

IFAJ explores freedom of the press

Freedom of the press has emerged as an important issue for the IFAJ in recent months, as national guilds from more countries seek to join the organization. Should every country be allowed to join the IFAJ or should membership be restricted to countries that encourage a free press? A special sub committee was established in May to explore the issues and the potential direction of future policy for the IFAJ. The committee included Liz Kellaway (Australia), Mike Wilson (USA), Owen Roberts (Canada) and Yuri Mykhailov (Ukraine). Chairman Hans Siemes (The Netherlands) explains progress to date...

At the heart of effective journalism is freedom of the press. Without it, journalists (agricultural journalists too) cannot do their work properly. They must be able to give objective facts and make comments in their articles and programs, without pressure or censorship from a government or any other group. Governments who restrict freedom of the press 'cut the fingers from the typing hands of journalists'.

From the beginning, freedom of the press has been fundamental for the IFAJ. It's in the constitution: *the IFAJ supports and encourages the practice of journalism according to the principles of freedom of the press.*

During the meeting of the executive committee in September in Tokyo, executive members (every member country is represented) unanimously recommitted the IFAJ to those principles and agreed to intensify our work on the issue.

Ten point plan

The executive agreed on a ten-point plan about freedom of the press, prepared by a special sub committee. The plan not only reinforces IFAJ's current policy, it proposes that the IFAJ will do more to support agricultural journalists in countries where there is no freedom of the press.

Identifying affected countries?

One problem is how to identify countries where freedom of the press is an issue. How can the IFAJ draw a line? The current constitution says that the IFAJ should depend on the International Press Institute (IPI), the journalistic organization recognized worldwide for monitoring freedom of the press. By the way, the IPI describes freedom of the press as: *free access to the news, free transmission of news, free publication of newspapers, free expression of views.*

But there is a problem. The IPI doesn't produce a list which shows all countries that do not have freedom of the press. It only produces a watch list, which highlights countries that have stepped up repressive measures against journalists. However, another internationally-recognized organization, Freedom House, founded by Eleanor Roosevelt, does produce a list.

In the 10-point plan, there is a proposal to use both lists. If a country is on either the IPI watch list or the Freedom House list, that country cannot be a member of the IFAJ.

The plan also proposes that the IFAJ will work with the IPI to identify opportunities to help journalists in those countries, without endangering the lives of individual journalists. This might include inviting representatives from national guilds to be guests at an IFAJ congress.

Suspending current members

It's possible that a member country of the IFAJ might be placed on either the Watch List or the Freedom House list. In that case, the 10-point plan suggests that membership of the national guild should be suspended in a vote by the General Assembly. At the same time, the IFAJ should make it a priority to work with suspended members to help them in whatever way IFAJ thinks useful to

encourage a change in their country so that their membership can be reinstated. For that reason, the IFAJ will become an associate member of the IPI. And still the presidium of the IFAJ has the possibility to invite a representative as a guest.

The next steps

The special sub committee and the Membership Committee will work together to progress the issue. This includes drafting a 'vision statement' which clearly states the IFAJ's position on freedom of the press, the criteria which will be applied to reviewing membership and the key principles which are important.

The vision statement will be reviewed at the next IFAJ Executive meeting in Berlin in January 2008. Delegates will vote on the final proposal at the next IFAJ General Assembly in September 2008.

Members of the IFAJ special committee were