

Arab world needs freer media: Forum

JOURNALISTS CRITICISE RESTRICTIONS

DOHA • The Eighth Doha Forum on Democracy, Development and Free Trade concluded here yesterday with veteran journalists stressing the need for reviewing the regulations imposed on mass media in the Arab region.

Talking on 'Future of Media Role', a session that marked the finale of the three-day Forum, Wadah Khanfar, Director General of Al Jazeera Network, said free media faces several challenges in the region.

Over the last few months a positive trend was evident in the international media, he said. There are signals that the media is recovering, though slowly, from 'patriotic paradigm'.

Unfortunately, in the Arab region, some Arab information ministers continue to keep independent media keep away from their countries, he said. "The five years after the September (9/11) strike, international journalism suffered an unprecedented deterioration in terms of facts and reality. However, for the last few months we are seeing the media going back to its traditional grit and value. We see the international media questioning the power centre. This is a very positive indication", he said.

Khanfar said the Arab region needed its own crop of journalists to cover the socio-political issues of the region. Because of their cultural and linguistic barriers, foreign journalists are often restricted to a kind of "rooftop journalism".

"Journalism is not merely giving information but understanding others. For that, you must be very familiar with the socio-cultural and political matrix of the country", he said.

Referring to the importance of

the emerging trend of citizen journalism, Khanfar said the traditional media was facing great challenges. The media will not be the same after the next five or six years. It will no longer be a system being controlled by the reporters sitting in a newsroom. Citizen journalism will help further democratization of the media, he said.

Prof Ali Shomou, former Minister of Information and Culture, Sudan, demanded an immediate review of the media regulations being implemented by the forum of Arab information ministers, which according to him is an infringement upon the freedom of expression and the right to information.

Abdelbari Atwan, Chief Editor, Al Quds Al Arabi, London, said the mass media in the Arab region was going back to the early 20th century, when it was used as a medium to glorify the power centres.

He said the contemporary media was facing serious challenge from "institutional monarchy". They exert pressure on channels and media outlets which come out with uncomfortable reports. A lot of political websites and blogs were being blocked by the authorities, he said.

"Media's job is to educate, inform and entertain. In the UK, a vast majority of people depend on entertainment programmes to get their desired information. Controlling media, in any form, is a most stupid idea. It has never worked; and it will never work", said Lord Tim Bell, Chime Communications, UK.

Al Jazeera English presenter David Foster was the moderator for the session.