

Speech by the Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands Alphons J.A.J.M.G. Hennekens on the occasion of the certificate distribution ceremony of News Network at Bonanza Restaurant, Chittagong, Thursday 15 April 2010 at 13.00 hrs.

Dear Mr. Shahiduzzaman, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. I am pleased to be present at this certificate distribution ceremony in Chittagong. I extend my congratulations to the journalists who just finished their practical training in journalism organised by News Network.

I will start now with a brief introduction on the relationship between the Netherlands and Bangladesh. The Netherlands and Bangladesh have a longstanding and fruitful relationship. Soon after independence the Netherlands recognized Bangladesh and from 1973 onwards provided support for its development. Our countries are close partners, working together on a variety of projects and programs in the field of development cooperation, governance and human rights and in the area of economic development and trade. We have recently adapted our mission statement. In the coming years we will support Bangladesh to improve transparency and strengthen accountability to achieve the MDG's and graduate to a middle income country.

We aim to do so under 4 strategic objectives:

- 1) Increasing transparency and accountability in public sector management.
- 2) Stimulating Private Sector Development through policy dialogue and increased use of Dutch private sector development and economic instruments.
- 3) Increasing sector performance for greater service delivery impact in water management, education, health and water & sanitation.
- 4) Investing in human rights and civic engagement with an emphasis on women's rights.

Now, I would like to give you some background information on Free Voice. The training program 'Training of Journalist Trainers' in which you just participated was financed by Free Voice. This media organisation is based in the Netherlands and receives financial support from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Hague. It is a foundation that supports

independent media in developing countries. Their Asia policy is to strengthen the economic position of the media, stimulate networking, improving the content as well as technical quality of journalism and lastly, supporting the innovative multi media developments. Free Voice is member of Press Freedom 2.0, a consortium of five Dutch non profit organisations. This partnership aims to strengthen press freedom around the world. The other partners are World Press Photo, European Journalism Centre, European Partnership for Democracy and People on a Mission.

This is also a good opportunity to say a few words on the media in The Netherlands and in Bangladesh. I will start with the media landscape in The Netherlands. The Dutch media landscape is difficult to explain to outsiders. The system was created around 1925 for radio broadcasting. Broadcasting was done by different organisations organized along political party lines but without formal links. In the Netherlands these organisations are referred to as the pillar-system of society associated with the socialist, catholic, protestant and liberal political parties. They rented radio-time. The same system was introduced for television in 1955. The government highly subsidizes the so- called public broadcast contrary to the commercial channels. In the 90's the media law was changed in order to enable commercial broadcasting in the Netherlands.

At present newspapers are going through difficult times when looked at number of paid subscribers due to freely distributed newspapers and online media. The number of independent publishers has considerably come down over the years from 35 in 1970, 24 in 1980 to 7 in 2007.

The number of women active in journalism is increasing over the years, but although the number of women acquiring higher positions in the media, the majority of these positions, including chief editors, are primarily dominated by men. Since 1982 there is an independent organisation 'women and media' to strengthen the position of female journalists. Only in 2006 the first woman was appointed as editor of a newspaper.

Central in the Dutch media policy is article 7 of the Constitution: freedom of speech. Advertising is excluded from this as there are for example laws prohibiting or limiting advertising, for instance, for tobacco, alcohol and medicines.

I would also like to draw your attention on accountability systems in the Netherlands media. The Dutch press relies on self regulation through the Journalism Council. Filing a suit is possible in the case of an unlawful act like slander and insult, etc. All other complaints can be brought before the independent Journalism Council. Over the years several professional codes have been formulated which are used by the Council to evaluate complaints. The Council's verdicts and arguments in turn generate jurisprudence for the codes. Because of freedom of speech this Council is not able to force anyone to render account over his publications or to impose any sanctions, like rectifications.

Several national and regional newspapers employ their own ombudsman who investigates complaints of readers and who writes critically about the newspapers' policy. The Dutch press does not have a national press ombudsman. Pressures for self-regulation within the audio-visual industry resulted in the Watch Guide, aimed at protecting young viewers against possible harmful effects. This Watch Guide, established in 1997, classifies films, tv-programs, videos and games, to give advice to parents. Specially trained personnel of the video companies fill out questionnaires to classify their own productions. The coding system is developed by a group of scientists specialised in the area of media and youth.

Let me now focus on the media in Bangladesh where the printed and electronic media started flourishing in the 90's. This happened due to a hand off policy of the government and led to at present, nearly one thousand newspapers and magazines and several TV channels in the country.

When looking at the position of women journalists we see the following picture emerging. For every 100 male journalists only 5 female journalists can be found. Like in the Netherlands and elsewhere in the world there is a long way to go for women in the media. Not only as professionals but the media often keep presenting a stereotyped image of women, which does not reflect their diverse lives and their valuable contributions to society.

I am pleased to learn that the Government of Bangladesh has ratified the Right to Information Act (RTI) in 2009. This is a very important development: to ensure people's access to information. The implementation of the RTI Act will contribute to reduce the level of corruption, to ensure transparency and accountability in all sectors and to establish good

governance. The media can play a major role in implementing the law in a pro-people approach by divulging the issues related to public welfare.

It is now up to the Information Commission and the policymakers to show their political will to implement the RTI Act in an effective way and tackle the operational challenges of the law. This is essential to ensure a fearless and hassle-free environment for journalists.

What strikes me is that the media in Bangladesh, be it print or electronic, do quite often report without double checking the information they receive and giving follow-up to events reported is also very rare. I hope that investigative journalism has been given due attention during this course.

Ladies and Gentlemen, as I mentioned earlier the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands seeks to improve transparency and to strengthen accountability in Bangladesh. Development partners however can only facilitate these processes. The actors in Bangladesh be it government, press, civil society or ordinary citizens all have to play their role to make the Right to Information Act work in Bangladesh and to accelerate the process of democratisation in this country. Therefore, this type of training aiming at increasing the number of skilled journalists, men and women, is of great importance.

I would like to reiterate my appreciation for your participation in the training of journalist trainers-program and I trust that all of you will do your utmost best to contribute to improve the quality of journalism in Bangladesh.

Thank you very much.