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Commonwealth Organisations unveil “Principles on media and good governance” to counter threats to freedom of expression and accountable government

As leaders from the 53 Commonwealth countries prepare to fly to London for a Summit meeting next week, six Commonwealth organisations today unveiled proposals for a 12-point Commonwealth code of conduct aimed at reducing the heavy toll of journalists’ killings and other threats to the media’s right to report.

The Commonwealth Principles on Freedom of Expression and the Role of the Media in Good Governance were made public at the University of London’s Senate House, the home of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies (ICWS).

“Governments are always keen to shape the political message. Media freedom is hard won and needs constant vigilance and active defence”, said Dr Sue Onslow, deputy director of the Institute, who opened the meeting to mark the publication of the Principles.

Figures published by UNESCO, the UN Agency with a mandate to defend freedom of expression, show that fifty-seven journalists were killed for their work in Commonwealth countries between 2013 and 2017.

Commonwealth Secretary-General Patricia Scotland said last year that the number of journalists killed for doing their jobs represented “a serious indictment of our collective efforts to build a safer and more inclusive future.”

Among the widely reported cases in 2017 were the fatal shooting of editor and journalist Gauri Lankesh in India in September and the car bombing that killed investigative journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia in Malta, the current chair-in-office of the Commonwealth.

“Media freedom is in peril”, said Mahendra Ved, President of the Commonwealth Journalists Association. “The Commonwealth should now demonstrate the will to defend it through actions, not just words; I believe these guidelines can help to make the commitments real.”

The Commonwealth Principles on Freedom of Expression and the Role of the Media in Good Governance were drawn up by a Working Group representing journalists, academics, parliamentarians, lawyers, legal educators and human rights advocates across the Commonwealth.

The document reflects international standards and best practice with regard to the relationships between the media and the three branches of government, effective protections for the independence of the media and its role in informing the public, the media’s respect for accuracy and fairness, and promoting member states’ observance of the principles.

Desmond Browne QC, who represented the Commonwealth Lawyers Association on the Working Group, said: “The CLA has been proud to play a part in drafting these important Principles. The intention is that they should provide a universal Code for the Commonwealth which will protect both freedom of expression and the activities of responsible journalists.”

UNESCO's statistics show that fewer than ten percent of all killings of journalist in Commonwealth countries have resulted in those responsible being brought to justice. Human rights groups say that high rate of impunity is at odds with the Commonwealth's commitments to the rule of law and protecting the media's legitimate right to report in the public interest.

Kayode Soyinka, publisher of *Africa Today*, was present at the launch of the Principles. Soyinka said: "As a letter-bomb survivor and victim of the most gruesome attack on media freedom in my country, Nigeria, I support the Commonwealth Media Principles. The time has come for the Commonwealth to prove its relevance as a true champion of democratic values."

Apart from condemning the high number of targeted killings of journalists in several Commonwealth member states, media and press freedom organisations have called for coordinated actions to combat numerous cases of abduction, violent assault, criminal prosecution and arbitrary closures of media outlets.

The six Commonwealth organisations which are jointly putting forward the Principles say they want them to be adopted by the Commonwealth as a "manual of good practice" to assist governments, legislatures, judiciaries and the media to contribute in appropriate ways to promoting open, democratic and accountable societies, in accordance with Commonwealth values.

The Commonwealth Summit will take place in London from 16-20 April; for details see <https://www.chogm2018.org.uk/>

The six signatory organisations of "Commonwealth principles on freedom of expression and the role of the media in good governance" are the Commonwealth Journalists Association, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, Commonwealth Lawyers Association, Commonwealth Legal Education Association, Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative and Commonwealth Parliamentary Association UK.

The Principles are published at 00.01 GMT on April 11 on the websites of the Commonwealth Journalists Association (CJA) www.cja.org and the Institute of Commonwealth Studies <https://commonwealth.sas.ac.uk/news>