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RSF – Reporters Sans Frontières

For law protecting journalists, “ball is now in Pakistan government’s court,” says RSF

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has just completed a visit to Pakistan that focused on the issues involved in the protection and safety of journalists in what is one of the world’s deadliest countries for media personnel. In the course of talking to journalists, legal experts and government officials, RSF managed to forge a consensus that now needs to be implemented.

The visit was overshadowed by TV reporter **Sadaf Naeem**’s horrific [death](#) while she was reporting in Lahore on 30 October and the fact that now, more than a month later, no investigation has been carried out and no one has been held responsible.

Naeem was killed while covering the “Long March” on the capital by Imran Khan, the former prime minister and leader of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). As Khan slowly rode down one of Lahore’s streets atop a container truck, Naeem tried to climb up the side of the truck to interview him but was pushed back by a bodyguard, fell to the ground and was crushed by the truck’s wheels, dying instantly.

According to RSF’s [press freedom barometer](#), she is the 54th journalist to have been killed in connection with their work in the past ten years in Pakistan. An average of five Pakistani journalists have died every year since 2012 because they were journalists.

Urgent action needed

In only two instances have those responsible for these deaths have been identified, tried and convicted, according to a [report](#) recently published by Freedom Network Pakistan (FNPK), RSF’s partner in Pakistan. In other words, the rate of impunity for killings of journalists is more than 96%. Naeem’s crushed body has joined a long list of unpunished homicides.

“Action is urgently needed,” said Daniel Bastard, the head of RSF’s Asia-Pacific desk, after visiting Pakistan. “A democracy cannot function when journalists literally risk their lives doing their job. This is why RSF is very attached to the dialogue that has been initiated with the various Pakistani authorities including members of the federal government and representatives of the provincial governments, especially those of Sindh and Punjab. If the current processes are concluded successfully, Pakistan could potentially serve as a model for other countries around the world.”

After being neglected for years by Pakistan’s politicians, the issue of journalists’ safety is finally being taken seriously. Thanks to joint advocacy by RSF and FNPK, the Sindh provincial legislature in the southern city of Karachi [unanimously approved](#) a law on the protection of journalists on 28 May 2021.

Burning issue

“Like it or not, the safety of journalists has become a political issue in its own right,” RSF was told by Adnan Rehmat, a media development expert and coordinator of the Pakistan Coalition on Media Safety (PCOMS). “The law passed in Sindh has the potential to serve as a model for the whole country and even further afield.”

“Pakistan is a recent democracy, still under construction,” federal information minister Marriyum Aurangzeb told RSF when they met in Islamabad. “We have launched consultations on the issue of the safety of journalists, so that they are involved in the first place. This is a process that needs to be affirmed. The matter is absolutely paramount for democracy.”

A year ago, the previous federal parliament [passed a law](#) on this burning issue that has yet to take effect. It has many major flaws, including a provision in section 6 under which journalists could face criminal prosecution for failing to observe conduct “obligations.” The information minister acknowledged the problem when RSF pointed it out during their meeting. *“This is poor phrasing,”* she said. *“We are taking good note of it.”*

Commitments from all involved

Political commitments alone are not enough. The protection of journalists requires a commitment from all those involved, starting with media editors and owners, who often send reporters into the field without adequate protection or security protocols.

In this respect, the case of Sadaf Naeem, the journalist who was crushed to death by Imran Khan’s truck, is very instructive. While in Lahore, where this tragedy took place, RSF met with Muhammad Ibrahim Lucky, who heads the main journalists’ union in Punjab province.

“According to our investigation, Sadaf Naeem had recently left her employer, Channel Five, because she was no longer receiving a regular salary,” he said. *“She had nonetheless accepted this assignment after her former employer called her back urgently. But she was sent into the field without any protection or support. She didn’t even have a cameraman with her, and she ended up carrying out her duty by filming with her own mobile phone.”*

Journalists need better representation

The lack of involvement on the part of media owners is undoubtedly an area where more efforts are needed in order to develop an effective mechanism for protecting journalists. This even applies to the famous “model law” adopted in Sindh province.

“Media owners never file complaints when journalists they employ are killed,” Rehmat said. *“This is a real problem because, at the moment, they are over-represented in the commission that is supposed to analyse cases of homicide against reporters. The law needs to mandate them so they better protect their employees, put in place proper safety protocols for them, and are held accountable.”*

This means, inter alia, that journalists should have better representation on this commission. Under the law passed in Sindh, only one of its nine members is supposed to represent journalists, while the other eight places are reserved for representatives of the government and media owners/editors.

Novel governmental approach

When asked about this, the federal government seems sympathetic to the complaints that journalists make about their employers, in particular on the question of unpaid wages, which undermines journalism, make the profession more precarious and directly endangers the reporters – as tragically illustrated by Sadaf Naeem’s death.

“We are considering making the allocation of government advertisements conditional on the payment of journalists’ salaries,” the information minister said. *“Very concretely, a company that does not treat its journalists as they should be, in terms of salaries, will be removed from the list of media outlets that benefit from government legal advertisements.”*

This is a novel approach. State advertising is a major source of revenue for the media, and in the past the federal authorities have tended to manipulate the allocation of ads insidiously in order to pressure the media to censor themselves. RSF had [repeatedly denounced](#) this form of blackmail.

In response to the minister’s proposal, RSF suggested that ad allocation should also be conditioned on the implementation of security protocols by employers for the journalists they send into the field.

Good practices

RSF made the same proposal at a meeting with Urooj Sayyami, human rights adviser to the chief minister of Punjab, Pakistan’s most populous province. RSF hopes that the Punjab government will draft a law on protecting journalists based on the good practices in the law passed in neighbouring Sindh province, while avoiding the flaws.

“This is a very relevant initiative, especially in the south of our province, where journalists work in remote areas and are more vulnerable,” she said. *“This issue can be put on the agenda of our meetings with parliamentary leaders [in the Punjab Assembly].”*

As well as trying to prevent violence from happening in the first place, legislative mechanisms must also, in the long term, address what follows acts of violence and, in particular, combat a phenomenon that increases journalists’ vulnerability – impunity for acts of violence against them, which encourages perpetrators to eliminate witnesses without fear of legal reprisals.

International conference on 6 December

In this regard, the Sindh law specifically provides for the creation of a special prosecutor's office for crimes of violence against journalists, as recommended by the [United Nations Action Plan on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity](#), which Pakistan adopted exactly ten years ago.

“To mark the 10th anniversary of the UN Action Plan, we are organising an international conference in Islamabad on 6 December that Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif is to attend,” FNP director Iqbal Khattak said. “This will be an opportunity to clearly present the next steps that the government should take – based on RSF’s recommendations – in order to establish a truly effective mechanism to fight impunity.”

“The ball is now in the court of the civilian authorities in Islamabad,” RSF’s Daniel Bastard said. “Taking up the demands of different civil society sectors, we were able to identify the encouraging areas and the mistakes to avoid, and to reach a broad consensus on the issue of protecting journalists. It is now up to the Pakistani government and legislators to give concrete expression to this progress. RSF stands ready to support this process.”

Pakistan is ranked 157th out of 180 countries in RSF's 2022 [World Press Freedom Index](#).

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