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Free media workers held for their work in Syria

On 3 May 2015, World Press Freedom Day, journalist and freedom of expression advocate Mazen Darwish will be honoured with the prestigious UNESCO / Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize in recognition of the work he has carried out in Syria for more than 10 years at great personal sacrifice. But Mazen Darwish will not be able to accept his award. As many other Syrian journalists, he will celebrate World Press Freedom Day behind bars.

Since the uprising began in Syria in 2011, government forces and pro-government militias have repeatedly subjected journalists to arbitrary arrests, unlawful detentions, enforced disappearances, as well as torture and other ill-treatment because of their involvement in recording and reporting on human rights violations in Syria. Some of them have died in the custody of the Syrian authorities, others face unfair trials, including before military courts and the Anti-Terrorism Court.

At the same time, armed groups, in particular the group that calls itself Islamic State (IS), have increasingly abducted, tortured and otherwise ill-treated and killed both Syrian and foreign journalists.

According to the International Press Institute's Death Watch, 74 journalists have been killed in Syria since 2011.

Mazen Darwish, President of the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM), is one example of the journalists and media workers who have been targeted by parties to the conflict. He and his colleagues Hussein Gharir and Hani al-Zitani were arrested on 16 February 2012. They were held for approximately one year without charge, until being charged with “publicizing terrorist acts” in February 2013. Their trial before the Damascus Anti-Terrorism Court has since been postponed continuously. Another staff member of the SCM, Ayham Mustafa Ghazoul, was arrested by Syrian government forces in November 2012. In early 2013, the Syrian authorities confirmed that he had died in their custody shortly after his arrest.

Obeida Batal, who worked with Orient TV, a Syrian opposition-affiliated news channel, was abducted by unknown armed men on 25 July 2013 during an attack on the Orient TV offices in Tel Rifaat. He has been missing since then.

Citizen journalist Ali Mahmoud Othman was arrested by government forces in Aleppo in March 2012. During the attacks on Homs, he took up reporting on the situation in the absence of reports by professional national and foreign journalists and became part of a network of activists running the Homs Media Centre. He remains subjected to enforced disappearance.

United Nations Security Council Resolution 2139 demands the immediate release of all arbitrarily detained people in Syria, in particular of journalists.

On World Press Freedom Day, the NGOs signing this statement – participants in the Free Syrian Voices campaign – urge all parties to stop harassing and persecuting journalists, including citizen journalists, and to

immediately release all who are arbitrarily detained as a result of their work.