

Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan



نای حمایت کننده رسانه های آزاد در افغانستان
Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan

MEDIA WATCH REPORT

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Preamble:

Journalists will face serious challenges on the eve of Presidential Election 2014 as significant candidates will emerge and the president will try for the success of his favorite one.

Media and journalists will cover candidates' campaigns during the campaigning season which may sometimes draw sharp criticism from people. The response from powerful candidates, particularly of the one favored by the ruling group, may be violent.

On the other hand, having a background in committing violence against journalists and media, police and security personnel will most probably continue to do so during the election process.

To prevent such incidents, Nai Supporting Free Media in Afghanistan has initiated the organization for editors and the election commission coordination group which is meant to eliminate or mitigate challenges without delay and consuming the commission or media's time.

This group will try to contribute in maintaining sustained cooperation among media, The Election Commission and security organs during the election process. On the other hand it will also ensure that media and journalists seriously regard the Election Commission's procedures and principles along with the media law.

In order to lower the risk of violent encounters, journalists should follow their professional and ethical principles in preparing their reports. They should stick to the principles of balance and fairness in covering this national process across the country.

There have been several incidents observed in which police or the Election Commission's personnel have beaten journalists as they entered polling centers. In less than six months left to the upcoming presidential election, police has already beaten a journalist as when he when he entered a registration center to take pictures of those waiting in line to get voting cards in Takhar Province. This is the first incident in which a journalist is beaten in a registration center for the upcoming election.

If unstopped then we may expect a high graph of violence against journalists in the upcoming election. On the other hand there is a risk of Taliban's threatening journalists if they cover voters turn out by the ballot boxes on the Election Day as they have already threatened to punish anyone who will vote in the election. They may not like the reports either and therefore resort to serious violence including threatening the lives of journalists.

The candidates also need to understand that the safety of journalists will lead to better coverage of their election campaigns and will help people learn about their election programs. Absence of journalists will deprive people from accessing information about election.

The Independent Election Commission and media institutions need to undertake effective programs to provide full coverage of the election process. Journalists should regard their safety as their first priority. Lack of attention to safety measures will let small incidents interrupt covering of important parts of the election process.

There are further challenges still on the way including delay in approve of the right to access information which needs to be ratified and enforced prior to the election day.

To cooperate on all of the above mentioned areas, journalists and media are to pay serious attention to the need of coordination among journalists across the country.

Against this background, we have followed the following news titles regarding journalists and media:

- 1. Police beat a journalist in a voters registration center**
- 2. Two journalists were beaten in an election-related gathering in Herat province**
- 3. Taliban's threats forced a journalist to stay at home**
- 4. Journalists boycotted covering state-related news in Ghazni province**
- 5. Journalists in demonstration: approve the Law of Right to Access Information**
- 6. Nai's reaction to an attack on the building of a private TV station**
- 7. Afghanistan TV stations and broadcasts will be digitalized**
- 8. Khedmatgar daily ceased publishing**

1. A journalist was beaten by the police in a voters registration center

A police officer beat Aref Daneshjo, a journalist for Hamsada local radio in Takhar province on August 31, 2013, while he was preparing to make a report on [potential] voters' registration. The journalist has told Media Watch in an interview that he had already informed local personnel of the Independent Election Commission to make a report, but they still did not allow him to interview the clients or take pictures. This causes Mr. Daneshjo to exit the center and try to interview clients outside. When he was interviewing and taking pictures, a police officer attacked him and beat him with his gun. He broke the journalist's camera too.

Mr. Daneshjo then complained about the incident to Takhar provincial police headquarters. The involved police officer apologized to Mr. Daneshjo afterwards.

Meanwhile Takhar provincial police headquarters claimed that the journalist had no identity card and had first engaged in attacking the police officer which turned the latter angry.

Takhar's provincial police commander, Abdul Hanan Agha-Gul told Media Watch: "When the journalist wanted to enter the registration center, police asked him to show his identity card and let them conduct a body search. The journalist refused both and the contention began. He was first in attempting to beat the police officer. Shopkeepers in the area witnessed this."

