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Asia - Pakistan

Mounting fears

Pakistani journalists live in growing fear of violence

29 July 2015

Pakistani journalists are being forced to flee or go into hiding to escape acts of violence and intimidation that usually go unpunished. The authorities have not kept their promise to protect media personnel and are sometimes even responsible for these abuses.

The shooting of Baloch journalist **Zafarullah Jatak** in June is the latest in a series of macabre murders of media personnel that are not being solved. Jatak worked for *Intekhab*, an Urdu-language newspaper based in Quetta, and had been a journalist for the past six years. He was gunned down in his home in the early hours of 28 June. The police have made eight arrests but have yet to establish the motive.

No progress has been made in the investigation into the murder of journalism professor (and former journalist) **Syed Wahidur Rahman**, who was gunned down in his car outside Karachi university on 29 April, four days after media and human rights activist **Sabeen Mahmud** was gunned down in Karachi immediately after organizing a discussion about the violence in Balochistan. Mahmud's murder has also gone unpunished.

"The Pakistani authorities must end the impunity for the only too frequent physical attacks on journalists," said Benjamin Ismail, the head of the Reporters Without Borders Asia-Pacific desk.

"We urge them to carry out proper investigations and to bring those responsible for crimes of violence against journalists to justice. The impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators of these abuses just encourages them to continue violating human rights and freedom of information."

The fact that crimes of violence against journalists are rarely solved and punished just reinforces a climate dominated by death threats and physical attacks.

There has also been a marked increase since 2014 in media freedom violations by government officials and various political factions. This disturbing trend constitutes a major impediment to attempts to combat impunity and sustains a climate that does not encourage media freedom.

The only option is to flee

As well as increasing the pressure on journalists to censor themselves, this climate also often drives them to flee their homes in search of a safe refuge.

Rasool Dawar, a journalist of nine years' experience who was *Geo News TV*'s correspondent in Peshawar, the capital of the northern province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, fled the province after being threatened, interrogated and detained twice by intelligence officials, who ended up telling him to leave or face with consequences without every giving him a reason.

Explaining his concerns to his employer, Dawar said: *"I still feel frightened and am not comfortable at all to continue my professional duties at my work-stations in a free manner."*

He was arrested in February and again in April by men in military uniform and was interrogated in a police station basement while blindfolded. "Advised" after these arrests to leave Peshawar, he found temporary refuge in Islamabad. Since then, he has been trying to obtain a permanent transfer in order to escape the danger in Peshawar.

The military have been hounding *Geo News* ever since it broadcast allegations by the relatives of leading *Geo News* presenter **Hamid Mir** that the head of the intelligence services was behind the shooting attack in which Mir was badly wounded on 19 April 2014.

Israr Ahmed, a crime reporter for *The Nation* daily in Punjab province for the past seven years, has long been living in fear as a result of being hounded by both the police and gang members in connection with his coverage of drug trafficking in Rawalpindi.

After he survived a murder attempt in 2012, the police failed to provide him with protection and did not even investigate the murder attempt. The police threatened him after he reported that fellow Punjab-based journalist **Raja Arshad** (see below) had received threats. Then, in March of this year, he was ordered to pay 300 million rupees as a result of a legal action.

Finally, he was arrested on a rape charge in April, although the rape victim did not identify him as her assailant, and he was tortured while being held. The police allegedly make frequent use of bogus rape charges as a method of intimidation.

Its use against Ahmed along with the previous threats seems to indicate that the police were determined to persecute him and constitutes yet further evidence of the desperate plight of Pakistani journalists, who are not only not protected by the police but are often hounded by them.

Arshad, who works for *Aaj News TV*, was threatened in connection with his coverage of reactions to a December 2014 attack on a Peshawar school in which more than 100 people were killed. He got no help or protection from the local police after a mob came to his home,

"I am living in fear of being harmed, as journalists are extremely vulnerable in Pakistan with no protection from the government or their media organization," he said in April.

Pressure on media outlets

The media themselves also often find that their work is hampered by restrictions and censorship attempts by local government officials and political groups.

On 13 May, the Pakistan Press Council sent a directive to the print media via the All Pakistan Newspaper Society saying *"acute care should be taken to avoid negative comments"* about the crisis in Yemen in order not to threaten Pakistan's friendship with the countries that are members of the Saudi-led coalition operating in Yemen.

As a result of a decision by the government of the Kashmiri region of Pakistan, *Geo News* was banned from broadcasting from 1 to 29 June for showing a map of Pakistan that excluded the disputed Indian-controlled region of Jammu and Kashmir in its programme "Today with Shahzeb Khanzada."

[It was previously banned for two weeks in 2014](#) for broadcasting claims that the intelligence services were responsible for the shooting attack on Hamid Mir.

The continuing decline in the climate for the media is likely to lead to more self-censorship and a further erosion of Pakistan's already fragile media freedom. [Ranked 159th out of 180 countries in the 2015 Reporters Without Borders press freedom index](#), Pakistan is prey to every kind of enemy of freedom of information and is one of the world's deadliest countries for journalists.

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