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"SHAMS" Center on World Press Freedom Day: Palestinian journalists are still in the eye of the repression storm

Ramallah: In commemoration of World Press Freedom Day, The Human Rights and Democracy Media Center paid tribute to male and female journalists, media employees, and bloggers in Palestine who in spite of working in an extremely complex environment and being subjected to violations from multiple sides nonetheless still perform their jobs professionally, defend the concerns of their people with much integrity and a sense of responsibility, and battle colonialism, repression, and the pandemic simultaneously.

The center stated that this year's World Press Freedom Day came in the midst of a tremendous load of responsibilities for journalists and the media sector as well as wave of various violations of media liberties. The colonial establishment commits through its authorities, the army, and the settlers numerous violations against journalists that include physical assault, targeting with live and rubber bullets, arrest and detention, closure of media institutions, confiscation, appropriation, or destruction of work equipment, prevention of coverage, deletion of materials, employment as human shields, travel bans, and other forms of violations.

"SHAMS" Center also stated that journalists in the West Bank and Gaza Strip still experience other forms of media violations that include censorship of media sites, interrogation, arrests, and deletion of journalists, pressure and intimidation, prevention of coverage, physical assault, and prosecution under the pretext of slander and insult of higher positions. Additionally, they suffer from violations from giant digital corporations like Facebook, which censors, shuts down or temporarily suspends Palestinian journalists' right to publish content in an attempt to suppress the Palestinian narrative expressed in their coverage of the occupation's violations and in response to Israeli demands that use "incitement" as a pretext.

The center pointed out the throughout the month of April, 3 notable violations from various sides took place against journalists and public freedoms in a clear demonstration of the absence of effective protection for journalists. These incidents include the arrest by the occupation forces of the journalist Ala' Hasan Jameel Al-Rimawi (43 years old), director of G-Media network and Al-Jazeera Channel's



coordinator and reporter, directly from his house in the city of Ramallah On 21/4/2021. Al-Rimawi announced a hunger strike from the moment he was arrested and is still sticking to his strike in solitary confinement. The occupation authorities on the other hand sentenced him to 3 months of administrative arrest, which reflects a silencing culture practiced by the colonial establishment against journalists. Al-Rimawi joins a list of (15) other Palestinian journalists, including one female journalist, who are currently placed in Israeli jails and suffer tough conditions. (4) of these journalists are under administrative arrest, (11) were sentenced to different prison terms, and (1) is still under detention in another case.

Within the same month, the people in the West Bank woke up to an unprecedented statement published by Facebook in which the company accused a group of hackers affiliated with the Palestinian security forces of launching a large cyber-espionage campaign against journalists, critics of the government, and human rights activists in and out of Palestine. The operation was called "Arid Viper" according to Facebook's statement. This news requires the formulation of an investigation committee whose responsibility would be to investigate the incident, place the results transparently before the Palestinian public, and prosecute perpetrators of this extremely dangerous violation.

The center emphasized that journalists' plight is deepened further by the legislations crisis as there are a number of legislations that sabotage their work. The most notable of these legislations are the Cybercrime Law number (10) of the year 2018 in the West Bank, the "Misuse of Technology" charge in the Gaza Strip, two legal tools used to prosecute a large number of journalists many of whom are still on trial, and other legislations that are inconsistent with international standards and the duties of the State of Palestine regarding journalism and freedom of the media like Printing and Publication Law number (9) of the year 1995. Additionally, the legislations crisis has hindered the issuance of laws that are crucial for free and effective press work like the Right to Access Information Law.

In the Gaza Strip, the journalist Rawa' Ahmad Murshid was verbally and physically assaulted by members of the "Field Regulation" force as she was taping a session in an agricultural area in the Juhr Al-Deek region. According to Murshid's testimony, she was accompanied in the filming location in Juhr Al-Deek with a camerawoman, a young man, and a 6-year-old girl.



The center emphasized that these violations from the various sides, the occupation authorities and the ruling authorities in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip respectively, highlight the magnitude of the challenges and violations that journalists are subjected to and intersect despite their various sources at the aim of silencing them, preventing them from covering events, and publishing news as doing so is essential for a complete control the public sphere.

At the conclusion of its press statement, “**SHAMS**” center recommended that civil and political freedoms, most essentially the freedom of expression and press, be fully granted in Palestine. It also recommended the transcendence of the internal political division’s destructive impact by holding public elections, which would improve the state of public liberties and the work of the media, and demanded that international and legal institutions act immediately to stop the systematic Israeli violations and assaults against Palestinian journalists, which include physical assaults, arrests, travel bans, mobility restrictions, confiscation of equipment, destruction of content, employment of journalists as human shields, and closure of Palestinian media institutions.

The center also recommended the exertion of pressure, whether through contact with United Nations rapporteurs, international civil society institutions, or institutions active in prisoners’ issues, to release imprisoned journalists. Other recommendations included calling onto the International Health Organizations and the Red Cross to fulfill their duties in following up on their health conditions in Israeli prisons, and demanding that the Palestinian media shed light on their struggle.

Finally, the center recommended amending and updating local legislations and national legal frameworks that regulate press work to make them consistent with international standards and agreements and more responsive to the needs of the freedom of press as many of these legislations currently stand in the way of the natural growth and development of media institutions and impede their freedom. The effort to update these legislations, the center noted, must include the issuance of the Right to Access Information Law.