Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honoured to be here with you at this session to discuss on the challenges to guarantee the safety of journalists, in particular from a UN perspective. There is evidence that this exercise of fundamental human right to freedom of expression is becoming ever more dangerous. It is time therefore to join up and increase our many efforts and face this challenge together. I would like to thank the BBC College of Journalism and the Centre for Freedom of the Media for taking the initiative to organize a meeting to address this critical issue.

Today, I would like to highlight the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity. This Plan is a new and potentially game-changing UN-wide initiative that could help to significantly improve the safety of journalists and media workers and also to combat impunity. And we need the media sector’s engagement with these issues if the UN Plan is to make a difference.

We’re talking here about making a difference to societies, to freedom of expression for everyone, and not only for those working in the media. But of course the media is one of the most important users and stakeholders in freedom of expression. The practice of journalism cannot exist without the exercise of
freedom of expression. But journalism is more than this exercise – it differs from gossip or propaganda or casual speech, because it aspires to be that particular use of free expression which sets itself the lofty goal of serving the public interest. Not all communication amounts to journalism, and unfortunately not all journalists actually do journalism.

For those that do, however, they need the freedom to do so, and they need their sources to be free of fear to speak to them. They need societies to appreciate, nay cherish, freedom of expression. It does not work to have a journalist investigate a corruption case of a powerful politician only to receive death threats delivered to his or her family. Worse, too many of these threats go beyond intimidation. According to the last biennial report of the UNESCO’s Director General, 62 journalists and media workers were killed in 2011. A dramatic increase has taken place in 2012. Only in the first nine months, 95 journalists have been killed in their line of duty. This trend must stop. The murdered media people are the immediate victims, but the bigger target is of course every citizen whom the killers hope to cow into fear.

To do journalism also means autonomy from extraneous direction – whether by officialdom or the public relations industry. It means editorial independence from owners, and it should even hold against editors who impose personal, commercial or other agendas at the expense of the integrity of a given story. It also means autonomy in relation to the UN Plan. However, autonomy does not equate to detachment, and I will now attempt to explain why.

Most journalists at large, one assumes, will feel a sense of appreciation, and a heightened sense of commitment to their profession, when they see the battalions of NGOs batting out there for their safety. And now since last September, journalists can take some further comfort that the ranks of the concerned are growing: the UN at large has now committed to joining the cause. We give you this support not because you are saints, but because you are brave and usually have integrity, and because your ethics of public interest communication make you indispensable to the public good. And you are an extremely visible symbol, indeed a barometer, of how safe it is in a society for citizens to speak without fear.

This UN Plan has not come out of the blue. UNESCO and many other UN agencies have been undertaking various actions to promote safety and combat impunity. Since 1997, the Director General of UNESCO
has issued a public condemnation of every killing of a journalist, and called upon Member State
governments to fulfill their responsibility and bring the killers to book. UNESCO has worked hard as well
to provide safety training to journalists worldwide, and collaborated with NGOs on research and
publications. We have affirmed the importance of safety at numerous World Press Freedom Day events,
attempting to convince people that the killings of journalists have ramifications far beyond the loss of
the individual lives.

In a bid to do more, UNESCO’s 39-member governing council of an initiative called the International
Programme for the Development of Communication, IPDC, proposed in 2011 that we reach out more
formally to others who are, or could be, allies in the cause. Thus, what then began as a proposal to hold
the first UN Inter-Agency meeting on the subject from the Member States of UNESCO, went through
broad consultations with media, NGOs, governments and other UN actors, on to become the UN Plan of
Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity. This ambitious initiative was then endorsed
on 13 April 2012 by the UN Chief Executives Board, a body representing the highest coordination
mechanism of all the diverse branches of the UN family.

The crux of the UN Plan as a new initiative is in the global quest to create environments where each
person is free to speak and where journalists can practice without fearing for their lives. There is
enormous potential in the UN Plan of Action in bringing the full weight of the UN to bear on the
challenge, and in being a point of reference for others concerned to turn the tide. The UN Plan builds on
sporadic collaborations to date such as between UNESCO and the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of
Expression, but it vastly expands the regularity, and especially the range, of participation by UN actors in
the quest for journalistic safety.

The right to receive and express opinion is central to the mandate of UNESCO whose constitution
commits it to promoting the free flow of ideas. Within the totality of UN agencies, it is UNESCO, acting
for its 195 Member States, that has the specific responsibility for programmes to promote freedom of
expression, and the corollaries of press freedom and freedom of information. But there is a limit to
what UNESCO itself can do if it works in isolation from other international organisations in this duty to
staunch the worst violations of freedom of expression: i.e., the killings of journalists. The UN Plan of
Action recognizes that alongside UNESCO, other UN agencies have a vital part to play, and all of the UN
can work well with other actors in governments, media and civil society.
Already, we can see the various UN machineries beginning to move in the same direction of the Plan. Only a couple of weeks ago, at its 21st session, the United Nations Human Rights Council unanimously adopted a historic resolution calling for "States to promote a safe and enabling environment for journalists to perform their work independently and without undue interference". It condemned in the strongest terms all attacks and violence against journalists, and expressed its concern at the growing threat to the safety of journalists posed by non-State actors. It may well be that governments you know agreed to this resolution, and the public could be profitably alerted that there is revived political will that is emerging and in some cases could be consolidated.

