

Kofi Annan  
Secretary General  
United Nations  
UN Plaza  
New York

May 10<sup>th</sup> 2006

Dear Secretary General,

On behalf of the International Federation of Journalists I write to draw your attention to a number of concerns over recent developments at the United Nations.

First of all, the IFJ joins with many others in welcoming the constitution of a Human Rights Council to replace the Human Rights Commission. This is a significant and important step that highlights the responsibility of governments who have signed up to the UN Charter to meet their obligations.

The launch of the Council is a powerful opportunity to confront major obstacles to the creation of a global culture of respect for fundamental rights. However, we have some anxiety that this objective may be jeopardised when we note that several countries elected this week – China, Cuba, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia among them – are states where press freedom is under pressure.

The credibility of the Council will depend utterly upon the capacity of Council members to respect human rights at home. In journalism we have doubts about the commitment of some of these member states to respect freedom of expression, a core element in the framework for fundamental rights. You will understand, therefore, why many in journalism will wait and see before judgement about whether this initiative means a serious change of direction in defence of free expression.

I also wish to raise two other matters.

The first concerns your statement issued last week on plans for the development of a global policy against terrorism. We note that in your announcement you highlighted the need to “*dissuade people from resorting to or supporting terrorist acts.*”

While we appreciate your good intentions here, the IFJ fears this may open the door to interference in the work of media. As you know the exercise of independent journalism requires journalists to meet with and to discuss issues with many different sources, some of them, perhaps reflecting political opposition groups, may be classified as “terrorist.”

This problem of definition means that in some countries governments use the cover of ‘anti-terrorism’ to introduce rules and laws that undermine the rights of citizens and

which undermine independent journalism. Last year we published a major report *Journalism, Civil Liberties and the War on Terrorism*, which reveals how, in the rush to legislate over terrorism, civil liberties are being compromised. The UN should do nothing that encourages member states to go further down this road.

Indeed, it would be helpful if, as Secretary General, you could reassure people in media that there is no intention to recruit media into a political campaign that could undermine the independence and professionalism of journalists.

Finally, another and more specific issue that we want to raise with you concerns the UN policy of banning journalists from Taiwan from access to the World Health Assembly, one of the world's major health conferences.

This is based on a policy which discriminates against journalists, which undermines the UN's commitment to free speech and which appears to be motivated by internal politics.

To put it at its mildest, this is questionable policy. Certainly, it is not authority derived from the formal resolution which removed Taiwan from the roll of membership of the UN, but appears to be an administrative matter governing who may or may not enter UN buildings. Private citizens of Taiwan working as journalists should not be subject to discrimination; their responsibilities are entirely professional, not political.

The annual World Health Assembly, which opens on May 22, is one of the world's premier media events. It is matter of humanitarian and public interest to all peoples and the internal policy of refusing accreditation to Taiwanese colleagues is unacceptable.

We ask you to review this policy and to accept the credentials of journalists, many of whom carry the International Federation of Journalists International Press Card, and to allow them to cover this event.

It is impossible not to conclude that this policy is political discrimination against independent, professional journalists and is unworthy of a global institution that stands for free speech and independent journalism.

We fully support our member organisation in Taiwan, the Taiwan Journalists Association, in their protests over the ban. This is a policy that should be reviewed immediately.

With Kind Regards

AIDAN WHITE  
General Secretary