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World Press Freedom Day Message
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An issue of safety

More than 600 journalists and media workers have been killed around the world in the last ten years.

In other words, on average every week a journalist loses his or her life for bringing news and information to the public.

A free press, though critical to a democracy can be a scary proposition.

It is not unusual for Caribbean governments to declare their commitment to press freedom and the rights of journalists to pursue responsible and fearless journalism.

However it is equally not unusual for the region's governments to accuse media of interference, and, especially from political platforms, single out for grievous tongue lashing, particular practitioners who the politicians believe have done too good a job at exposing double speak or wrong information.

Nothing upsets a government more than checked facts and the exposure of corruption.

Even so, as journalists, we know that our political leaders are grateful for and supportive of a free press.

In Jamaica and other parts of the region, we live in a popular culture that declares that 'informa fi dead'. It goes to the centre of the police versus the people phenomenon.

It sets out the law that persons who pass information that can incriminate or inform positive action are deserving of brutal attacks.

In the line of duty as a journalist, there is hardly any getting around the passing of information. The notion that one can be attacked for just being a journalist is clear and present danger.

However, for the most part, when we in the region talk about the safety of journalists we are generally speaking about the threat against job security, especially where publicly owned media is the primary employer.

We are also taking into account the threat on the lives of journalists and their families that come from the underworld and the aggrieved.

Newsrooms have had to take extra care to protect journalists who have been singled as anti a particular political party or have exposed corruption at high levels.

The fact that politicians fail to understand that by publicly calling out media practitioners in a way that could suggest anger and blame can, and of itself, instruct thugs loyal to said politicians or political organization to attack journalists.

There is a lot at stake in many of the issues reported by journalists. War is the most dangerous to cover. But typically, in most cases, journalists who have lost their lives were not reporting in armed conflict situations, but on local stories in their home towns, particularly related to corruption and other illegal activities such as organized crime and drugs.

The Caribbean has not yet reached the stage of the counterparts in Latin America or Africa in terms of the killing of media practitioners, but if current trends continue unabated, it won't be long before we get there.

Press freedom is a must have that we will fight to maintain.

We will celebrate and even improve our enviable 13th place ranking on the World Press Freedom Index.

We must also safeguard the critical mechanisms to monitor ourselves, sticking with established guidelines so that we best serve the interests of our public and the preservation of truth.