



## ***United Nations General Assembly First Committee***

### **Topic B: Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity**

*“Stop targeting the truth-tellers. As journalists stand up for truth, the world stands with them.”*

– António Guterres

#### **Introduction**

A fundamental backbone of democracy, journalists are on the forefront of telling the truth and informing the public. The safety of journalists and the issue of impunity are critical concerns that the United Nations in collaboration with the international community has been addressing to protect media freedom and ensure the safety of journalists worldwide<sup>1</sup>. Journalists are seen as gatekeepers<sup>2</sup>, and play a crucial role in informing the public, holding power to account, and promoting transparency and accountability in society. However, journalists often face risks, threats, and attacks while carrying out their work, particularly in conflict zones, authoritarian regimes, and areas where press freedom is restricted<sup>3</sup>.

The issue of impunity refers to the lack of accountability for crimes committed against journalists<sup>4</sup>. In many cases, perpetrators, of attacks, threats, harassment, and violence against journalists, which can be individuals, groups or entire States, go unpunished, creating a culture of fear and intimidation that undermines press freedom and freedom of expression<sup>5</sup>. Impunity not only perpetuates a cycle of violence against journalists but also erodes public trust in the media and in turn weakens democracy<sup>6</sup>.

To address the safety of journalists and combat impunity, the United Nations, international organizations, governments, civil society groups, and media organizations have been working together to raise awareness, advocate for legal protections, provide training and support for journalists, and hold perpetrators accountable for crimes committed against media workers<sup>7</sup>. Initiatives such as the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity<sup>8</sup>, the International Day to End Impunity

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations. (n.d.). Reporting from the Front Lines: Keeping Journalists Safe in War Zones. United Nations Academic Impact.

<sup>2</sup> Brown, C. (2018). Journalists are gatekeepers for a reason. *Journal of Media Ethics*, 33(2), 94-97.

<sup>3</sup> United Nations. (n.d.). Journalism – an essential but dangerous profession. Retrieved from United Nations Safety of Journalists.

<sup>4</sup> United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. (n.d.). UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity. Retrieved from United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner.

<sup>5</sup> International Press Institute. (2024, March 25). In Peacetime and in War: Protecting Journalists' Safety and Ensuring Accountability for Crimes against the Press. International Press Institute.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> International Press Institute. (2024, March 25). In Peacetime and in War: Protecting Journalists' Safety and Ensuring Accountability for Crimes against the Press. International Press Institute.

<sup>8</sup> United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. (n.d.). UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity. United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner.

for Crimes against Journalists<sup>9</sup>, and the UNESCO-led Global Media Defense Fund<sup>10</sup> aim to strengthen the safety of journalists, promote press freedom, and combat impunity for attacks on journalists<sup>11</sup>.

## **Background**

The safety of journalists and the issue of impunity for crimes committed against them have become central concerns in the global fight for press freedom and human rights.<sup>12</sup> International treaties, conventions, and resolutions, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, lay the groundwork for safeguarding the rights of journalists.<sup>13</sup> Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights enshrines the right to freedom of expression, which includes the freedom of the press.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights guarantees this right, emphasizing that journalists must be allowed to perform their work without fear of repression or intimidation.<sup>15</sup> However, despite these protections, journalists continue to face significant threats to their safety, especially in conflict zones where the risks of violence and attacks are heightened.<sup>16</sup>

The United Nations has played a pivotal role in addressing the safety of journalists.<sup>17</sup> In 2013, the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 68/163, which highlighted the importance of protecting journalists and ensuring accountability for crimes committed against them.<sup>18</sup> This resolution marked a critical step in the global recognition of journalists' vulnerability and the need for concrete measures to prevent violence against them.<sup>19</sup> A year later, Resolution 69/185 called for further action to improve the safety of journalists, including the creation of systems to better investigate and prosecute crimes against them.<sup>20</sup> The UN Security Council also addressed this issue with Resolution 2222, adopted in 2015, which emphasized the protection of journalists, media professionals, and associated personnel in armed conflict situations.<sup>21</sup> These resolutions collectively underscore the international community's commitment to

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<sup>9</sup> United Nations. (n.d.). International Day to End Impunity for Crimes Against Journalists. United Nations November.

<sup>10</sup> UNESCO. (n.d.). Global Media Defence Fund. UNESCO.

