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'Widespread Fear': Spate Of Killings In Pakistan's Restive Northwest Targets Journalists

- By [Khalida Niaz](#) and [Frud Bezhani](#)

Hassan Zeb was in his car when two unidentified gunmen on a motorcycle opened fire and killed him in broad daylight.

The brazen attack occurred on July 14 outside Peshawar, the capital of the northwestern province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Zeb is the third reporter to be killed in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, a restive region bordering Afghanistan that has witnessed rising militant attacks, in recent months.

Overall, eight journalists have been killed in the South Asian nation of some 240 million people in 2024, a [record number](#), highlighting the growing threats to media workers.

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Article on recent killings of journalists in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province

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'I Heard The Gunfire'

Zeb's brother, Anwar, witnessed the attack that occurred in the district of Nowshera.

"I was purchasing something from a shop while Hassan was sitting in the car," he told RFE/RL's Radio Mashaal. "I heard the gunfire and saw that he was shot. I didn't recognize the motorcyclists who attacked my brother."

Anwar Zeb said his brother -- a father of six who worked for the Peshawar-based Aaj newspaper -- did not have any enemies and had not received threats to his life.

Reporters staged a protest against the killing of Zeb on July 15, accusing the authorities of doing little to protect media workers.

The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and its affiliate, the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ), strongly condemned Zeb's killing in a [statement](#) on July 15 and called on the Pakistani government to protect journalists amid what they described as "rampant violence and impunity."

String Of Killings

Zeb's killing came after Khalil Afridi was [shot dead](#) on June 18 by hooded armed men, who had stopped the reporter's car and opened fire.

Police said Afridi was on his way home from a picnic area with a friend in the district of Khyber when the incident occurred.

Afridi worked for the Pashto-language Khyber TV and was a civil society activist. Afridi's family said he had survived two previous attempts on his life. They said he had received threats before his death.

A month earlier, freelance journalist Kamran Dawar was killed by unidentified gunmen in front of his home in the district of North Waziristan.

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Dawar ran a YouTube channel and a Facebook TV news channel called Waziristan TV. Known for his criticism of Pakistan's all-powerful army, he had received [threats](#) before his death.

No group has responsibility for any of the deaths.

'They Face Threats'

Gohar Ali of the Freedom Network, a nongovernmental organization working for media freedom and freedom of expression in Pakistan, said the perpetrators are believed to be militants.

"Journalists are also threatened by state actors. [Reporters] cannot work independently, and when they do, they face threats."

Pakistan is one of the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists.

The country's northwest has been the scene of a yearslong insurgency by the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan, or Pakistani Taliban, extremist group. Other militant groups like Islamic State and Al-Qaeda as well as smaller militant outfits also operate and carry out attacks.

The region has witnessed a sharp rise in militant attacks since the Afghan Taliban seized power in Kabul in 2021, a move that boosted many extremist groups in Pakistan.

"The media environment has changed because of such incidents," said Ali, referring to the spate of killings targeting journalists. "There is widespread fear among the journalism community, and [reporters] cannot report [freely and] independently."

International media watchdogs have also documented the increasing repression of freedom of expression and the intimidation of journalists.

Over 300 journalists and bloggers this year were affected by state coercion and targeted, including eight who were charged with alleged sedition, terrorism and incitement to violence, according to the IFJ's annual press freedom [report](#), which was released in May.

The report also noted “largescale restrictions on the Internet and social-media access.”

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Austrian Red Cross
Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and
Asylum Research and Documentation
(ACCORD)

Wiedner Hauptstraße 32, 1041 Wien
T +43 1 589 00 583
F +43 1 589 00 589
info@ecoi.net

Contact
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