Mr. Aref Daneshjo rejected the claim made by police and said: "I fully reject the claim made by Takhar provincial police commander because I presented my identity card to the police officer and cooperated with them during the body search. After I entered the registration center, it was an employee of the Independent Election Commission who did not grant me permission for interview and taking pictures. I exited the center and when I wanted to interview with clients and take their pictures outside of the center that the police came and beat me."

Mr. Daneshjo continued to explain the reason behind the police's attack: "Clients had complaints from the mentioned police officer and so to prevent any publishing and leak of those complaints he attacked me and broke all of my journalistic equipment.

Media Watch spoke with Takhar provincial police commander and discussed journalists' complaints about the conduct of police vis-à-vis people and journalists. Mr. Abdul Hanan Agha-Gul promised to convene a meeting with journalists and serious police commanders in Takhar province to create further coordination between journalists and the police.

Takhar police has not had reliable relations with journalists in the past and, due to journalists' repeated complaints, the Ministry of Interior dismissed the previous provincial commander of the police.

In addition to maintain public order and provide security across the province, the current top police commander in Takhar also tries to ensure relations between the police and journalists. This relationship hit its lowest point under the previous commander and prompted journalists to complain to state agencies and organizations that support journalists.

Nai's Media Watch condemns police's beating of Hamsada local radio journalist and asks officials-in-charge to prevent such misconducts and breaking law by police so that citizen's trust in police does not erode.

A hostile relation between security forces and journalists will hit the headlines with existing tensions and a diminished picture of the province. Creating coordination and a sound relation [with journalists] are legally state officials' responsibility. Also the most fundamental right of citizens over their state includes the latter's responsibility to protect its citizens' life and property. If Takhar police are truly committed in restoring relationship between the police and journalists then they need to start serious reforms among the police and punish, and sack if necessary, those members who annoy people especially journalists.

2. Security forces beat two journalists in Herat province

Shapoor Saaber, a Radio Azadi (Radio Liberty) journalist, and Khalil Noorzai , a Voice of America journalist, were first prevented from entering a gathering organized by the western region chapter of Shora-e-Ulema (Council of Clerics) in support of the election process in Herat province and then beaten by security personnel.

In an interview with Media Watch, Shapour Saaber said: "After I was invited via email to this gathering, together with Khalil Noorzai from Voice of America, we went to Momtaaz Mahal Hall to attend the event. The conveners did not permit us to enter. When we wanted to coordinate the issue with the Western Regional Electoral Commission, a person named Farzaad, the security in charge of the Independent Electoral Commission insulted us and then beat us. Soon police personnel joined to attack and beat us."

High-ranking provincial authorities including Herat governor witnessed the beating incident by the police. Sayed Fazlullah Waahedi, Herat governor, met with the mentioned journalists and then issued a warrant to arrest those responsible for the violent incident.

The two journalists as well as a number of organizations defending journalists are concerned about the fact that after [keeping them for] some hours in custody, Herat police has already released the arrested perpetrators.

Shapoor Saaber, the Radio Liberty journalist said: "Although high-ranking governmental authorities witnessed the security personnel beating us, after they were arrested in the Governor's warrant, the police chief for the 3rd security district (where the event was convened) released them following an order by the Herat province police commander.

Mr. Saaber also said that while Farzaad, the one who beat the journalist, was in police custody, he has received several threats even to his life, and including from government's armed opposition, to testify before the police to liberate Mr. Farzaad.

But, Rahamatullah Saafi, Herat Police Commander, told Media Watch that Mr. Farzaad, the in charge for election commission's security who is claimed to have beaten journalists, is still in police custody. Yet the journalists who have been violently behaved with are demanded to go to the police office and provide further information so that the next measures are initiated.

The Herat Police Commander stated that journalists have done their duty under hardest circumstances in Herat and Herat Police will protect them until their last breath.

Violent behavior against journalists has always concerned human rights and journalists advocacy institutions as well as state institutions. Herat Provincial Council called this ugly behavior against journalists regretful and asked the perpetrators to be punished.

