

**Keynote by Ambassador/Head of EU Delegation to Nigeria and
ECOWAS, Amb. Michel Arrion on the occasion of World Human
Rights Day 2016
At Yar'Adua Foundation, 3 May 2016**

It is a great pleasure for me to be with you today on this occasion to mark the World Press Freedom Day 2016. The European Union is the leading promoter of freedom across the globe. We promote freedom of opinion and expression as right to be exercised by everyone everywhere, based on the principle of equity, non-discrimination and universality. The Strategic Framework on Human Rights and Democracy adopted by the EU in 2012 commits us to promote freedom of expression, both online and offline. Following up on this, the EU Human Rights Guidelines on Freedom of Expression Online and Offline were adopted on 12 May 2014.

These significant steps underline the priority the EU accords to freedom of opinion and expression as an essential foundation for democracy, the rule of law, sustainable inclusive development and participation in public affairs, which are at the core of its values. Freedom of opinion and expression is essential for the fulfilment and enjoyment of a wide range of other human rights, including freedom of association and assembly; freedom of thought, religion or belief; the right to take part in cultural life; the right to education; the right to vote and other political rights relating to participation in public affairs.

Freedom of opinion and expression guarantees the individual the right to hold opinion without interference; the right to seek and receive information without molestation; and the right to share information and ideas of all kinds through any medium and regardless of frontiers without inhibition. It is, therefore, indispensable for individual dignity and fulfilment. Ensuring access to information can serve to promote justice and reparation, stem abuses and widen the frontiers of participation.

The EU recognises that free, diverse, independent media are essential for the promotion and protection of freedom of opinion and expression. By facilitating the free flow of information and ideas on matters of public

interest, and by ensuring transparency and accountability, independent media constitute one of the cornerstones of a democratic society. An informed, active and engaged citizenry is not possible without free, independent, pluralistic media.

It is for these reasons that the EU has always been active in supporting journalists and writers. We promote the right of political actors, civil society, journalists and others to freely express their views, in so far as these views were peaceful. Whenever necessary, public statements are made to express support to persons facing violations of their right to freedom of expression. The EU also supports several projects to assist and protect journalists and human rights defenders across the globe.

Apart from the traditional media, social media activists such as bloggers are playing increasing roles in deepening public discourse, shaping public opinion and promoting transparency and accountability. Technological innovations in information and communication technology have created new opportunities for individuals to participate in the dissemination of information to a mass audience. The import and impact of these innovations on the participation and contribution of citizens in the decision making process can be appreciated against the backdrop of the role the social and new media played in last year's elections in Nigerian.

These innovations have also thrown up new challenges. All human rights that exist offline must also be protected online, in particular the right to freedom of opinion and expression, and the right to privacy. Increasingly, the EU is giving attention to cyber-activism and blogging, and has adopted a European Strategy for Cyber-Security which aims at ensuring a secure and trustworthy digital environment for all users. We are also promoting the implementation of Corporate Social Responsibility measures, to make sure that European companies' exports of technology are not used to violate human rights or unduly restrict freedom of expression.

Nigeria, in our assessment, is a country where freedom of expression is in general respected. The traditional media is relatively pluralistic. Bloggers and cyber-activists freely share their views. Nigeria boasts of a

large, vibrant social media community, whose engagement with the socio-political processes has enriched public discourse and widened the frontiers of participation on issues that concern the citizenry. This freedom should be guarded jealously.

The adoption of the Freedom of Information Act in 2011 raised hopes. The EU was in the forefront in pressing for the adoption of the law when we sensed the reluctance of previous administrations to do so. Journalists, the civil society, bloggers and cyber activists should fully explore the provisions of this law to demand for more accountability and transparency in public affairs.

Sometimes we get reports about the arrest of journalists or bloggers, or about other types of incidents that appear to inhibit freedom in public space. These actions may not be necessarily initiated by the government, and are, fortunately rare here. Where they arise, we follow them keenly and expect that they should be handled with the necessary attention, in line with the principles of international law.

It is the primary obligation of the states to protect the right to freedom of opinion and expression and the right to privacy, and ensure that their legal systems provide adequate and effective guarantees for these rights

On our part, the EU is committed to respecting, protecting and promoting the freedom of opinion and expression, guided by the Treaty of the European Union (TEU) and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, and in accordance with our international human rights obligations. We have always helped to address and prevent violations of these rights in timely, consistent manner.

The EU condemns the increasing level of intimidation and violence that journalists, human rights defenders, media actors and other individuals face in many countries across the world when exercising the right to freedom of opinion and expression online and offline.

Let me conclude these remarks by restating that the EU is determined to:

- Fight against laws or practices that impose censorship, encourage self-censorship or provide legal penalties, including criminal,

financial and administrative sanctions, misuse of market powers and poor economic conditions.

- Combat violence, persecution, harassment and intimidation of individuals, including journalists and other media actors, because of their exercise of the right to freedom of expression online and offline, and combating impunity for such crimes
- Promote laws and practices that protect freedom of opinion and expression; media freedom and pluralism and foster an understanding among public authorities of the dangers of unwarranted interference with impartial/critical reporting
- Promote and respect human rights in cyberspace and other information and communication technologies as well as legal amendments and practices aimed at strengthening data protection and privacy online and offline.

I invite all of you to join in a technical workshop on the theme of this year's World Press Freedom Day to be held at the UN Information Centre, Lagos tomorrow.

Thank you for your attention.