Federal Foreign Office (Germany) — auswaertiges-amt.de

Speech by Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle on the occasion of the World Press Freedom Day

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Foreign Minister Westerwelle delivered an address to the National Press Club on the occasion of the World Press Freedom Day on 3 May.

Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle's address to the National Press Club on the occasion of the World Press Freedom Day, 3 May 2012

--- Check against delivery! ---

Dear Mrs Werner,

Dear Mr. Cramer,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I appreciate very much your friendly invitation on the occasion of the World Press Freedom Day.

I.

Freedom of the press and freedom of expression are inalienable rights. They are the cornerstones of democracy and freedom. Without them, it is impossible to imagine free societies.

More than 60 years after being adopted, the freedom of opinion and expression, as enshrined in the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” is as important as ever before.

Of course, in the era of internet, satellite television, smartphones and social networks, in times of Facebook and Twitter, it may seem as if this finally had become a global and globalized reality.

Unfortunately, this dream has only come true in parts of the world, not everywhere.

In Iran and elsewhere, censorship continues to oppress the free flow of information, to distort facts and to change the perception of reality.

Not only in Belarus, journalists still are behind bars, for the mere fact that they act according to Art. 19.

As we speak, journalists have died, have been attacked and risk being killed while reporting about the bloodshed in Syria.

All that reminds us of how heavy the responsibilities of journalists are and how precious – and dangerous - their daily work can be.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Democracy is impossible without the freedom of expressions and the critical assessment of state actions by a free and investigatiing press.

Therefore: We will continue to refuse to look the other way when journalists are persecuted and political opponents are oppressed.

II.

What we strive to achieve everywhere, is particularly significant for Millions of people throughout North Africa and the Middle East.

With the Arab spring, fundamental change has come to the Arab world. The peoples in the region, in particular the youth, had the courage to stand up for freedom, dignity and participation.

We will never forget the moving pictures from the Avenue Bourghiba in Tunis or the Tahrir Square in Cairo. They showed us the power of freedom. And they taught us how quickly autocratic regimes can collapse in today’s globalized world.

Nobody knows what the wind of change blowing through North Africa and parts of the Arab world will ultimately bring about.

However, we do know what a crucial role the media can play to overcome repression and violence.

III.

Thanks to the brave struggle of activists and journalists for a free press, today’s international community is more than ever able to watch, to get information, to judge and to act accordingly. The internet has revolutionized the media. Great new technological opportunities have changed information patterns dramatically. In our free societies, that does not fundamentally change the rules of the game.

Not so in North Africa, the Middle East and in other parts of the world: There, new forms of journalism play a crucial role in and for civil society. Without them - without Al Jazeera, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and others - it would hardly be possible for us to see, to hear and thus to know what is really going on in Syria, in cities like Homs, Hama or Idlib. Maybe the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt had not succeeded without these new forms of journalism.

Thus, the so-called Arab Spring has already written history, but we are still only at the beginning. Freedom of the press, democracy and the rule of law are far from being guaranteed, most countries in the region are still relying on autocratic structures and media control.

We must therefore carry on our struggle for a free press worldwide and for freedom of opinion worldwide. Thank you for your attention.

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