<sup>11</sup> United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. (n.d.). UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity. United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner.

<sup>12</sup> United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. (n.d.). UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity. United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner.

<sup>13</sup> ARTICLE 19. (2023, December 20). Israel and Palestine: Journalists in the conflict zone must be protected - ARTICLE 19. ARTICLE 19.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> General Assembly resolution 2200A (XXI). (1966, December 16). International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. United Nations Human Rights.

<sup>16</sup> United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. (n.d.). UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity. United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> RSF Resource for Journalists' Safety. (n.d.). *APPENDIX I: Protection of journalists in war zones*. RSF Resource for Journalists' Safety

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid,

<sup>21</sup> United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Res 2222 (27 May 2015) UN Doc S/RES/2222

combating impunity for crimes against journalists and holding perpetrators accountable.<sup>22</sup>

The international community has made significant strides in establishing legal frameworks and resolutions aimed at protecting journalists and addressing impunity for crimes against them.<sup>23</sup> However, the persistent threats to journalists' safety, particularly in conflict zones, indicate that more needs to be done to ensure their protection. The goal is clear: to foster an environment where journalists can work without fear of retaliation, where their rights to freedom of expression are upheld, and where those who target journalists are held accountable.<sup>24</sup> These efforts are vital not only for the safety of journalists but for the broader protection of press freedom, which is essential to the functioning of democratic societies and the promotion of human rights.<sup>25</sup>

### **Current Situation**

The safety of journalists and the issue of impunity for attacks against them remain critical global challenges. UNESCO has taken a leading role in addressing these issues through the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity.<sup>26</sup> This initiative aims to protect journalists from violence and harassment, particularly in conflict zones, while also seeking to end impunity for those who commit crimes against them.<sup>27</sup> By promoting awareness, strengthening legal frameworks, and encouraging collaboration between governments and international organizations, UNESCO works to ensure that journalists can perform their duties without fear of retaliation.<sup>28</sup> The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) and the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) also play pivotal roles by monitoring and reporting on violations against journalists, advocating for the protection of their rights, and urging Member States to comply with international standards safeguarding press freedom.<sup>29</sup>

Despite these efforts, the situation for journalists remains dire, particularly in regions affected by armed conflict or political unrest. The United Nations Security Council addresses threats to international peace and security that endanger journalists, often taking action to protect media professionals in conflict zones.<sup>30</sup> However, journalists continue to face physical violence, arbitrary detention, censorship, and harassment. Impunity for crimes against journalists is widespread, with perpetrators often going

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<sup>22</sup> RSF Resource for Journalists' Safety. (n.d.). *APPENDIX I: Protection of journalists in war zones*. RSF Resource for Journalists' Safety.

<sup>23</sup> United Nations. (n.d.). *Reporting from the Front Lines: Keeping Journalists Safe in War Zones*. United Nations Academic Impact.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. (n.d.). *UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity*. United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> United Nations. "Safety of Journalists" 2024

<sup>30</sup> RSF Resource for Journalists' Safety. (n.d.). *APPENDIX I: Protection of journalists in war zones*. RSF Resource for Journalists' Safety.

unpunished.<sup>31</sup> Various international bodies, including the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and Reporters Without Borders, document these attacks, calling for stronger enforcement of protections and greater accountability for those responsible.<sup>32</sup>

Efforts to combat impunity and enhance the safety of journalists are also supported by entities like the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the International News Safety Institute (INSI), which provide practical support and safety training to journalists working in dangerous conditions.<sup>33</sup> These organizations emphasize the importance of creating mechanisms for investigating and prosecuting crimes against journalists, as well as providing physical protection and psychological support for media professionals.<sup>34</sup> In conflict zones, the protection of journalists as civilians under international law, such as through the Geneva Conventions, is crucial for ensuring their safety and upholding their rights as media workers. However, challenges persist in ensuring compliance with these laws, particularly in non-international armed conflicts where the protections for journalists are often inadequately enforced.<sup>35</sup>

