

American

NEWS & VIEWS

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UNESCO, State Department Host World Press Freedom Day Events

By Charlene Porter
Staff Writer

Washington — Journalists from around the world have converged on Washington to survey the state of their profession in recognition of World Press Freedom Day, officially marked on May 3.

A Washington conference in honor of the occasion began May 1 with a speech from Under Secretary of State Judith McHale saluting the conferees for their “tireless efforts to safeguard journalists and their ability to work around the world.”

The theme of this year’s events, as designated by UNESCO, is “21st Century Media: New Frontiers, New Barriers.” The new communication technologies of social media and text messaging have been instrumental in the organization of public demonstrations for freedom and liberalization that have swept North Africa and the Mideast in 2011, so these events will also be shaping the discussions.

McHale cited her recent travel to Tunisia to meet with activists leading the reform movement. “They are embracing the blessings of a free press, of freedom of association and of free expression as vital components of an open, democratic society,” she said.

McHale said new communications technologies have made it “nearly impossible for authoritarian governments to contain and control information as they once did.”

At the Washington conference, bloggers and Internet journalists from North Africa and the Middle East, as well as media professionals from elsewhere in the world, are participating.

In her World Press Freedom Day statement, UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova expressed concern about reported attacks on journalists covering the events in North Africa and the Middle East that have collectively come to be known as the Arab Spring. She also welcomed the liberalization of press restrictions. “But I also urge other governments in the region to step up their efforts to meet the aspirations of their citizens and open the way for the full enjoyment of the basic human right of freedom of expression,” she said.

On May 3 Bokova is recognizing jailed Iranian journalist Ahmad Zeidabadi as the recipient of the 2011 UNESCO/Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize. He is a former editor-in-chief of the Azad newspaper, a contributor to other media outlets and a professor of

political science.

Zeidabadi is one of many Iranian journalists targeted in the aftermath of the 2009 election. The government accused him of plotting to overthrow the government in a “soft revolution,” and he is now serving a six-year prison term. He has been in and out of prison several times since he began a media campaign for greater civil rights for Iranians in 2000.

An independent panel of journalists from around the world selected Zeidabadi for the honor. In endorsing the panel’s selection, Bokova said, “Throughout his career Ahmad Zeidabadi has courageously and unceasingly spoken out for press freedom and freedom of expression, which is a fundamental human right that underpins all other civil liberties, a key ingredient of tolerant and open societies and vital for the rule of law and democratic governance.”

Pentagon Report Cites Tangible Progress in Afghan Security

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer

Washington — Afghan national security forces have made “tangible progress” in halting and reversing the momentum of the Taliban insurgency in a number of areas, a new U.S. Defense Department report says.

The report to Congress — which covers the period from October 1, 2010, to March 31, 2011 — said Afghan national security forces continue to increase in size, quality of operations and capabilities. While progress remains “fragile and reversible,” enough momentum has been generated in the past six months to establish conditions to begin the transition of security duties to Afghan forces in seven areas this summer, the report said.

“The situation on the ground is fundamentally changing,” a senior defense official said in a Pentagon background briefing in Washington April 29 when the report was released. “And this is something that happens day by day, week by week, month by month, and over the past two years.”

The positive news comes as the United States prepares to reduce some of its almost 100,000 forces in July and hand over security for some districts to Afghan forces. The report said the success comes from a combination of events: the arrival of a surge in U.S. and coalition forces in 2010, establishing a U.S. Army division’s headquarters in a regional command, and the expansion of Afghan security forces.

“The surge in conventional forces and special operations forces, the increased pace and scope of operations, and the expansion of the Afghan local police program and Village Stability Operations have, together, placed unprecedented pressure on the insurgency,” the report said.

“Together, these efforts have driven insurgents out of key population centers in the south, cleared safe havens that the enemy possessed for years, and disrupted its networks and plans,” the report said.

The long-term goal is to transfer full security responsibility for Afghanistan to Afghan control by 2014.

