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WORLD PRESS FREDDOM DAY:

AFRICAN UNION A KEY PART OF WORLDWIDE CELEBRATIONS

Tunis, Tunisia 4 May 2012- As the world celebrates press freedom and takes stock of progress and challenges, in the context of World Press Freedom Day (WPFDD), the main celebrations, bringing together the world's major media players are taking place in Tunis, Tunisia under the theme "New voices: Media freedom helping to transform societies". The meeting is running from 3 to 5 May.

Central to these celebrations is the role that social media has played in democratizing nations and bringing about socio- economic change. Much reference is being made by all speakers to the Arab Spring which started in Tunisia and spread to other countries, notably Egypt and Libya.

Official celebrations for WPFDD started yesterday 3 May, which is international Press Freedom Day, with an address by the Tunisian President Mr Moncef Marzouki, delivered to hundreds of guests at the presidential palace.



Today, the Tunisian Prime Minister Mr. Hamadi Jebali made an impassioned plea for media to be given the freedom to report on all issues so as to play their part in socio- economic development. As Tunisia is going through a democratic transition after its revolution last year, Mr. Jebali pledged his government's support to enhancing press support to enhancing press freedom, access to information and freedom from interference at all levels.

"The new Tunisia reinforces both the traditional and new media" the Prime Minister said and "will support them to remove all the shackles that inhibit their work". He also announced that various consultations are taking place to improve internal communication within the Tunisian government and to free up the space for media in general.

The gathering in Tunisia is unprecedented and underlines the country's celebration of its new found liberty, which was one of the pivotal reasons for the revolution. In statements which were a departure from the old regime, the Prime Minister congratulated stalwarts of media freedom such as Yemeni journalist Tawakkul Karman, one of the three Nobel Peace Prize Laureates for 2011 and Azerbaijani journalist Eynulla Fatuyallev, the laureate of this year's UNESCO Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize. Mr. Bejali distanced his government from the old regime, which he accused of targeting the media and thereby depriving the people of Tunisia of objective news.



The African Union Commission joined the key speakers today in pledging support for freedom of the media and highlighting its initiatives in this respect. Mrs Habiba Mejri-Cheikh, the Director of Information and Communication represented the Commission's Chairperson Dr Jean Ping at the celebrations. She delivered his address, in which he reminded the world that the WPDF is taking place in the African Year of Shared Values, of access to information is

one. Dr Ping applauded the young people of Africa who, using social media “rose up to protest vigorously against all forms of injustice imposed on them”, adding that social media have introduced a new relationship between the governed and the governors.



The Chairperson's speech also gave examples of practical ways in which the AU Commission is helping to promote freedom of the media. He referred e.g. to the Pan African Media Network which seeks to provide a platform for media to interact freely and share views on developments within the continent. This is part of the Commission's media development strategy. He also mentioned the African Platform on Access to Information (APAI), a successor to the landmark Windhoek Declaration, the most

commonly cited document on press freedom across the African continent. The AU Commission signed the APAI declaration in 2011, thereby establishing its commitment to freedom of the media.

The African Union is a leader in assuring freedom of expression on the continent through different instruments. For example; article 9 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights says:

“Every individual shall have the right to receive information. And every individual shall have the right to express and disseminate his opinions within the law.”

The Union’s Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression considers the role of media and other means of communication as key, in ensuring full respect for freedom of expression, in promoting the free flow of information and ideas, in assisting people to make informed decisions and in facilitating and strengthening democracy. It says:

“Respect for freedom of expression, as well as the right of access to information held by public bodies and companies, will lead to greater public transparency and accountability, as well as to good governance and the strengthening of democracy”

The WPFDD celebrations will conclude tomorrow 5 May with the adoption of the Carthage Declaration, which proposes actions for different stakeholders, in order to consolidate the culture of protecting journalistic freedoms.

Celebrations to mark WPFDD this year were organized by the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). The organisation’s Director General Ms Irina Bukova addressed the meeting today, focusing on the role of social media in transforming societies.

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