Said Walid Qebtaaly, Head of Herat Provincial Council told Media Watch: "The ugly behavior that is committed against the journalists in Herat brings under question all the claims made by Police that their personnel are educated and respect rights of citizenship."

Head of Herat Provincial Council told the beaten journalists who are now concerned about realizing of the perpetrators by the police that they will not let anyone harm the freedom of speech that they have paid for with their lives.

Nai organizations Media Watch condemns in strongest terms beating of journalists in Herat and demands the security officials in the province to refer the perpetrators of this violent act to the judicial organs.

In the past several years the incidences of violence against journalists have shown an increasing trend and the statistics of violence against media and journalists still keep increasing. One reason to explain this trend is that the perpetrators are left unpunished and set free based on personal and group relationships. This will even further brave the enemies of media and speech freedom in the country and continuation of this trend will harm people and the state of Afghanistan.

As Herat Police Commander also committed his full support in referring the perpetrators of this violent incident to the judicial organs, one more time we insist and ask Herat's security officials to fulfill their commitment and duty so that others learn a lesson from it and do not dare to commit such misconduct.

3. Taliban's threats forced a journalist to stay at home

A journalist of Voice of Nijraab, a local radio in Nijraab district in Kaapisaa province, was forced to stay at home after a number of individuals affiliated to Taliban threatened to kill him if he chose to continue his work in the radio.

The journalist, who chose not to be named, is forced to leave his reporting job after two years and stay at home.

Dr. Abdul Motaleb, head of Radio Nijraab, told Media Watch that one of the radio's journalists contacted the office on August 31, 2013, and informed them that he can no longer continue as a journalist.

According to the head of Radio Nijraab, the journalist has not only stopped working for the radio but has also demanded them to stop broadcasting voices that were pre-recorded for the radio's signals. Before being forced to stay at home, this journalist's reports were covering Tagaab, Alsai and Nijraab districts and areas of Kaapisaa province.

Tagaab and Alsai are among the insecure districts in this province where Taliban's and terrorists' movements have disturbed security for a long time now.

Journalism in and reporting from insecure areas have always been a challenging job. Journalists have been threatened, beaten, and in many cases lost their lives for reporting from such areas in the last decade.

Based on the Afghanistan Mass Media Law, the state is committed to protect personal and professional safety of journalists.

Media Watch demands from the government of Afghanistan to fulfill its lawful and legal duty in protecting citizens' life and property, therefore to identify and capture individuals and groups who threaten journalists.

The state's indifference toward the safety of journalists has created serious challenges. Continuation of this trend will seriously harm both the state of Afghanistan as well as the freedom of speech in this country.

Once again we seriously demand from the government of Afghanistan, particularly from security officials, to provide a conducive environment across the country for journalists to work – as the law has charged them. Otherwise, insecurity as well as lack of enforcing the law will go pervasive across the country and will darken the face of the Afghanistan government in national and international forums.

4. Journalists boycotted covering state-related news in Ghazni province

Journalists in Ghazni province have faced problems in accessing information for a long time. In the latest case, after Taliban released from custody Ms. Ferebaa Kaakar, a member of House of Representatives, the journalists decided to suspend reporting and covering Ghazni-related news until the provincial officials convince them on accessing information.

Faribaa Kaakar, member of House of Representatives was kidnapped by Taliban on September 7, 2013, and was then released 24 days later. The process that led to her release was kept away from media and Ghazni province journalists. Then the journalists decided to respond to the officials' behavior by suspending their coverage of any news related to Ghazni province.

Rahamatullah Nekzaad, a journalist in Ghazni province, told Media Watch: "Ghazni provincial officials invite journalists to report on such conferences and programs which have no news value, while in important occasions they not only block journalists' access to information but also prevent them from taking pictures or prepare reports."

According to Nekzaad, this is not the first time that journalists are prevented from covering important news topics. Ghazni journalists have been facing this problem for a while now. [As an instance] he mentioned the ceremony of naming Ghazni as the civilization capital of Islamic countries in which journalists were kept far away from the scene and had even no right to enter the hall to report.

