



Opening Remarks by Larry Kilman, Deputy CEO and Executive Director, Communications and Public Affairs, at the Arab Free Press Forum, Tunis, Tunisia, 25 November 2013

Good morning Ladies and Gentlemen,

I'd like to welcome you to the 6th Arab Free Press Forum, which annually brings together publishers, editors, journalists and press freedom advocates from across North Africa, the Middle East and the Gulf, invited by WAN-IFRA, the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers. We are very proud of this event, where media professionals can meet to exchange ideas, experience and best practices, particularly on the practical issues facing media today.

With each edition, the Forum has grown in stature, and one measure of its influence is the large number of organisations that have agreed to be part of it. We are honored to be collaborating with UNESCO and their offices in Tunis and Cairo, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), the government of Canada, International Media Support (IMS), the Ethical Journalism Network, Free Press Unlimited, Canal France International (CFI), Egypt Media Development Program (EMDP), "Yakadha" Association for Democracy and a Civil State (Vigilance), NAWAAT.org, the Tunisian Centre for Press

Freedom, the African Centre for Training of Journalists and Communicators (CAPJC), the National Union of Tunisian Journalists (SNJT), the Union of Independent and Partisan Newspapers (SJIP), Egypt's Al-Shorouk newspaper, and Beirut's An-Nahar newspaper.

This event is an opportunity to review and debate the latest and most significant press developments in the Arab world. It includes the press freedom situation, of course, but the event also focuses on the editorial and business challenges and opportunities facing media in the region. No media company can carry out its societal role – to provide the credible information citizens need to make informed decisions -- without a viable and sustainable economic model.

When the Forum last met in January 2012, the meeting was characterized by a strong sense of optimism. Following the popular uprisings in the region, there was great hope that media freedom and democracy would rise hand-in-hand, in a continuous line.

I think it would be fair to say that the optimism has been tempered since then, as political and media liberalisation are progressing at too slow a pace, or not at all, or, as recent events in Syria, Egypt (where this event was originally scheduled to be held), and elsewhere have illustrated, in the wrong direction.

Developments here in Tunisia have also been worrying. Two years after the revolution, traditional media have experienced no significant structural change in their market or regulatory environments. The euphoria of the revolution has given way to a government that seems to believe there are political liabilities in a free press and sees no need to invite public scrutiny. These are among the conclusions in WAN-IFRA's soon-to-be-published Tunisia country report, which is part of our Financially Viable Media in Emerging and Developing Markets project. Though there are still reasons for optimism, there are fears that political divisions and identity struggles will continue to hamper the development of a free press. And this can be said for many countries in the region.

This is serious business. Despite the changes occurring in the region, governments continue to resort to harassment, censorship, prosecution, fining and imprisonment of news media professionals.

While social media and citizen journalism have filled a gap and contribute substantially to the media scene, the development of democracy, here as elsewhere, depends on the establishment and sustainability of professional independent media. And those media, to be credible, must be held to a high standard of ethics and journalistic integrity. This is not something that occurs without a good deal of

training, without a business strategy that encourages it, and without the necessary infrastructure in which independent media can grow and thrive.

In the course of today and tomorrow, our speakers will not only be examining government actions that inhibit the role of the independent press, through legislative barriers and other means, but will also address editorial policies that inspire public trust, sustainable business practices, innovations in newsrooms, and finally look into improving safety practices, through the UN Action Plan on the Safety of Journalists and other protocols. A session will specifically address the issue of digital surveillance, and how journalists can protect themselves from the dangers they face in the digital world.

To get the discussions started for the next two days, I'd like to suggest some of the things that are necessary for the free press in the region – and everywhere for that matter -- to grow and thrive:

- an environment in which journalists are able to carry out their duties without fear of violence. A climate of fear inhibits journalistic investigation and can promote self-censorship.

- an independent judiciary that cannot be used to punish the press at the whim of the government. And a system that responds to attacks on journalists with swift investigations and prosecutions.

- the abolition of insult laws, criminal defamation laws and all jail sentences for press offences. I would be amused at how easily government officials and religious leaders are embarrassed or insulted, if the results weren't so serious. Insult laws elevate public officials above the reach of media scrutiny and shield government actions and policies from public debate. They also send journalists to jail.

- another necessary condition is a system of political alternance. Government officials must be answerable to the people, and the independent press provides the public with the information they need to decide whether power holders should remain in office or not.

- liberalized access to government and other public records. A free press needs freedom of information to be effective. Too many governments hide behind secrecy laws – and jail journalists who manage to get access to documents for spying – to hide corruption, failures of public policy, and worse.

- trade bodies and other associations representing the common interest of news media, and comprehensive training schemes for journalism, ethics and business strategy and practices.

I'm sure this conference will come up with more points and strategies for achieving them over the next two days.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge that we would not be here today at this particular gathering if it were not for a tragedy – the murder in 2005 in Beirut, of Gebran Tueni, then publisher of An-Nahar, and a WAN-IFRA Board member for more than ten years. His loss continues to resonate, as his voice and his pen would have been effective tools in support of a free and independent Arab press, and against the tyrants in the region. His example – and those of our many friends and colleagues lost in the cause of press freedom – continues to inspire us.

I wish you an excellent, informative and stimulating conference.

Thank you.