

Statement of the Civil Society Media Caucus

14 October 2005

Civil Society's Media Caucus at WSIS expresses its indignation over a series of incidents in which Tunisian authorities have hampered the freedom of expression of journalist and their freedom of association as well as that of others attending the Tunis phase of the World Summit on the Information Society.

In addition to problems involving denial of entry to Tunisia; the following incidents have occurred in the days preceding the summit:

- Christophe Boltanski, a correspondent for the Paris daily newspaper 'Libération', was beaten and stabbed and had his personal effects stolen near his hotel in the embassy district. When he cried for help, guards standing outside a nearby embassy did not intervene. The attack took place a day after Libération published Boltanski's report about clashes between police and activists protesting in support of seven hunger strikers campaigning for the release of political prisoners in Tunisia
- Representatives of Tunisian and foreign media and human rights organisations were prevented by a large number of Tunisian plainclothes police from entering the Goethe Institute, the cultural centre of the German Embassy in Tunis, for a meeting to plan events parallel to the Summit.
- A Belgian television cameraman approaching the Institute had his camera seized by plainclothes police who forced themselves into the TV crew's vehicle. The camera was only returned after the film cassette had been confiscated. The police stated that no pictures may be taken in Tunisia without prior official authorisation and prevented another reporter from taking photographs of the incident. A Tunisian journalist approaching the site was beaten by police.
- Various websites which have contained criticism of Tunisia are available to the delegates at the official WSIS venue, but remain blocked and censored in the rest of Tunisia.

Such incidents call into question the seriousness of the Tunisian government to allow full freedom of expression and association at the WSIS.

The incidents show that prior concerns about the observance of human rights in Tunisia have been justified, underlining the widespread nature of official abuses in the country.

They also illustrate that concerns about holding a United Nations Summit dealing with communication and freedom of expression in such a country were justified.

To correct the situation the Tunisian government and the International Communication Union as the relevant UN authority organising the summit, must:

- Guarantee equal right to access information via the internet both within and outside of the summit site.
- Guarantee that all journalists have the right to freely report in Tunisia, without fear or intimidation.
- Guarantee that the international media and summit delegates have the right to free movement and to meet with colleagues in the Tunisian media and civil society, outside of the official summit site, without threats or intimidation from the police or government authorities.
- Ensure that Tunisian journalists and civil society members meeting with the international community are not subject to retribution and that free speech, press freedom and other human rights are respected in Tunisia after Summit delegates have gone home.

Given the above incidents and the overall poor human rights record of Tunisia it seems to us that the UN system has contracted a moral obligation to follow up. It should name a special rapporteur to monitor freedom of expression and other human rights in Tunisia.