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### **Press Freedom and trustworthy information keeps power in check and preserves democratic processes**

Keeping Power in Check: Media, Justice and the Rule of Law – the global theme for 2018 was highlighted through interactive panel discussions at World Press Freedom Day 2018 in Islamabad.

**Islamabad:** To mark the 2018 World Press Freedom Day, UNESCO Pakistan jointly with the European Union, the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands and the Embassy of Sweden organized the World Press Freedom Day celebration in Islamabad.

The event engaged 70 participants including university students, journalists and media workers, civil society organizations, government officials, UN counterparts and representatives of international community in a discussion on importance of a free and independent media. The main segment of the event were debates held on subthemes of online speech regulation and the role of social media in the times of elections.

In his welcome address, His Excellency EU ambassador Jean-François Cautain reminded it is the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of World Press Freedom Day and called for a moment of reflection. The Ambassador further added, “Free press is the key to peace, free press is the key to justice, free press is the key to stable democracy. Looking at the state of press in any country is looking at how a country is doing when it comes to state of human rights and the state of democracy.”

Mr. Shafqat Jalil, Additional Secretary, Ministry of Information, Broadcasting and Heritage, in his opening remarks acknowledged the relevance of media in context of upcoming general elections in Pakistan: “The independence of media and provision of justice are inseparable. As a free media is fundament to check misuse or abuse of power and building the capacity of journalists enables them to act as a watchdog.”

The following points were raised during:

#### **Debate 1: Does online speech need regulation and / or self-regulation?**

- Repercussions of excessive regulation or lack of it and how censorships can be counterproductive
- Citizen versus state online regulation
- The importance of online speech by making it possible for the public to hold governments accountable and the need to respect the citizens’ prerogative to access or not access information
- Opportunity for marginalized groups to raise their voice
- Self-censorship could greatly reduce the options on table for deliberation

#### **Debate 2: Debate 2: Social media in times of elections: friend or foe?**

- Social media is not only a friend during elections but throughout the democratic process as it makes our leaders more accessible and accountable
- Social media is pervasive and helps to bring pressing issues to light
- Social media is an equalizer making it relevant for elections
- Social media can fill the gap left by the mainstream media and give coverage to independent candidates and women

- Recently around the globe, social media has also played a manipulative role in times of election and the ubiquity of rapidly circulating news on social media makes it extremely difficult to verify news and fake news
- Social media and online platforms are not ideologically neutral and can be led by corporate interests and agendas

Following the debates, Mr. Neil Buhne, UN Resident Coordinator in Pakistan in his remarks pointed out that in the face of rapidly changing nature of social and mainstream media, it is important to, examine how these changes can have positive or negative effects in Pakistan. He said that in the light of recent attack on journalists in Kabul, press freedom is more relevant than ever.

Her Excellency Ms. Ingrid Johansson, the Swedish Ambassador for Pakistan closed the ceremony noting that the diverse audience present at the event symbolized the universal relevance of and commitment to media freedom: “Online speech and social media has become part of everyday life and gives us unforeseen possibilities to receive and share information, yet these new media platforms also face new types of challenges. However, we must safeguard and appreciate this scrutinizing institution of media, because it makes our societies more effective and enlightened.”

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