



Statement

Amman, Jordan, 26 June 2007

IRAQ TRAINING ON INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM AND FREEDOM OF INFORMATION: SECURITY AND RULE OF LAW MUST COME FIRST

Iraqi journalists, invited by ARTICLE 19 and the UNDP for a two-day training on investigative journalism and access to information, insisted that a sharp improvement in the security situation and the rule of law are essential pre-conditions for the media to be able to operate freely and to perform its watchdog function.

By the time the training ended, on 24 June, one more journalist, and a friend and colleague of some of the participants, had died. Zena Mahmoud, a reporter for Alhaqiqa newspaper, and a former news presenter for an Iraqi radio station, was shot by an unknown assailant on her way home in the city of Mousel. Many participants to the ARTICLE 19 and UNDP training had experienced direct threats to their life and were on “blacklists” circulated in Iraq for simply doing their job as journalists. All had lost friends and colleagues to the conflict. Their daily experience, shared throughout the training, demonstrate that journalists are targeted because of their work: conducting investigations in Iraq in the current situation puts journalists’ life under great danger, especially when investigating corruption, control of public funds and human rights violations, whether committed by the government, the occupation forces or armed militias.

Participants discussed the incompatibility of the Iraqi Penal Code with of the right to freedom of expression protected under international law, and particularly with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). They called for a reform of the Iraqi Penal Code to ensure Iraq meets its obligations under the ICCPR to which it is a signatory.

Participants highlighted the absence of laws that guarantee access to information, the culture of secrecy predominating among government officials, and the lack of awareness among officials and public servants that journalists and all Iraqis have a legitimate right to access to publicly-held information.

The participants recommended initiating a campaign for promoting an access to information law in Iraq and agreed, as a first step, to organise workshops and discussions in several parts of Iraq for journalists, lawyers, civil society organisations, members of Parliament and some government officials, especially from the Ministries

of Human Rights and the Ministry of Justice. These workshops will aim at initiating a national debate, particularly among civil society, on access to information in Iraq.

Participants also recommended that ARTICLE 19 and UNDP continue organising similar workshops for politicians, government officials and journalists, with the objective of training government officials on the culture of transparency and facilitating the flow of information from government agencies to the media.

Background:

ARTICLE 19 and UNDP have led a series of activities aimed at strengthening freedom of expression and, in particular, freedom of the media in Iraq. One of these activities has been a Media Law Working Group (composed of Iraqi journalists, lawyers, academics, and members of parliament) whose objective is to formulate progressive legislation for the protection and promotion of the right of freedom of expression in Iraq. The workshop on access to information and investigative journalism is the last in a series of capacity-building initiatives conducted by ARTICLE 19 for Iraqi civil society and media, with UNDP more recently, and earlier with UNESCO. These initiatives have included presentations and practical exercises on international standards of freedom of expression, the historical development of access to information laws globally and its role in investigative journalism, and on media law in Iraq. The workshop also addressed the challenges facing journalists when conducting investigative reports and ways to overcome such challenges.

NOTES TO EDITORS:

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ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees free speech.