

# **Granting of the Samir Kassir Award for Freedom of the Press 2012**

## **Speech by Ambassador Angelina Eichhorst Head of the Delegation of the European Union to Lebanon**

2 June 2012

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*Check against delivery*

Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,  
Dear friends,

The Samir Kassir Award is awarded each year on 2 June, the day Samir was assassinated. The Award was set up in 2006 by the European Union to restate our commitment to the memory of Samir Kassir, to his battle for freedom of expression, and, through his name, to all those who continue to fight for their freedoms. This 7<sup>th</sup> edition takes place while many journalists, particularly in this region, continue to pay a heavy toll for their work.

Last year in particular was a bad year for freedom of expression worldwide and this year does not appear to be more promising. Since the beginning of 2011, already more than 90 journalists lost their lives while exercising their profession. Many more faced intimidation, harassment, kidnappings, arbitrary detentions or torture. Unfortunately it is a fact that the right to freedom of expression needs to be constantly defended and protected.

As the Arab uprisings continue to be at the centre of the news, sadly, many journalists and other media professionals continue to pay a high price for their coverage. In this region and since the uprisings, every 12 days a media professional has been killed.

It is thanks to the professional commitment and the courage of journalists as well as many inspired bloggers and users of all forms of social media, that we can get a sense of what could be really happening on the ground.

So where does the European Union come in? I am often asked this question. Yes, we repeatedly denounce and condemn threats to or attacks on journalists, call on authorities to allow journalists to carry out their vital role of providing independent information without fear of violence or repression. We condemn unjustified restrictions to Internet access. All these concerns are taken up through consistent dialogues we have with almost all governments and partners around the world. We also speak out against human rights violations inside Europe, even within the 27 Member States.

And then there is the direct financial support we give. In Lebanon we are proud of funding tangible initiatives like Samir Kassir Eyes (SKEYES), which directly supports journalists under threat and monitors violations of freedom of the press,

denounces censorship practices and acts as an effective watchdog for freedom of expression in the region. This type of support is increasingly needed, in particular when considering that, today, the financial crisis has not spared journalism, neither in the European Union or the region. We know the challenges for a professional press in the region are numerous: better organisation, improved representation, and enhanced legal protection are all key priorities and the European Union will continue to support where possible such initiatives.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Samir Kassir had a dream of "a democratic, independent and stable Lebanon" and long before anybody else, he coined the phrase "the Beirut Spring", while noting that this Spring would only reach its climax once the demand for democracy became an Arab demand.

*(Gardons à l'esprit que l'importance de ce soulèvement atteindra son point culminant s'il arrive à faire de l'exigence de la démocratie une exigence arabe)*

Samir did not have at his disposal the unprecedented array of tools that social media are able to offer nowadays, but taking on board people's dreams and aspirations, he managed to speak out many people's minds. I am therefore in no doubt that Samir has inspired many of the journalists who participated in the Award, and will continue to inspire in particular the youth of this region and all those who believe that words can make the difference, that dialogue can help people to understand each other better and lead to a compromise, a consensus, and hence to peace and security.

I would like to thank all those present today for your demonstrated commitment to universal human rights and your consistency in remembering those who lost their lives because they had the courage to speak out. I would like to thank this year's and all previous years' Jury composed of diverse backgrounds and nationalities from all shores of the Mediterranean; thank you for finding time in your busy calendars to make this Award a success.

To Mrs. Gisele Kassir, the family of Samir and to the Samir Kassir Foundation I say: your everyday work, fighting for a freer media in our Neighbourhood is the best tribute and honour that can be paid to the memory of Samir Kassir.

I now give the floor to Mrs. Gisele Kassir, before disclosing the names of the winners.

Thank you.