Union is committed to respect the freedom and pluralism of media around the world and will continue to denounce restrictions and unjustified arrests that are aimed at the work of journalists.

The European Union has for example established the Samir Kassir Award for Freedom of the Press, which supports the power of words against weapons and oppression, and honors those who fight for a freer press. The European Union also funds initiatives such as Skeyes which directly supports journalists, monitors violations of freedom of the press and culture, and provides legal support to journalists and intellectuals who face legal action. Some Member States of the European Union are also actively supporting media through their various projects.

Defending freedom, rejecting violence, all this may sound obvious, yet no part of the world is spared, neither Europe, nor in the part of the world in which we find ourselves today. As long as there are journalists who are killed, persecuted, or harassed, or who simply lack the means to practice their profession, it will be worth shouting out loud and clear that the freedom of the press is freedom that is not negotiable.

Thank you.

