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KL seminar suggests steps to promote press freedom and professional standards in Asia.

A series of important measures to further press freedom and improve standards of journalism in Asia were agreed on at a seminar held in Kuala Lumpur from May 16 - 18, 1996.

The seminar organized by the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre, was attended by 60 journalists, lecturers in communication and media specialists from 16 countries. They included representatives from several countries outside the region -- Australia, Britain, Canada, Jamaica and Nigeria, as well as from UNESCO.

The meeting was opened by Dato’ Mohd. Shafie Apdal, Parliamentary Secretary, Ministry of Information, Malaysia. Dato’ Shafie told the participants that media practitioners are actually mediators of current issues. They have the responsibility to disseminate information to bring realisation to society of the need to work towards success and improvement, and also to allow society to think of ways to develop the environment without jeopardizing the peace of others around them.

In a thought-provoking address of welcome, Tan Sri Kamarul Ariffin, Executive Chairman, Utusan Melayu Group, urged Malaysian journalists to abide strictly by the code of conduct in the absence of an Ombudsman or a watchdog mechanism.

Mr. Vijay Menon, Secretary-General of AMIC, said that many western proponents of pluralism seek to promote western style press freedom in Asia. But this is often at variance with the Asian view. Senior journalists in ASEAN have proposed an Asian model of journalism in which the press works with the government to build a national consensus.

Mr. James Bentley, Regional Communication Adviser for ASia, referred to Unesco’s efforts in regard to press freedom and pluralism and read Director-General Federico Mayor’s message on the occasion of Press Freedom Day.

The meeting devoted some of its wide ranging discussion to the impact of the new technology on the media in the 21st century and particularly the profound effect it may have on freedom as between the print and the electronic media.

The seminar made a number of recommendations. They included:
Preserving and Promoting Press Freedom and Freedom of Expression

1. The Constitution and Related Laws

Constitutional guarantees of press freedom exist in most Asian and Commonwealth countries. However, there are many gaps between constitutional mandate and reality. There are also many laws intended to "protect the state," including laws on public safety, official secrets, etc. Which may be considered as threats to press freedom or be restrictive. The group recommends the following:

1.1 A study be made on how the constitution and national laws of each country conform with and incorporate international instruments and declarations to which they are signatory such as the UN Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenants of the UN.

1.2 Consider the creation of an independent advisory appellate body by national governments and parliaments which would review the relevance and need for emergency laws.

1.3 Ensure that emergency laws be time-bound (i.e. that they lapse after a given period of time) and that they be regularly reviewed in terms of relevance and need.

1.4 Study the need or relevance of specific press and other laws that impinge on the press such as the penal code and the law of contempt.

2. Economic Issues

Constraints to press freedom may be due to the irregular allocation of newsprint and withholding of government advertisements. In some instances, governments are found to favour "friendly" publications. To address this problem, the following are recommended:

2.1 Encourage businesses to advertise in provincial newspapers, e.g. the Philippines.

2.2 Provide fiscal incentives to publications (e.g. lower tariff rates) in importing newsprint.

3. Review libel, defamation and similar laws and consider the need for, or the replacement by, a privacy law.
3.1. It is strongly recommended that each country should undertake judicial reforms that minimize procedural delays in matters of invasion of privacy and or defamation.

4. Pre-censorship, Informal censorship and Self-censorship

Informal censorship which includes letters and telephone calls from powerful individuals can be insidious and debilitating. When practiced often, it can lead to self-censorship. The following are recommended:

4.1 All forms of prior restraint should be eliminated.

4.2 Existing censorship laws should be reviewed and amended (with appropriate safety nets for journalists).

4.3. Self-censorship can be best addressed by adequate and appropriate training of journalists and upgrading professional standards. Journalists' associations should actively promote upgrading of professional standards.

5. Press Ownership Structure

5.1 Ownership can be a greater threat to press freedom as owners may use their publications to promote their vested interests. The following are recommended:

5.2. Allow or encourage plurality in media ownership. This will also ensure diversity of information power.

5.3. Study the feasibility of creating editorial trustees for publications. Such a body should be free from the owner's influence and could safeguard editorial integrity and independence.

5.4. The decline of the influence of the editor must be arrested.

5.5. The appointment of public interest directors to newspaper boards should be encouraged.
6. Access to Information

Access to information includes both the right of the journalist to gain access to news sources and the public's right to information. Journalists' access can be enhanced by:

6.1 The passage or strengthening of Freedom of Information or Access to Information legislation in place of prevailing official secrecy regimes.

7. Other Recommendations:

7.1. Encourage the creation or strengthening of independent press councils composed of media professionals and others.

7.2. Encourage the adoption and regular review of Codes of Ethics at various levels—from individual newspapers to journalists' associations. Such codes should be published in the newspaper at least once a year. Readers and the press itself should be encouraged to institute a "social audit" of newspapers. By impartial groups to rate how they measure up to their professed goals and accepted media standards.

7.3 The appointment of newspaper ombudsmen could help address issues of professional lapses, corruption and inaccuracies

7.4. Newspapers should institutionalize the right of reply and correction to maintain fairness and credibility.

Mechanisms for Strengthening Professional Standards

1. Increase the level and institutionalize systematic, regular consultation and exchange whereby media professionals can have direct input into the curricula and practical training of media students and journalism educators are encouraged to work in media institutions.

2. There is an acute need for more professional training for the media. Media organizations should invest more in training activities. Training institutes should upgrade their facilities and periodically review their curricula. Specific emphasis should be given to the training of personnel from provincial/district newspapers.
3. The present hiatus that exists between urban and rural media in many countries can only be bridged if the national media concentrates more on coverage of rural affairs and concerns.

4. Press Institutes, which exist in most Asian countries, need to strengthen their in-service training programmes for media personnel and also refresher courses in specialized areas such as security issues, etc. for all journalists.

5. In countries where journalists are poorly paid, attention should be given to improving working conditions of journalists in consonance with other sectors of the communications industry.

6. More interaction should be encouraged between the newspapers and the communities they serve through various means, e.g. focused discussions with social groups and opinion leaders in the community.

7. In training programmes and practices, emphasis should be given to adherence to the ethics of journalism and professional conduct.

8. There is a need for a non-governmental forum where the public can air grievances against the media and obtain satisfactory redress. Where these mechanisms exist, they should be strengthened and where they do not exist, they should be established. This body should comprise eminent persons from different walks of life and should be constituted by professional bodies of editors and publishers.

9. To encourage the development of high professional standards an Asian award for outstanding journalism should be instituted.