# Speech by Minister of State Cornelia Pieper at the Anna Lindh Stiftung Mediterranean Journalist Award ceremony

2012-10-18

On the occasion of the presentation of the Anna Lindh Foundation’s Mediterranean Journalist Award to journalists from the Mediterranean, Minister of State Pieper underlined the importance of the work of media stakeholders when it comes to combating violence and repression.

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Mr. President of the Anna Lindh Stiftung André Azoulay, Excellencies, Distinguished Members of the Jury, Award nominees, Ladies and Gentlemen,

thank you for the warm welcome.

Please allow me to sincerely thank Mr. André Azoulay and the Anna Lindh Foundation for inviting me to speak here today. Thank you also to the Allianz Cultural Foundation for hosting this year’s Mediterranean Journalist Award ceremony.

It is an honor to take part in an event that celebrates the invaluable contributions made by journalists in the fields of press, television, radio, and new media in the Mediterranean over the past year.

I especially welcome the opportunity to recognize the work of the Anna Lindh Foundation. Its work to develop a network of civil society actors from all corners of the Mediterranean region has made great strides in fostering mutual respect and empowering local actors to bring about positive change. Germany considers the Anna Lindh Foundation an extremely valuable partner. We look forward to continuing our cooperation with and support for the Foundation.

The prestigious Mediterranean Journalist Award being presented here tonight is one of the cornerstones of the Foundation’s support for the development of independent and dynamic sectors of society in the region.

The Award is evidence to the widespread recognition of the vital role members of the media play in overcoming repression and violence, and in building a new future.

The courage and determination shown by the citizens of Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya in overcoming oppressive regimes last year has inspired all of us. The Arab Spring taught us how aspirations for increased dignity, respect, freedom, and opportunity can unite people, turning the voices of individuals into a powerful force for change. We will never forget the images of people of all backgrounds joined together in peaceful gatherings, such as those in Tahrir Square. The role of journalists and new media in particular, in bringing about this transformation has been widely recognized and cannot be overstated.

We recognize that fulfilling this role does not come without cost. As we speak, journalists are putting their lives in danger in order to report about the bloodshed in Syria. This reminds us how heavy the responsibilities of journalists are and how precious – and dangerous – their work can be.

I am therefore especially pleased that Syrian journalist Ms. Rima Marrouch will receive the award in the special category for the best journalistic work on the theme “the role of citizens and civil society in building democracies and pluralistic societies”. I congratulate her on receiving this Award for her outstanding coverage of the news in Syria.

Despite the incredible developments in the region, today, a sense of division along political, religious, and social lines seems to call into question last year’s spirit of unity

and to jeopardize some of the achievements and potential created by the Arab Spring. Frustration among some parts of the countries’ populations, not only in Egypt, has grown and there is a danger of disillusionment with the democratic process. Only now do we really understand the challenges that lie ahead as countries in the southern Mediterranean experience a difficult time of political and economic reform. It is clear that a full transition from authoritarian regimes to open and pluralistic democracies cannot be achieved in only a year. We must pace ourselves for long processes of reform, which will require continuous and consistent support from the international community.

The role of media – both traditional and “new media” – has changed dramatically in the new regional context and will continue to be instrumental to achieving a lasting and sustainable transition.

Long restricted by governments, media has opened up new avenues for citizens and civil society to organize themselves and to share their experiences with others in the region through outlets like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Social media and bloggers, in particular, have fundamentally transformed information patterns and empowered non-government actors. Autocratic regimes can no longer escape accountability for their actions.

Today, media play a pivotal role in providing a platform for a peaceful and constructive debate about the future of the region. They give a voice to different groups and opinions; they weigh arguments and make informed judgments, and critically assess the work of governments and

other political actors. As countries move forward with unprecedented national and local elections, media increase transparency in the political process.

The recent acts of violence led by an extremist minority that also targeted diplomatic missions in some parts of the region reinforce the importance of the respectful and peaceful exchange of ideas. This lies at the heart of democratic ideals and is essential to living together in an increasingly interconnected world. It is clear, however, that these actions do not represent the will of the majority of the people in the region. These people have clearly expressed their desire to empower themselves through the building of democratic institutions, not through violence. In this regard, the Anna Lindh Foundation's work to support people working for positive change is more important than ever.I am encouraged by the signs of progress we have seen thus far and am impressed by the vibrancy of traditional and modern media in many Arab countries today. Across the region we have seen a proliferation of new publications, websites, and broadcast media outlets. In Libya, an entirely new media has been developed. In Egypt and Tunisia, there have been significant steps made in reforming the legal framework and institutions overseeing the media. And citizens are engaging more and more online: Arabic is the fastest growing language worldwide on social media outlets like Twitter and Facebook. In fact, many government officials in the region are now joining social media outlets and answering directly to citizens' comments, thereby creating a unique dialogue that did not previously exist. Political parties in Egypt similarly used social media to explain their party platforms in advance of last year's election. Today, discussions on Constitutional reforms are also taking place online.

It is clear, however, that more needs to be done. There have been worrisome cases pursued by governments in the region against journalists and bloggers for criticizing the government or on charges of blasphemy. There have also been efforts to block press and social media websites. Self-censorship is still very prevalent in the region.

Governments must do more to implement the reforms they have promised and to ensure laws protect rather than punish journalists. Freedom of expression should not be a luxury.

On the other hand, the media itself must accept increased responsibilities and obligations as it takes on a larger role in society. We call on media throughout the region to develop a code of ethical conduct and to work to increase credibility within their countries. Members of the media should also work to ensure a further professionalization and modernization of the industry in line with international standards.

Recognizing this need and the importance of an independent and pluralistic media for the region's transition, Germany provides support for media development with a focus on enhancing both the professionalism of main media actors and of their content. Germany has facilitated training sessions led by German experts for journalists and local media in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia, in addition to holding media training sessions for representatives of

political parties and government institutions in Tunisia and Egypt. In Yemen, we are supporting an initiative to set up an independent radio station. Through these activities, we aim to promote dialogue with transitioning countries about the role of media in society and to provide modern formats that appeal more to the young people of the region.

While the outcome of the transitions underway remains uncertain, what we do know is that freedom is indispensable for the successful development of the region. And freedom of the press is an essential element of that. As Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle said recently in his speech to the

UN

General Assembly in New York,

freedom is not a gift. It has to be won and constantly defended.

German support for transition in the Middle East and North Africa is strongly based on the principle that lasting regional stability can only be achieved by securing greater liberties for the people of the region, including freedom of expression. We believe that steps made toward democracy, will pave the way to a safer and more prosperous region. With this must come tolerance and respect, whether between diverse ethnic or religious groups within the same country or between different parts of the Mediterranean.

I again commend the work of the Anna Lindh Foundation, as well as the nominees here tonight, for their critical contributions to addressing the challenges in the region today. Their work helps bring us closer to achieving a future of liberty, freedom, and security.

Thank you once again for inviting me to take part in tonight’s event. I look forward to the award ceremony.

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