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An event to mark the World Press Freedom Day

**PROTECTION OF JOURNALISTS IN EXILE:
TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION AS A GROWING THREAT
TO MEDIA FREEDOM**

5 May 2026, 11:00-12:30, Palais des Nations (room XI), Geneva

1. BACKGROUND

This year, World Press Freedom Day is held under the theme: *“Shaping a Future at Peace: Promoting Press Freedom for Human Rights, Development, and Security.”* This theme underscores the essential role of a free, independent and pluralistic media in sustaining peaceful, just and inclusive societies.

In recent years, journalists have faced increasingly complex and evolving threats, both online and offline.

Free, independent, diverse and pluralistic media play a vital role in supporting democracy and holding those in power to account. Civic space is shrinking, and authoritarian trends are gaining ground, leaving many journalists with no option but to leave their home countries.

Among the threats facing journalists, transnational repression (TNR) has emerged as a growing and deeply concerning phenomenon. TNR, as explained in [a briefer released by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights \(OHCHR\) in June 2025](#), refers to acts conducted or directed by a State, or its proxy, to deter, silence or punish dissent, criticism or human rights advocacy towards it, expressed from outside its territory. These acts often target civil society actors abroad, including journalists, human rights defenders, and whistle-blowers as well as their families or associates who remain in countries of origin.

Journalists in exile are particularly at risk, as highlighted by the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression in a [report](#) published in April 2024. While relocation is often intended to provide safety, many continue to face intimidation, threats against family members, arbitrary detention, renditions, and, in some cases, enforced disappearances, abductions, convictions in absentia or killings. Legal frameworks such as extradition or counter-terrorism measures are often used to silence journalists. These practices create a chilling effect that undermines freedom of expression globally.

Digital technologies have significantly expanded the reach and sophistication of TNR. Online harassment campaigns online gender-based violence, death threats, doxing, smear campaigns, disinformation and unlawful surveillance are used by home States to monitor, intimidate and silence journalists across jurisdictions. Websites are blocked to prevent people in the home country from accessing reliable information

Among others, the [Media Freedom Coalition](#) (MFC) has paid much attention to the issue of safe refuge to journalists at risk. The [High-Level Panel on Media Freedom](#), in 2020, provided a series of recommendations for MFC member countries, the headline recommendation being the creation of an emergency visa for journalists at risk. This was followed by several important adjustments to States' existing frameworks for safe relocation.

Despite growing recognition of TNR, responses remain fragmented. Existing national and international protection mechanisms often fail to adequately address the cross-border nature of these violations. Strengthened cooperation, accountability and preventive measures are needed to ensure that journalists can safely exercise their work regardless of where they are located.

Against this backdrop, OHCHR and Estonia, along with Austria, Canada, Costa Rica, the Délégation Wallonie-Bruxelles and the Kingdom of Belgium, Finland, Sierra Leone and the United Kingdom, will convene a Geneva-based panel discussion to commemorate the World Press Freedom Day, advance understanding and identify concrete responses to transnational repression targeting journalists.

2. OBJECTIVES

The event aims to:

- Raise awareness of the scale and evolving nature of transnational repression against journalists, including both digital and physical forms of attacks;
- Highlight human rights implications, particularly in relation to freedom of expression, the right to privacy, and the protection of journalists;

- Identify gaps and challenges in existing national, regional and international frameworks addressing TNR;
- Identify measures to combat impunity for transnational repressions;
- Share good practices and policy responses, including protection measures for journalists in exile;
- Foster dialogue and cooperation among States, UN entities, civil society and other stakeholders;
- Contribute to ongoing international discussions, including within the Human Rights Council, on strengthening protections against transnational repression.

3. AGENDA

Moderation by OHCHR

Opening remarks by co-sponsors and OHCHR

Setting the scene

- Mr Andrea Cairola, Senior Programme Specialist, Freedom of Expression and Safety of Journalists Section, UNESCO
- Ms Irene Khan, United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression
- Mr Yauhen Merkis, Belarussian journalist

Panel discussion

- Ms Grażyna Baranowska, Vice-Chairperson of the United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances
- Dr Silke Voß-Kyeck, Scientific Associate, Deutsches Institut für Menschenrechte
- Professor Can Yeginsu, Deputy Chair of the High-Level Panel of Legal Experts on Media Freedom
- Ms Fiona O'Brien, Regional Director for Europe and Central Asia, Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)
- Ms Joanna Szymańska, Head of Programmes and Strategy for Europe, Article 19
- Ms Benthe Priester, Policy and Advocacy Officer, Free Press Unlimited

Interactive discussion

4. EXPECTED OUTCOMES

The event is expected to:

- Strengthen awareness and visibility of transnational repression as a major and growing threat to press freedom;
- Advance a shared understanding of how digital and physical forms of repression intersect across borders;
- Identify concrete recommendations to improve prevention, protection and accountability measures;
- Promote stronger coordination among States, UN mechanisms and civil society actors
- Inform ongoing processes, including Human Rights Council discussions and future initiatives related to the safety of journalists;
- Contribute to the broader World Press Freedom Day agenda, reinforcing the link between press freedom, human rights, development and peace.