Said Rahmatullah Alizada, a journalist from French News Agency in Ghazni province, who has also participated in the boycott, told Media Watch: "By issuing a resolution, the Ghazni province journalists have explicitly informed the Ghazni provincial officials that the boycott of covering provincial news will continue until they solve the journalists' problems."

Journalists in Ghazni province have exercised boycotting provincial news coverage at least one more time earlier which was later left after the government officials convinced them.

Musa Khaan Akbarzada, the Ghazni governor, told Media Watch: "The journalists of this province, all of whom I respect, turn unhappy sometimes and I will convince them to leave the boycott."

The governor of Ghazni told Media Watch about the lack of providing information to the journalists on the release of Ms. Ferebaa Kaakar from Taliban's custody: "Ferebaa Kaakar's husband requested from me not to share with journalists anything on the matter."

Mr. Akbarzada, Ghazni governor, told Media Watch about the Ghazni province festival: “All programs about the Ghazni province festival were under the control [and administration] of the Ministry of Information and Culture. I am not satisfied with their planning either as they charged only one TV [canal] to broadcast the entire program. This will not be repeated again. Regarding the bad news, I do not want to be the first one to spread the bad news because I do not like the bad news.”

Yet the journalists in Ghazni province told Media Watch that they will continue their boycott until the Ghazni Provincial Administration officially vow that from now on they will provide all information to the journalists.

Nai organization’s Media Watch believes that access to information is one of the fundamental rights of citizens, especially of journalists, and asks the government authorities, particularly the Ghazni governor, that, in accordance with the Mass Media Law and the Constitution of Afghanistan, provide journalists with requested information immediately and without delay. Lack of access to and hiding of information can cause serious problems in the society and will prevent people from progress.

5. The Law of Access to Information should be approved before the upcoming election

About 200 journalists and media activists in a peaceful gathering in front of the National Assembly of Afghanistan—coordinated with Nai Supporting Free Media in Afghanistan—demanded from parliamentarians to ask the government of Afghanistan send the Law of Access to Information to the National Assembly for approval.

These journalists carried mottoes such as ‘Access to



information is the right of every citizen” and submitted a three-article resolution to Ms. Helai Ershaad, chair of the House’s Commission on Religious, Cultural and Educational Affairs.

The resolution demanded from the Parliament to give the government a week to submit the draft Law of Access to Information to the Parliament for approval. The journalists insisted that in the case if the government fail to comply then, the using its legal mandate, the Parliament, in coordination with media institutions, prepare a draft of the law and approve it within two weeks.

Another part of this resolution reads as: “We demand from the Parliament that by approving the Law of Access to Information, in consideration with the time span in the first article of the resolution, pay serious attention and respond to the journalists’ complaints with regards to lack of access to information. They should [help in] introducing the perpetrators to the judicial organs.”

In article three of this resolution the United Nations is asked to have the government of Afghanistan regard its citizens’ right to access information as their human and fundamental right by providing the Law of Access to Information.

Journalists’ institutions submitted a draft copy of the Law of Access to Information to the government of Afghanistan two years ago. It is now at the Council of Ministers. Officials at the Council of Ministers said that this law will be approved in the coming month, but the journalists insist that the process of approving this law should be expedited.

Ms. Hilai Ershaad, chair of the House of Representatives’ Commission on Religious, Cultural and Educational Affairs, promised to the journalists that she will take their message (the resolution) to the general assembly. “We cooperate with the journalists. I officially receive your resolution and will fully cooperate with you in this regard.”

The journalists who attended the gathering expressed their serious need for the Law of Access to Information and addressed that the lack of such a law has created serious problems for the journalists.

They added that most of the problems that they face on duty arise from lack of access to information.

While preparing investigative reports, the journalists need credible information and statistics from government and nongovernmental institutions. However, most of the cases, they refuse to provide such information in. There also exist cases in which the governmental officials have hidden the facts from the journalists.

