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Message from Audrey Azoulay,

Director-General of UNESCO,

on the occasion of the International Day to End Impunity

for Crimes against Journalists

2 November 2020

One of the most important roles of journalists is to bring truth to light. This means identifying, assembling and verifying facts, and then accurately reporting their meaning. It places journalists in a unique and compelling position where, in the words of United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres, they can “speak truth to power”.

For too many journalists, however, telling the truth comes at a price. Truth and power do not always see eye to eye – between 2010 and 2019, close to 900 journalists were killed while doing their job, more than 150 in the last two years alone. Many have lost their lives while covering conflicts, but far more are being killed outside of conflict situations, for investigating issues such as corruption, trafficking, political wrongdoing, human rights violations and environmental issues.

Death is not the only risk journalists face: attacks on the press can take the form of threats, kidnappings, arrests, imprisonments or harassment – offline and online, and targeting women in particular. While we can take some solace in the fact that the 2019 death toll for journalists was the lowest in a decade, these wider attacks are continuing at an alarming rate, and the COVID-19 crisis has led to new risks for media workers around the world.

We can and should do more. In seven out of eight killings, the perpetrators of these crimes go unpunished. Journalists are essential in preserving the fundamental right to freedom of expression, guaranteed by Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. When journalists are attacked with impunity, there is a breakdown in security and judicial systems for all.

States therefore have an obligation to protect journalists and ensure that the perpetrators of crimes against them are held accountable. Judges and prosecutors in particular have an important role to play in promoting swift and effective criminal proceedings. To this end, UNESCO has trained nearly 17,000 judicial operators in recent years, including on issues of impunity, and is developing guidelines in partnership with the International Association of Prosecutors to assist prosecutors in investigating crimes and attacks against journalists.

To raise awareness and support these actions, UNESCO commemorates the [International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists](#) every year on 2 November. This year, our #EndImpunity campaign is highlighting some of the specific risks that journalists face in their quest to uncover the truth. On this day, I call on everyone to join the campaign, and on all Member States and international and non-governmental organizations to join forces to guarantee the safety of journalists and root out impunity.

Only by investigating and prosecuting crimes against media professionals can we guarantee access to information and freedom of expression. Only by speaking truth to power can we advance peace, justice and sustainable development in our societies.