

PRESS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

UN World Press Freedom Day 2009

‘Are governments at war winning the battle of controlling the international media?’

London, UK – 16 April 2009. The Evening Standard columnist **Andrew Gilligan** and NATO spokesperson **Jamie Shea** are to team up to argue that governments at war are winning the battle of controlling the international media, at an event organised by the UK National Commission for UNESCO on 1st May in London.

Gilligan and Shea will challenge the views of **Alan Fisher** (Al Jazeera English) and **Jeremy Dear** (NUJ), who claim that governments have failed to prevail in this ongoing struggle. The debate will be broadcast live online to a global audience.

According to Gilligan, “Governments are becoming increasingly skilful at obscuring the truth during times of conflict. Recent examples demonstrate that the release of information is tightly controlled, resulting in a selective version of every conflict.”

Arguing against the motion, Alan Fisher will argue that, “Governments have always failed in their attempts to silence the press and with new technology, their fight has never been more futile. Through the years, journalists have been intimidated, threatened and even killed but the message still gets out, the story still emerges. Governments may win the odd battle, but media is winning the war.”

The panel of experts will debate the success of governments in controlling coverage in times of conflict and turbulence. A number of other speakers, including working and exiled journalists from Democratic Republic of Congo, Sri Lanka and Zimbabwe, will weigh in on this critical question.

The annual World Press Freedom Day debate will take place at the **Frontline Club from 10.00 to 12.00 noon on 1st May**, in advance of World Press Freedom Day on Sunday 3rd May.

2009 UNESCO World Press Freedom International Prize:

The Sri Lankan editor Lasantha Wickrematunge has been posthumously awarded the 2009 UNESCO World Press Freedom International Prize. The late Sri Lankan journalist and editor of the *Sunday Leader*, who was assassinated on 8 January this year, knew his profession put him in danger and went so far as to write an editorial for publication after his death. It appeared in the *Sunday Leader* on 11 January 2009, voicing Mr Wickrematunge’s commitment and readiness to die for press freedom: “[...] there is a calling that is yet above high office, fame, lucre and security. It is the call of conscience.” The *Sunday Leader* has been nominated for a Guardian Journalism Award at the 2009 Index on Censorships Freedom of Expression Awards.

We are pleased that Natalie Samarasinghe from UNA-UK, the niece of Mr Wickrematunge, will be speaking at the London debate on 1 May.

Tickets are available from worldpressfreedom@unesco.org.uk. Those unable to attend can see the debate live on the Frontline website at <http://frontlineclub.com>.

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For further information, please contact Ian White at the UK National Commission for UNESCO on +44 (0)20 7766 3492 or iwhite@unesco.org.uk.

Notes to Editors:

- **The UK National Commission for UNESCO** is the focal point in the UK for UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization)-related policies and activities. As an independent body, the UK National Commission brings together a network of nearly 250 experts from across the UK in the fields of education, culture, sciences and communication. Working closely in partnership with HM Government and UK civil society, the UK National Commission aims to provide expert advice to the Government on UNESCO related matters, develop UK input into UNESCO policy-making, promote reforms within UNESCO, and encourage support in the UK for UNESCO's ideals and work.
- **The Press Freedom Network** is a loose grouping of organisations, publications and individuals who are sympathetic to or directly interested in the cause of media freedom. It contributes to the organisation of the annual World Press Freedom Day event (usually a debate) on May 3, in addition to discussing other topical and relevant issues. The network operates mainly via an effective e-group but with occasional meetings (in London); and acts primarily as an information and debating forum rather than seeking to make policy decisions binding to any member.
- **World Press Freedom Day (3 May)** is a day to celebrate the fundamental principles of press freedom; to evaluate press freedom around the world, to defend the media from attacks on their independence and to pay tribute to journalists who have lost their lives in the exercise of their profession. 3 May was proclaimed World Press Freedom Day by the UN General Assembly in 1993 following a Recommendation adopted at the twenty-sixth session of UNESCO's General Conference in 1991. It serves as an occasion to inform citizens of violations of press freedom - a reminder that in dozens of countries around the world, publications are censored, fined, suspended and closed down, while journalists, editors and publishers are harassed, attacked, detained and even murdered.