



RAIF BADAWI AWARD

for courageous
journalists 2020

Key Note Speech

**Agnes Callamard, Director, Columbia Global Freedom of Expression;
UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions
14 October 2020**

**Dear friends who are present, and those who could not make it because of repression,
travel bans or arbitrary and cruel imprisonment**

Dear Ensaf Haidar Mohammed,

Dear Raif Badawi,

Dear Jury members of the Raif Badawi Award,

Dear Abdul Rahman,

It is my great honor to join these many voices marking the occasion of Rafi Badawi award for 2020 in celebration of its incredible inspiring honoree and in affirmation of all that for which Raif stands.

Friends, around our world the indicators particularly those related to freedom of expression and association warns us that human rights are on the decline.

The birth of a new global governance system is proving to be painful and bloody – characterized by a multiplicity of conflicts and toxic proxy wars that are leaving millions exposed to violence, abandoned to poverty, locked in exclusion, under the heavy heel of oppression.

Around the world, populist leaders have gained power. They embrace nativist nationalisms and xenophobia; reject the globalization project; deny their obligations to universal human rights. They exploit our fears for their political gain even in the face of unprecedented pandemic.

There is unfolding, potentially it not already, a global shifting of tectonic plates – the result of the combined pressures of a misunderstood and little controlled technological revolution, a better understood but gravely mishandled climate crisis, and unaddressed deepening inequalities.

These are not abstract phenomenon.

The war in Yemen has produced the largest of this world's humanitarian crisis with 80 per cent of the population thrown into dependence on humanitarian assistance.

The country, in the midst of the Arab Spring, had worked to free itself from the shackles of oppressive regime. But for those dreams of freedom, the life of millions has been made a living hell.

Years after years, UN Panel of Experts have denounced egregious violations committed by both sides to the conflict, including the indiscriminate shelling of civilians and civilian infrastructure.

Meanwhile, Britain, Canada, France, Iran and the United States have continued their support to the warring sides, including through large arms transfers.

The UN Security Council has called for a ceasefire while simultaneously providing arms to enable the fighting in Yemen to continue.

Year after years, the world watches, the great powers profit, Yemen's neighbours' assault and the internal factions fracture and corrupt.

And the people of Yemen die. Through shelling, deliberate killings, sexual violence. They die of starvation, of easily treatable diseases, and of Covid19.

Among its many casualties, this cruel and unrelenting war against the freedoms of Yemeni people has seen a brutal targeting of the freedom of the press, of freedom of speech, of freedom of belief, of freedom of assembly. Journalists rounded up to be detained without just process in a network of hidden prisons. Lawyers and activists disappeared, were tortured, assassinated.

What is astounding – as this powerfully symbolic award affirms - is how astonishingly vital remains the civil society of Yemen. More repression has been met bravely with even more expression. More violence has not rendered the people silent. Thanks to the brave defiance of journalists and writers, of human rights activists and lawyers, the demands that human rights be respected, protected and upheld have not been gagged but are being amplified.

Few exemplify that courage more than does **Abdul Rahman**.

Abdul-Rahman has chosen to stand up to stand out when the crush of the authorities' war and the cruel costs of conflict would rather have him cower.

Never underestimate in dark times the power and purpose of shining light – of illuminating suffering and demanding its relief, of exposing violations and demanding that they be addressed, of revealing the silenced and the silences and insisting that in their place there be voices, demands and participation for justice.

Abdul Rahman is responding to the attacks by demanding more and better for the people of Yemen. His message is that even in contexts of extraordinary sufferings and

duress, it remains possible to launch offensive for human rights and journalism and against corruption.

Could there be a more appropriate lesson for us all?

It is also what Raif would have us do.

It's what Jamal Khashoggi would want us to do.

It is what Loujain al-Hathloul, Samar Badawi, Nassima al-Sada, Nouf Abdulaziz and Maya'a al-Zahrani ask us to do.

No country should be able to buy their way out of accountability, no matter their influence, strategic relevance; no matter the nature of their friendships.

Whether this country is called Saudi Arabia or Iran, Russia, China or the United States.

The state execution of Mr. Khashoggi by Saudi Arabia has revealed many accountability deficits and gaps within the international system; showing that we are poorly prepared to respond to targeted killings, specifically of those who dissent.

The continuing imprisonment of Raif Badawi, and of other journalists and women human rights defenders in Saudi Arabia, and of journalists and human rights defenders the world over; The threats against their critical reporting, the threats against their life; In Saudi Arabia, in Yemen, in Iran, in China,

These highlight too how much more we need to do to defend and protect them.

This is deeply troubling not the least because of the increasingly violent intolerance that we witness the world over for the independence of minds, for critical thinking, for independent reporting.

The international community must equip itself urgently with more effective tools to respond to these deficits. I am calling on all – Governments, civil society, the Media – to advocate for a **UN standing international investigation instrument** to independently investigate targeted killings, and other acts of violence against journalists and human rights defenders, and/or support national actors engaged in such investigations.

I am demanding that the world equips itself with the **Khashoggi Sanctions**, which will focus on the chain of command, on individuals at the highest levels of the States, responsible for threatening, arbitrarily detaining journalists and human rights defenders, free thinkers and peaceful dissidents.

In the face of the profound transformations our world is witnessing, in the face of the many threats – from populists, from climate inactions, from the pandemic – in the face of the counter revolution waged by powerful countries around the world, it may be tempting to adopt a posture of defensiveness, to say let's limit our fight to protecting what we have achieved thus far.

But will this strategy ever be enough? Can we respond effectively to what is happening to our world without going on the offensive?

I don't think so.

Instead, we can and must do what Abdul-Rahman has shown us can and must be done.

Against the powerful, the despots, the populists and the cowards who may want us to retreat, Abdul Rahman is daring us to stand up and stand out. To do more than defend and resist. But to continue to dream, to build, to evolve, to develop.