The report said the coalition’s efforts have removed major safe havens from the insurgents’ control, disrupted their leader networks, and removed many weapons stockpiles and tactical supplies left behind at the end of the last fighting season. The surge in coalition forces and expanded operations have allowed the coalition to degrade the insurgency’s capabilities to such a degree that the Taliban have lost influence in key areas across the country, the report added.

Ensuring Civil Rights and Security

By Mark Trainer
Staff Writer

Washington – “When we talk about homeland security,” says Margo Schlanger, “what are we securing? If the idea of homeland security is that the American way of life can flourish, that includes civil rights and civil liberties.”

Schlanger is the Department of Homeland Security’s officer for civil rights and civil liberties. Her office of about 100 people, established shortly after the department itself, is part of the Office of the Secretary of Homeland Security and serves four primary purposes:

- Promoting civil rights (rights to equal treatment under U.S. law) and civil liberties (freedoms, such as freedom of speech, guaranteed in the first 10 amendments to the U.S. Constitution) in Homeland Security’s policy creation as well as training personnel and state and local partners.
- Engaging with individuals and groups whose civil rights and civil liberties may be affected by the department.
- Investigating civil rights and civil liberties complaints filed by the public involving the department.
- Leading the department’s equal employment opportunity programs.

Of the personnel Schlanger’s office trains, there are many the public is unlikely to encounter directly – civil rights officers who work in the 72 fusion centers nationwide, where the federal government shares information with local law enforcement – and many the public will encounter, such as staffers at U.S. Customs and Border Protection and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Trainers focus on “cultural competency,” such as training department personnel in the appropriate ways to screen and, if necessary, search individuals wearing various types of religious head coverings. Schlanger’s office also trains DHS staff members on violent radicalization so they know what indicators of potential threats to look for, “particularly when they are dealing with cultures and customs that are not familiar to them,” Schlanger said.

The office processes and resolves complaints against the department for such concerns as abuse of authority, conditions of detention, discrimination and due process. Complaint forms are available in multiple languages and are available through the DHS website. The Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties reports the data on complaints received.

One of the most important aspects of the Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties is its engagement with diverse communities throughout the country. This includes roundtable discussions with community leaders among groups such as American Arabs, Muslims and South Asians with the goal, according to the department, of communicating “reliable information about federal programs and policies, including avenues for redress and complaints.” Roundtable discussions also allow the department to obtain feedback about community concerns and department activities.

Breaking the Silence on Breast Cancer in Saudi Arabia

Breast cancer survivor Dr. Samia Al-Amoudi champions awareness of and treatment for the disease in Saudi Arabia. In 2007, the U.S. secretary of state recognized Al-Amoudi’s work with the International Women of Courage Award.

We asked several of the 46 women from 35 countries who have won the award about their recent work. This is the second response, made in April 2011.

Dr. Samia Al-Amoudi:

I was diagnosed with breast cancer in April 2006. This month – April 2011 – I finished five years [cancer-free], so medically speaking I am a survivor, although I

considered myself a survivor since day one when I managed to absorb the sentence "You have breast cancer."

Since then my mission in life [is to work] so no woman will suffer the way I did. I feel grateful to the generous contribution of the renowned businessman and philanthropist [and cousin] Sheikh Mohammed Hussein Al-Amoudi, who believed in my work. Through his donation I managed to start the scientific chair for breast cancer research, and through his fund, I managed to establish the first center of excellence in breast cancer in the region.

Women in my country have to believe in their health rights, which are basic human rights. This starts by empowering women with knowledge and more awareness and advocating for these health rights and targeting the young generation, as they are the real change.

It is amazing to see how much progress has been made in different parts of the country. [Programs] like the "Pink Eastern Province Campaign" by the Saudi Cancer Foundation show that there is a change in attitude and willingness to be more open on this sensitive issue. The health care provider sector shows increasing numbers of activities and appreciation for the importance of their role in promoting screening. All this is reflected in the perception of the community toward the importance of screening as a tool that saves lives, and it helps in overcoming cultural barriers to screening.

Winning the Women of Courage Award was a great wake-up call that had a great impact on recognizing the importance of the issue of breast cancer in Saudi Arabia. It ... showed how important it is to break the silence toward an issue that is considered a taboo in our society.

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