Sediqullah Tawhidi, head of Media Watch at the Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan, said in this gathering:

“Absence of the Law of Access to Information has caused the incidence of violence against journalists to increase. The authorities are not prepared to provide information and if the journalists insist, they are committed violence to.”



Mr. Tawhidi believes that some members of the cabinet think that approval of this Law will bring more limitations for them, while this is not true because the approval and ratification of this Law will also help the government of Afghanistan as well as citizens and journalists.

The right to access information was first officially recognized as a fundamental and human right of the citizens of Afghanistan in the 2004 Constitution. By predicting this right in the Article 50 of the Constitution, it was hoped that Afghanistan citizens will not face informational poverty as well as the governmental institutions will not practice a culture of secrecy as they did in the previous [political] systems. It was also hoped that the government will immediately provide a draft of the Law of Access to Information to provide for the citizens' right of access to information.

Currently the draft of the Law of Access to Information, which was submitted to the government by journalists' community two years ago, is at the Council of Ministers where it is prevented from approval by some ministers and authorities who are afraid of accountability to media.

Nai organization's Media Watch demands one more time from the government of Afghanistan to expedite the approval process of the Law of Access to Information with expectation that it understands the [upcoming] subtle conditions as the presidential election and provincial

councils' election are ahead. On the eve of these events both citizens and journalists promptly need the Law otherwise they will face serious problems.

6. Nai office reacted to an attack on the building of a private TV canal

Speaking at a news conference, convened at the office of the Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan, Mr. Sidiqullah Tawhidi, head of Nai's Media Watch, asked the security organs to seriously consider the security of media institutions especially of journalists in national, religious and any other special occasions.

Zhwandoon TV's personnel have claimed that a number of individuals attacked with stones and sticks on the TV building on the day of celebrating the Martyr's Week.

Mr. Sediqullah Tawhidi, head of Nai's Media Watch who was talking to journalists in a news conference, demanded from the detective organs to identify and arrest the individuals who by using the Martyr's Week celebration have attacked on the Zhwandoon TV so that it is not repeated again.

Mr. Tawhidi said: "Some media pay no attention to important national issues in their broadcasting and this has created serious challenges and problems in a number of cases." He continued: "some media [organizations] sometimes explicitly and stimulates one ethnic group against another, one area's people against another that will grandly harm the citizens and the entire nation of Afghanistan.

Mr. Tawhidi emphasized that Afghanistan's media and journalists are expected to understand the subtle conditions and problems that Afghanistan faces now, and are required to comply with the ruling laws of the country as well as with accepted global ethical norms in publishing and/or broadcasting their works and programs.

Mr. Tawhidi said: "Media should not serve as the bases of preaching violence; we should be the guardians of the interests of people of Afghanistan and not as accepting and favoring a part of Afghanistan people and negatively preaching against the rest."

Nai organization's Media Watch call the attack on Zhwandoon TV station as an uncivil and illegal conduct and while demands from the security forces to arrest the perpetrators, it also demands from such media to try to invite people to peace and calm instead of insulting a particular ethnic group or the honors of a nation.

Broadcasting such works will harm the credibility of the media outlet and will cause such serious problems.

Media complying with provisions of enforced laws as well as journalism's ethical principles can lower significantly lower the rate of violence against journalists and media.

7. Afghanistan's television broadcasting goes digital

The Ministry of Communication of Afghanistan announced the launch of a digital system which will include all TV networks across the country operating in analogue system.

Nusrat Rahimi, a spokesman for the Ministry of Communication, told Media Watch: "The Asia Consulting Company that has won this bid will soon start the project to digitalize Afghanistan TVs.

The Ministry of Communication said that the digital system will be launched in Kabul in the coming six months and in all cities across Afghanistan in the coming three years.

The spokesman for the Ministry of Communication said that execution of this plan will help the people of Afghanistan to access to clear and quality pictures.

The shift from analogue to digital system will increase the capacity of television and radio frequencies by 15 times. The digital system, which is currently in use in many countries, the quality of picture and sound are much better than in the analogue.

The Ministry of Communication has announced that this project will cost US\$ 500 million.

