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Reporters Without Borders calls on the authorities to do everything possible to protect journalists and media outlets in Afghanistan, where threats and attacks by the jihadi group Islamic State have been added to those by the Taliban, creating new information "black holes" in several provinces.

Although countries such as the United States, Iran, Norway and Qatar are "normalizing" their relations with the Taliban and certain Afghan politicians are sitting with them at the negotiating table, the Taliban have been intensifying armed attacks on civilians and openly threatening freedom of information.

The Taliban, and now members of Islamic State, are sowing terror in several northeastern provinces including Badakhshan, Nangarhar, Baghlan and Nuristan. Freedom of information in these provinces has gone from being limited to non-existent, giving rise to new information black holes.

Media outlets have been the targets of armed attacks. They include Radio *Donya Novin* in Charikar (Parwan province) and the regional bureaux of the independent Afghan news agency Pajhwok and the US government-funded *Voice of America (VOA)* in Jalalabad (Nangarhar province) on 12 June, when at least two VOA journalists were injured. Several sources described this as "the first Islamic State action" in Afghanistan.

Fighting has been so intense in some regions, especially in Badakhshan and Nangarhar, that journalists have been forced to stop working altogether and entire villages have fallen under rebel control. These provinces now rank alongside Helmand in the south and Khost in the east as regions where the Taliban have terrorized the media.

"Nangarhar has always been a violent province but the situation has become even worse in recent months," said a journalist in Jalalabad, the capital of Nangarhar, speaking on condition of anonymity.

"The rebels are carrying out attacks almost every day but we cannot cover them. The security forces have told us they cannot guarantee our safety and we don't want to put our lives in danger, so we cannot do our job. And working for the media has become even more difficult for women journalists. Sometimes they cannot even leave their homes."

Jalalabad has eight radio stations, three TV stations and four newspapers employing a total of 60 journalists, of whom 20 are women.

The journalist added: "The civilian victims of the past few months include two former journalists who were members of the Jalalabad municipal council - **Mofti Moinshah Haqani**, a presenter on the religious radio station *Sepinghar* who was gunned down by unidentified persons on 29 June, and **Angizeh Shinvari**, a freelance journalist who was killed by a bomb in her car on 10 February. She had been repeatedly threatened for encouraging women, especially women journalists, to defend their rights, and for openly criticizing Pakistan's support for the Taliban on her Facebook page."

According to the information gathered by Reporters Without Borders, six of the 22 municipalities in Nangarhar province are now under the control of armed groups that say they are affiliated to Islamic State. The situation is no better to the north, where Reporters Without Borders spoke to **Shir Mohammad Jahesh**, the head of local TV station *Tanvir* in Baghlan province.

"The fighting hadn't been expected to intensify in the north, especially in Badakhshan, a relatively calm area, but the Taliban presence is panicking the population, including journalists, obviously," Jahesh said. "There is now a great deal of violence in the region and our work is directly influenced by these armed groups, who ask us to be 'neutral' although in practice they want us to accept their rules."

The Taliban and other armed groups are unfortunately not the only ones who target the media. Warlords, local politicians and government forces also help to create a climate of fear designed to keep journalists at a distance, especially during military operations.

As Afghanistan sinks deeper and deeper into a full-blown civil war, the enemies of freedom of information are doing everything possible to prevent the media from working freely.

At an emergency meeting of [the National Security Council on 5 July](#), President **Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzi** accused the Taliban of committing war crimes after their bloody attack in Jalrez, in the central east province of Wardak on 2 and 3 July, in which more than 15 soldiers and civilians were killed.

[Georgette Gagnon, the head of the human rights unit of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan \(UNAMA\)](#), previously referred on 31 May to attacks on civilians and murders of civilians as war crimes.

Gulbadin Hekmatyar, the founder and leader of Hezb-e-Islami (HIA), [an Islamist group allied until recently with the Taliban, has meanwhile urged his fighters to support Islamic State in its clashes with the Taliban](#). Hekmatyar and HIA have been implicated in the murders of several reporters including [Zakia Zaki, the head of Radio Sada-e-Sulh \(Voice of Peace Radio\)-, one of Afghanistan's most distinguished journalists, in June 2007](#).

Reporters Without Borders asked presidential spokesman **Sayed Zafar Hashemi**, who is a former journalist, about protecting journalists and the need to combat impunity for crimes of violence against them.

"President Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzi and the Afghan government are committed to ensuring freedom of expression and freedom of information in Afghanistan," Hashemi said. "Our country is at war, a war that was imposed on us. The enemies are trying to attack what we have achieved in the past 13 years, including freedom of information. The state is doing everything to protect journalists in several regions and the security forces are at the service of journalists, to ensure their safety."

On the negotiations with the Taliban, he said: "We must find a political solution to end the war but the negotiations are necessarily based on the principles defined in the Afghan constitution. To reach a peace accord, all parties must accept this constitution, which guarantees freedom of expression. Peace serves the rule of law, in which everyone who has committed crimes, includes crimes against journalists and news media, must be punished by the law and the justice system."

[Afghanistan is ranked 122th out of 180 countries in the 2015 Reporters Without Borders press freedom index.](#)

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