Furthermore, as part of the steps to produce measures and implementation strategy based on the UN Plan of Action, a second UN Inter-Agency Meeting will take place in Vienna, Austria on 22 and 23 November. This occasion is convened by UNESCO and co-hosted by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes (UNODC), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). The outcome of the Vienna meeting will be to spell out concretely what the UN at large can do about promoting journalistic safety. At the meeting we are aiming for other UN agencies to recognize the contributions they can make, within their mandates, to the safety of journalists. An agency concerned with gender can help sensitise us to the particular pressures on women journalists; another dealing with environment can come to see the value of safety for journalists who report on brown industries and natural resource extraction. It’s not easy to take the various supertankers of the UN and get them involved, but it is happening.

In the light of this encouraging and novel development, what should the proper response be of people involved in the media? You are not asked to, and nor should you, become cheerleaders. Instead, you should remain questioning – being skeptical, but not sliding into cynicism where you think you already know the answers and they are that the UN Plan is pure rhetoric.

So, your role as critics is respected. But not so if you decide to only be spectators or bystanders. That other actors like the UN are getting moving does not absolve the media of its own active part to play. Journalists, editors, managers and media owners need to up their game and push for safety as well. It would be a grand illusion to think that there is no call to action by the media and that the buck has been passed on. Yes, governments have the primary responsibility for safety, and by implication, the
international governmental system also does. But that does not translate into media people sitting and waiting for this responsibility to be exercised.

I have noted that it would be a mistake to be cynical and write off this new initiative as empty rhetoric. And that to be cynical is to know the answers in advance, to be skeptical is to ask the questions. But coming to the cause of safety in particular, the media’s own actions – and inactions - will play a part in shaping the answers.

Dismiss the UN Plan and you help weaken it; leave everything up to the UN (and the NGOs), and you will also weaken the thrust. You do not have to, and indeed should not, sign up as a disciplined supporter of everything done in the name of the UN Plan. But you can indeed seize on this new opportunity, of a broadened spectrum of actors in favour of safety, to do more to help secure the conditions of freedom of expression. You can report on this newsworthy momentum, and you can hold it to account. You can educate your audiences why the issue is so important, and you can investigate the complexities around impunity. You can promote the issue internal to your newsroom or wider community of peers, and with your employers. In that way, you contribute – without compromising your independence – to the wider momentum that is building.

My call to you is: see the UN Plan as a new window of opportunity, and see through that window the possibilities of increasing your contribution. There are three classic activities you can proactively put to work in the service of the safety of your profession:

1. Not only because it is news, but also in your own self-interest, give coverage to the Plan, to the Vienna conference and to the activities that flow from it. Safety is an important story to your audiences; it serves both your industry and society more broadly;
2. Hold the UN at global and local level accountable for our performance in pursuance of this undertaking;
3. Act. Input into the Plan and dovetail with it via your own contributions of awareness-raising and advocacy for journalists to be able to work without fear. The BBC has a fine monument here to colleagues who have lost their lives doing journalism. Shouldn’t every media house have one? And why shouldn’t the media approach us at UNESCO and say, hey – world heritage should include public memorials about freedom of expression and its champions, let’s get a permanent
installation in a public place. That’s not enough. Don’t just do the outcry. Approach the authorities directly on the question of impunity and find ways to resolve long-standing cases; research and provide the judicial system, members of parliament and the public, with information about good practices in other countries which do not tolerate the situation, described in a soon-to-be-launched book in the Philippines as “Crimes and Unpunishment”.

The point is: if you escalate your involvement at this point in time, not only you but all of us have more likelihood of success. No one said it would be easy to organize the media in all its diversity, rivalry and rifts. As said, it is certainly not easy to mobilise the UN system around this single issue. But it is worth a try.

More and more journalists are being killed today, and the ripple effects on the profession and societies are logically reaching ever further. That’s precisely why a proportionate response is needed at this point in time: more is needed from the media, from the NGOs and from the UN system, if we are to halt the slide. There has been progress in some countries – a unified media in Colombia has been a factor in ensuring that government there puts substantial monies into protecting journalists receiving death threats. The experiences in unions successfully securing state compensation for the families of slain journalists are another case of success. We need to all become experts in these matters. If we want to combat impunity, we have to understand the structural, legal, institutional, operational and psychological dimensions.

The Vienna conference ends on 23 November, known as the international day against impunity – and the date commemorates the killing of 32 journalists in Maguindanao in the Philippines. This is a marvelous opportunity for media colleagues to kick off an enhanced contribution across the whole global dispersed community of journalists.

Another key opportunity that comes around in 2012 is 3 May which is the World Press Freedom Day. Created in 1993 during the UN General Assembly, this is one example of a global platform that has the ability to raise the profile of national press freedom issues. There are events worldwide on this day, including UNESCO’s mothership conference that was in Tunisia. The occasion also sees the awarding of the UNESCO/ Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize which honours the work of an individual or an organization defending or promoting freedom of expression anywhere in the world, especially if this
action puts the individual’s life at risk. Each of our Laureates, has been fighting for press freedom although some, tragically, lost their lives because of that fight.

Journalists and other media workers, nowadays joined by many social media producers, play a special role in guaranteeing the exercise of the human right to freedom of expression. You provide us with the necessary information to develop our opinions and to take informed decisions about our lives and development. It is therefore in the interest of the society as a whole to ensure a safe and enabling environment for them. With the cooperation from the UN, the national authorities, civil society and media professionals like you, including BBC and groups like CFOM, we can make significant impact on improving the safety of journalists and reversing the trend of impunity.

Thank you very much