

Remarks by Timothy Balding, Director General, World Association of Newspapers,
in the General Debate of the World Summit on the Information Society, Geneva,
11 December 2003

Freedom of expression and the free flow of information are the very foundations of democratic societies, the societies which are best placed to achieve the prosperity and peace which is the legitimate aspiration of all human beings.

Freedom of expression and the free flow of information are a fundamental precondition of durable economic, political, social and cultural progress and stability.

Freedom of expression and the free flow of information are powerful and essential allies in the global fight against poverty, disease, corruption, ignorance and illiteracy - and also international terrorism, which breeds and grows in closed societies which outlaw open debate.

All these assertions have now been fully embraced by the major inter-governmental organizations and are actively promoted by the leaders of, for example, the United Nations and the World Bank.

The Declaration you are about to sign here in Geneva also clearly affirms that these freedoms are central and crucial to the Information Society.

Unhappily, dozens of the governments which will adopt this text tomorrow, mercilessly and cynically persecute the men and women whose job it is to enable and to facilitate this free flow of information. Thousands of journalists and human rights activists are each year arrested and imprisoned, frequently beaten and sometimes murdered, for trying to exercise their human right to free expression. The technological challenge of bridging the so-called digital divide is not, I believe, the main issue. The main issue is how we can bridge the political and moral divide between countries which accept democratic debate and those which repress it.

It is largely in the poorest, least developed nations where this repression of information and opinion is most severe. In Eritrea, for example, where the government has eliminated the independent press by locking up all its journalists. Or in Myanmar, or Iran, where hundreds of newspapers have been shut down, or Syria, or Cuba, or China, which regularly sends cyber-reporters to up to fifteen years in jail for calling for pluralism. The list goes on and on, but I shall stop it there.

A final word, however: The next phase of this Summit will take place, as you know, in Tunisia, a country that repeatedly violates its commitments to the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to respect free speech and press freedom, a country where censorship is a way of life and where journalists are harassed and jailed.

On behalf of The Coalition of Press Freedom Organizations - the Committee to Protect Journalists, the Inter-American Press Association, the International Association of Broadcasting, the International Press Institute, the North American Broadcasters Association, the World Association of Newspapers and the World Press Freedom Committee - I solemnly call upon the organizers of the Summit to abandon plans to meet in Tunis unless Tunisia begins to respect human rights, especially those of freedom of expression and freedom of the press. If the second phase of this Summit goes ahead in the current environment in Tunisia it will bring this process into disrepute and completely undermine your Declaration's reaffirmation of the principles of free information and free expression.

Thank you.