Meanwhile, Sidiqullah Tawhidi, head of Media Watch at the Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan said that digitalization of television broadcasting will end the problems in getting frequencies. It will also remove the technical problems to a countrywide coverage of TV stations' broadcasting.

Mr. Tawhidi also said that execution of this process will help media reach more audience, especially those with already fewer ones.

Every new technological phenomenon has its positive and negative effects. Mr. Tawhidi believes that the negative effects of digitalizing media in Afghanistan will emerge if a despotic government takes power: "If a despotic government comes to power in the country and wants to take the freedom of speech, it will be easily able to stop TVs' broadcasting," said Tawhidi.

Meanwhile, Mr. Abdul Qadir Mirzayi, from Ariana TV, told Media Watch: “Digitalization of TV broadcasting will have its advantages and disadvantages. It will end the problem that TV [stations] had been facing in accessing relaying antennas.”

A number of residents in the capital as well as in the provinces of the country have expressed their delight and said that if they can access to several TV canals without antenna then they will no longer need the cable network or dish antenna receivers.

According to officials at the Ministry of Communication; after replacing Afghanistan’s analogue TV system with a digital one, fellow citizens do not need to throw away their analogue TV monitors but only to buy and install a receiver called the set up box that will enable them to watch digital motion pictures in analogue devices. It will cost them around Afg 500. It is worth to mention that the new TV monitors, also called as the new generation TVs, will not need this accessory box.

Shifting from analogue to digital system can also lower the costs for TV broadcasting which, according to officials at the Ministry of Communication, will let TV stations invest in producing high-quality programs.

Media Watch believes that upgrading TV networks from analogue to digital is an important need in the area of visual and audio media and hopes that this system is put in effect soon. With operation of a digital television system, more people of Afghanistan will access to media and fresh information.

8. Khedmatgar daily can no longer continue publishing

Khedmatgar daily published its final issue on August 31, 2013, after four years of publishing.

Baryalai Jahesh, from the daily, told Media Watch that the reason to stop publishing Khedmatgar daily is financial problems and lack of sufficient budget to keep the daily running.

The need for media publishing increases especially during the election campaign seasons and on the eve of the election more than any other time. The previous elections have witnessed an increase in new media outlets, but this is the first time that a daily paper ends its publishing on the eve of a similar important occasion when the candidates for the upcoming presidential election and provincial councils’ election need access to media. This is questionable.

Understanding the importance of media during election as well as approaching of 2014, Baryalai Jahesh, Editor-in-Chief of Khedmatgar daily, regret the cease in the Daily's publishing and hope that he can find secure financial resources to restart it again.

Nai Supporting open Media in Afghanistan has issued a press release in which it called the cease of a media outlet as the silence of a part of the society. It asked the responsible officials especially the Ministry of the Culture and Information of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to seek for suitable approaches to solve problems that media and particularly Afghanistan's printing media face.

Nai data shows that most of the printing media in Afghanistan face financial problems which challenge their future activities in the country.

According to Afghanistan Mass Media Law, the state is responsible to support free media in different areas including in printing, publishing, and distributing.

Many states help their printing media with subsidies especially in the areas of printing and publishing in order to institutionalize media in their countries.

According to the law and in order to institutionalize democracy and freedom of speech, the state of Afghanistan is also responsible to help and support the media outlets that are in [dire] need for help. It should not allow media to stop, as the latter are in fact the ears and eyes of the society.

Khedmatgar daily had been published in Pashto language in Kabul and some neighboring provinces. It was one of the widely read papers. It was covering mostly hot political themes as well as educational subjects.

Attention!

All journalists and media organizations are hereby notified that Mr. Mohammad Qasem Rahmani works with the Media Watch in the capacity of Media Lawyer. Those journalists and/or media outlets that face legal issues in connection with their media related and journalistic activities, or need consultation on performing such activities, may contact him by phone at **0799 830 905** or via email at: m.qasim@nai.org.af.

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To obtain a soft copy of the report, please visit the following link: <http://www.nai.org.af/Mediawatch.htm>

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