While significant international efforts are being made to protect journalists and address the issue of impunity, the current situation remains precarious.<sup>36</sup> Governments, international organizations, and civil society must continue to work collaboratively to establish stronger protections and ensure accountability for those who target journalists.<sup>37</sup> Strengthening legal frameworks, improving safety measures, and ensuring that perpetrators of crimes against journalists face justice are all essential steps in creating a safer environment for media professionals globally. Until these efforts are fully realized, journalists will remain vulnerable to violence and intimidation, hindering their ability to serve as a vital check on power and sources of information for the public.<sup>38</sup>

### *International Legal Frameworks*

International humanitarian law establishes two different statuses for journalists in situation of international armed conflict.<sup>39</sup> War Correspondents are defined in the Third Geneva Convention of 1949 for international armed conflict<sup>40</sup> War correspondents, or journalists authorized directly by a party to the conflict to follow its troops, who are captured in the exercise of their functions in an area of conflict are considered prisoners

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<sup>31</sup> RSF Resource for Journalists' Safety. (n.d.). *APPENDIX I: Protection of journalists in war zones*. RSF Resource for Journalists' Safety.

<sup>32</sup> Medecins Sans Frontiers. (n.d.). *Protection of Journalists within the Framework of Humanitarian Law*. Medecins Sans Frontiers.

<sup>33</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross. (n.d.). *Protection of Journalists*. Retrieved from International Committee of the Red Cross

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> United Nations. (n.d.). *Reporting from the Front Lines: Keeping Journalists Safe in War Zones*. United Nations Academic Impact.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross. (n.d.). *Protection of Journalists*. International Committee of the Red Cross.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Medecins Sans Frontiers. (n.d.). *Protection of Journalists within the Framework of Humanitarian Law*. Medecins Sans Frontiers.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

of war.<sup>41</sup> This puts them under the protection of the Third Geneva Convention, Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War (GCIII Art. 4). In 1977, Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions, Relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts, reiterated this<sup>42</sup> Other Journalists have the status of civilians and are to be protected as such. Although Additional Protocol I is meant to be applied to international armed conflicts, it is always possible to request that its provisions also be respected in internal armed conflicts.<sup>43</sup>

The Geneva Conventions, particularly Protocol I of 1977, provide additional legal protections for journalists working in conflict zones. Article 79 of Protocol I defines journalists as civilians under the laws of war and stipulates that they should be protected from attacks, provided they do not take actions that could compromise their status.<sup>44</sup> This protection is crucial as journalists often face violence while reporting from dangerous and hostile environments. International law, through the Geneva Conventions and subsequent protocols, recognizes the essential role of journalists in providing information during armed conflicts and underscores their protection as a fundamental human rights issue.<sup>45</sup> This legal framework ensures that journalists' rights are respected even in the most perilous situations, where impunity for crimes against them can be widespread.<sup>46</sup>

Various declarations and reports also emphasize the critical need for a safe and enabling environment for journalists. The Medellin Declaration of 2007 and UNESCO's World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development report, for example, highlight the importance of protecting journalists from threats and violence.<sup>47</sup> Reports by organizations like Reporters Without Borders and the Committee to Protect Journalists document the ongoing challenges faced by media workers, including harassment, physical attacks, and killings.<sup>48</sup> These reports illustrate the alarming reality that many journalists continue to face grave dangers while doing their jobs. The call for ending impunity for crimes against journalists is a central theme in these documents, as impunity not only allows perpetrators to act with little fear of prosecution but also fosters a climate of censorship and fear that undermines press freedom globally.<sup>49</sup>

### *Ensuring Accountability for Crimes against the Press*

Ensuring accountability for crimes against journalists at the United Nations level requires a comprehensive approach that combines legal frameworks, international

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<sup>41</sup> Medecins Sans Frontiers. (n.d.). *Protection of Journalists within the Framework of Humanitarian Law*. Retrieved from Medecins Sans Frontiers: <https://guide-humanitarian-law.org/content/article/3/journalists/>

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> RSF Resource for Journalists' Safety. (n.d.). *APPENDIX I: Protection of journalists in war zones*. RSF Resource for Journalists' Safety

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> UNESCO. (2007, May 2-4). *Medellin Declaration - Securing the Safety of Journalists and Combating Impunity*. United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization.

