

Leading Asia-Pacific media rights activists to take centre stage at UNESCO World Press Freedom Day debate

Bangkok, 29 April – To commemorate this year’s World Press Freedom Day (WPDF) UNESCO Bangkok is to host an interactive dialogue based on the theme of this year’s WPDF celebration: Freedom of expression, access to information and empowerment of the people.

Journalists in Asia face considerable life-threatening risks - the continent turned into a battlefield last year with 17 killed, nearly 600 assaulted, 430 arrested and 23 kidnapped. (Reference: www.rsf.org).

The event, to be held at UNESCO Bangkok on 2nd May, 2008 between 10am and noon, will feature three prominent media rights activists who will give brief presentations, followed by interactive dialogue with the audience.

The speakers are: Melinda Quintos de Jesus, executive director of the Manila-based Centre for Media Freedom and Responsibility. Ms de Jesus received the Benigno S. Aquino, Jr. Fellowship for Professional Development in 2000 in recognition of her efforts to strengthen democracy in the Philippines by promoting higher standards of media responsibility and professionalism;

Steven Gan is editor-in-chief of the independent online *Malaysiakini*. As a special issues editor, he wrote about the deaths of 59 inmates at the Semenyih immigration detention camp in Malaysia, but when *The Sun* (Malaysia) refused to publish the story, he gave the information to human rights activist Irene Fernandez, who was subsequently charged with spreading “false news”. In 1996, Mr Gan was adopted by Amnesty International as a “prisoner of conscience” after he was arrested at the Asia-Pacific Conference on East Timor. Mr Gan won the “International Press Freedom Award” (2000) from the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists;

Roby Alampay is executive director of the Bangkok-based Southeast Asian Press Alliance (SEAPA). Mr Alampay was an award-winning journalist in Manila prior to joining SEAPA. He won a Jaime V. Ongpin award for investigative journalism. His essays on democracy and press freedom issues have been published in leading international and regional media.

Director of UNESCO Bangkok Sheldon Shaeffer said: Press freedom and the freedom of access to information are essential for the comprehensive education of citizens – both of their own countries and of the world – and the development of participatory, democratic societies.

“In order to address the relatively poor situation of press freedom in the Asia-Pacific region, governments must not only develop stronger legislative and regulatory measures to

guarantee such freedom but also aggressively move to ensure they are implemented, making clear to public or private organisations that to attack, threaten, or even kill journalists will not be tolerated.

“It must be made clear that, in the long-run, such repression of the freedom of expression is not conducive to national or individual development.”

The event is co-organised by UNESCO Bangkok, UNDP, UN Office for Human Rights, and the South East Asian Press Alliance (SEAPA).

The United Nations created World Press Freedom Day in 1993 to raise awareness of the importance of freedom of the press and to remind governments of their duty to respect and uphold the right to freedom of expression enshrined under Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

UNESCO is the only United Nations agency with a mandate to defend freedom of expression and press freedom. Article 1 of its Constitution requires the Organization to: “Further universal respect for justice, for the rule of law and for the human rights and fundamental freedoms which are affirmed for the peoples of the world, without distinction of race, sex, language or religion, by the Charter of the United Nations.”

To realize this the Organization is requested to “collaborate in the work of advancing the mutual knowledge and understanding of peoples, through all means of mass communication and to that end recommend such international agreements as may be necessary to promote the free flow of ideas by word and image...”

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