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Windhoek Declaration and Press freedom

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Why in News: Every year, May 3 is observed as World Press Freedom Day to raise awareness about the state of press freedom globally as well the responsibilities and perils of the job. It was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in December 1993, and since then, the anniversary of the Windhoek Declaration is celebrated as World Press Freedom Day.

About Windhoek Declaration

A seminar was held between April 29 and May 3, 1991, in the Namibian capital Windhoek, shortly after the country gained independence.

The seminar was focussed on “promoting an independent and pluralistic African press” and was held in partnership with U.N. agencies. It was attended by 63 participants from 38 countries.

During the Windhoek seminar, private African newspapers decided to cooperate to aid information exchange as well as share experience through journalist exchange. They also decided to organise training courses and study trips for journalists, managers, and technical personnel.

Other initiatives undertaken at the seminar included the creation of regional and national unions for publishers, news editors, and journalists; the development of non-governmental regulations and code of ethics to defend journalism and ensure credibility; the creation of regional African press enterprises, and more.

The Windhoek Declaration was adopted on May 3, the last day of the seminar. It consisted of 19 principles related to “independent, pluralistic, and free press”. Later, in 1993, May 3 was proclaimed as World Press Freedom Day by the U.N. i

The Declaration builds on Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which relates to the right to freedom of opinion and expression.

According to the Windhoek Declaration, a free press is essential for democracy as well as economic development. It also talks about the persecution of journalists, editors, and publishers in African countries, urging the U.N. to identify press censorship as a violation of human rights.

It also encourages the international community to contribute to initiatives and projects specified under the Declaration.

Windhoek-inspired declarations

The 1991 Windhoek Declaration inspired a series of regional declarations promoting the independence of press and pluralism in media. A few of them are:

The 1992 Alma Ata Declaration on promoting independent and pluralistic Asian media

The 1994 Santiago Declaration on media development and democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean

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The 1996 Sana'a Declaration promoting independent and pluralistic Arab media

The 1997 Sofia Declaration on promoting independent and pluralistic media with special focus on Central and Eastern Europe

2023 World Press Freedom Day

2023 marks the 30th anniversary of World Press Freedom Day. The theme of this year's event is "Shaping a Future of Rights: freedom of expression as a driver for all other human rights".

It signifies the right to freedom of expression, as embodied in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as the element that enables all other human rights.

Status of Press freedom in India

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) comes out with a global ranking of press freedom every year. RSF is an international NGO whose self-proclaimed aim is to defend and promote media freedom.

Headquartered in Paris, it has consultative status with the United Nations.

The objective of the World Press Freedom Index, which it releases every year, "is to compare the level of press freedom enjoyed by journalists and media in 180 countries and territories" in the previous calendar year.

RSF defines press freedom as "the ability of journalists as individuals and collectives to select, produce, and disseminate news in the public interest independent of political, economic, legal, and social interference and in the absence of threats to their physical and mental safety."

The indices of press freedom have worsened in several countries, including India, according to the latest RSF report

India's ranking in the 2023 World Press Freedom Index has slipped to 161 out of 180 countries

In comparison, Pakistan has fared better when it comes to media freedom as it was placed at 150, an improvement from last year's 157th rank. In 2022, India was ranked at 150.