<sup>48</sup> Medecins Sans Frontiers. (n.d.). *Protection of Journalists within the Framework of Humanitarian Law*. Medecins Sans Frontiers.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

cooperation, and political will.<sup>50</sup> The United Nations has increasingly focused on holding perpetrators accountable for attacks against journalists through various resolutions, such as UN Security Council Resolution 2222, which emphasizes the need to end impunity for crimes committed against journalists, particularly in conflict zones.<sup>51</sup> This resolution urges governments to take effective measures to investigate and prosecute those responsible for violence against media workers.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, the UN Human Rights Council has consistently highlighted the importance of establishing national mechanisms to ensure accountability, urging states to implement legal frameworks that protect journalists from violence, harassment, and arbitrary detention, while also addressing impunity by holding violators to account.<sup>53</sup>

However, challenges remain in achieving tangible results, as political and legal obstacles often hinder effective prosecution of crimes against journalists.<sup>54</sup> The International Press Institute emphasizes that while international bodies like the United Nations provide important guidance and resolutions, local enforcement and implementation remain weak in many regions.<sup>55</sup> The lack of robust judicial systems, corruption, and political influence often allow those responsible for attacks on journalists to avoid justice. To combat this, the UN must continue to press for greater commitment from member states to not only adopt resolutions but also ensure that laws are enforced effectively at the national level.<sup>56</sup> Strengthening international cooperation and monitoring mechanisms will be crucial in supporting efforts to hold perpetrators accountable and provide justice for journalists, thus ensuring that press freedom and the safety of journalists are upheld.<sup>57</sup>

## **Future Outlook**

The future of protecting journalists and addressing impunity at the United Nations level hinges on strengthening international cooperation, ensuring the implementation of existing resolutions, and improving legal frameworks that hold perpetrators accountable for crimes against journalists.<sup>58</sup> Continued efforts, such as the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists, must be supported by member states through effective national mechanisms that enforce laws protecting press freedom and the safety of journalists.<sup>59</sup> While progress has been made, especially through key resolutions like UN Security Council Resolution 2222, challenges such as corruption, political influence, and weak judicial systems persist.<sup>60</sup> The UN must maintain its focus on enhancing accountability,

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<sup>50</sup> Medecins Sans Frontiers. (n.d.). *Protection of Journalists within the Framework of Humanitarian Law*. Medecins Sans Frontiers.

<sup>51</sup> United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Res 2222 (27 May 2015) UN Doc S/RES/2222

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Medecins Sans Frontiers. (n.d.). *Protection of Journalists within the Framework of Humanitarian Law*. Medecins Sans Frontiers.

<sup>54</sup> Medecins Sans Frontiers. (n.d.). *Protection of Journalists within the Framework of Humanitarian Law*. Medecins Sans Frontiers.

<sup>55</sup> International Press Institute. (2024, March 25). In *Peacetime and in War: Protecting Journalists' Safety and Ensuring Accountability for Crimes against the Press*. Retrieved from International Press Institute

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. (n.d.). *UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity*. United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Res 2222 (27 May 2015) UN Doc S/RES/2222

urging governments to investigate and prosecute those responsible for attacks on journalists. By fostering stronger political will, improving safety measures, and ensuring more rigorous enforcement of international norms, the UN can play a vital role in reducing impunity and creating a safer environment for journalists worldwide.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. (n.d.). UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity. United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner.

## **Focus Questions**

- What measures is the United Nations taking to ensure the safety and security of journalists worldwide?
- How does the UN work to prevent attacks on journalists and promote press freedom as a fundamental human right?
- What initiatives and programs has the UN implemented to address the issue of impunity for crimes committed against journalists?
- How does the UN collaborate with governments, civil society organizations, and media outlets to protect journalists and uphold media freedom?
- What challenges does the UN face in protecting journalists in conflict zones and areas with restricted press freedom, and how is the organization addressing these challenges?
- How can the UN strengthen legal protections for journalists, enhance accountability for crimes against media workers, and promote a culture of safety for journalists globally?
- What role does the UN play in raising awareness about the risks faced by journalists, providing training and support for media professionals, and advocating for stronger safeguards to protect journalists from violence and harassment?
- How does the UN engage with member states to ensure compliance with international human rights standards related to press freedom and the safety of journalists?
- What impact have UN initiatives, resolutions, and declarations had on improving the safety of journalists and combating impunity for attacks on media workers?
- How can the UN further enhance its efforts to protect journalists, promote media freedom, and uphold the right to freedom of expression in the face of evolving threats and challenges to press freedom worldwide?



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