

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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Beating, threatening, intimidating and violence against journalists continue in Afghanistan. The country has sacrificed much to institutionalize freedom of speech in more than a decade since the new political system was established. Journalists have faced various problems including violence which is mostly conducted by the State officials. Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan is seriously concerned about the trend.

Armed individuals shoot a journalist in broad daylight in Kabul City, but a month later police is still unable to identify and arrest the shooters. Known individuals abduct another journalist and then torture and beat him in Khost Province; they still openly move across the city without anyone asking them anything. Another journalist, who has tried to make an investigative report on the process of getting a traffic license at the Kabul Traffic Department, is beaten by a traffic officer and then hand-cuffed and detained for an hour. Fortunately, in this last incident, the Ministry of Interior acts and arrests the perpetrator, but it remains yet to be seen whether he will be punished or not.

There are, on average, three to four incidents of violence against journalists every week, but the Government of Afghanistan which is obliged by law to support and protect freedom of speech and journalists usually does nothing to identify and arrest the perpetrators.

In addition to physical violence, journalists are also affected by intra-organizational problems in their media entities. An owner of a private media outlet dismisses its chief editor for his following of principles of journalism which do not go along with what the former wants. The latter receives a brief dismissal note via a mobile phone message from his boss. This is why Nai has constantly called on the Government of Afghanistan to approve the Media Employment Code. The Government has yet to answer to those calls.

Despite all these challenges, freedom of speech and journalism continue to thrive in Afghanistan. The latest achievement is the official naming of an avenue as “The Freedom of Speech Avenue” in Kabul City. The Minister of Information and Culture has officially named the Freedom of Speech Avenue after two years of advocacy work by journalists. This can be invaluable and spiritually motivating to journalists, free thinkers and the public. It will constantly remind the latter of the value of free speech and of their continuous support for the cause.

The current issue of the Media Watch Newsletter covers the following topics:

- 1. A journalist beaten in Khost Province on Election Day**
- 2. A Radio Azadi journalist shot and injured by unidentified armed individuals in Kabul**
- 3. A journalist beaten by a traffic officer in Kabul City**
- 4. A Metra TV journalist insulted and threatened in Herat City**
- 5. A Journalist dismissed from his job after refused to compromise principles of journalism**
- 6. The Freedom of Speech Avenue officially named in Kabul**
- 7. Nai rejected the Freedom House report on Afghanistan media**

A journalist beaten in Khost Province on Election Day

Armed individuals severely beat Lemar Niazi, a veteran journalist, who was elected by the Independent Election Commission as a regional organizer in Khost Province, on Election Day.

According to Mr. Niazi, four observers of a presidential candidate first took him outside the city and then beat him on April 5, 2014. He called the case similar to abduction and added: “After beating me, they disagreed among themselves [on the next step] as one suggested to release me while another one insisted to kill me.”

Mr. Niazi said that one of those who forced him outside the city was a family member of a parliamentarian who was in-charge of Dr. Zalmai Rasool’s election campaign in the province.

Mr. Niazi told Media Watch that the abductors took his mobile phone and his pocket money.

Mr. Niazi also said that after the incident, he informed security forces in Khost Province about it, but no results have come out yet as the abductors have been freely moving across the city.

Meanwhile Mobarez Mohammad Zadran, spokesperson for Khost Governor’s Office, told Media Watch: “The investigations carried out by security forces in this province showed that the perpetrator in this case has escaped the city. The investigations continue.”

The spokesperson for Khost Governor’s Office said that they are ready for any kind of cooperation with Mr. Lemar Niazi and will do anything they can.

He also appreciated media activities in Khost Province and expressed support for them.

Nai’s Media Watch strongly condemns beating of journalists and calls on the local authorities in Khost Province to arrest the perpetrators.

Leaving unpunished the perpetrators who commit violence against journalists will weaken rule of law and increase violence and injustice in the society.

The perpetrators in this case are known individuals according to Mr. Niazi. When such known perpetrators are left unpunished, citizens will speculate that the government falls short of providing security and justice to the citizens.

A Radio Azadi journalist shot and injured by unidentified armed individuals in Kabul

Qasim Solamal, a Radio Azadi journalist, was seriously injured in an armed attack conducted by unidentified armed motorcycle riders near his home in Kabul City on March 20, 2014.

Mr. Solamal told Media Watch that he was shot in both legs and has been hospitalized for a month now.

Mr. Solamal added that he was unable to identify the attackers as they shot him from the back.

According to Mr. Solamal, both attackers intended to kill him as they left his mobile phone and contents of his pockets untouched.

Mr. Solamal said that earlier he had published a report on abuse of children in Taliban [training] centers. Later, the Haqqani Network threatened all employees of Radio Azadi including Mr. Solamal. He said that the mentioned report might have been the reason behind the attack.

According to Mr. Solamal, he informed security officials after the incident. Police has arrested two individuals in connection with the incident.

The Ministry of Interior says it has no information about this particular case but vows that police forces always try their utmost in providing security for citizens and, in particular, for journalists.

Nai's Media Watch strongly condemns this assassinating attack on the mentioned journalist and calls on the country's security officials to strongly act and arrest perpetrators who commit violence against journalists and protect freedom of speech. The Constitution obliges the State to protect citizens and journalists.

A journalist beaten by a traffic officer in Kabul City

A Kabul Traffic Department officer beat Akbar Rostami, an 8 AM Daily journalist, on April 19, 2014. Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan condemned the incident and called on the Ministry of Interior to seriously investigate the case.

In response to the incident of Mr. Rostami's beating and brief detention by a traffic officer, Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan convened a press conference in which Mr. Rostami described the incident as following: "I was beaten by a traffic officer when I wanted to make a report on the process of issuing driver's license and the increase in the number of middlemen."

Mr. Rostami added: "The customers did not follow their turns and this created chaos. In order to document my report I wanted to record the voice when I encountered violence from a traffic police officer."

According to Mr. Rostami, despite introducing himself as a journalist, the traffic police slapped him in face and detained him in a room. He was then violently faced down to ground and was hand-cuffed. He says that the traffic police did not allow him to contact authorities at the Ministry of Interior via mobile phone.

Abdul Mojib Khalwatgar, Executive Director of Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan, said in the conference: "Nai calls the incident against the law and condemns it."

Mr. Khalwatgar continued: "We call on the Government of Afghanistan, particularly on the Cabinet, to stop procrastination and immediately send the draft of the Access to Information Law to the Parliament."

Mr. Khalwatgar commented that this incident shows that a number of authorities in security sector and its related branches still fail to understand the importance of journalism and journalists' works in Afghanistan and they seem not to respect the rights of citizens and journalists.

Meanwhile Kabul Traffic Director confirmed the incident and told media that they have arrested the officer in question.

Sediq Sediqi, Spokesperson for the Ministry of Interior, told Nai's Media Watch that the traffic officer who beat the journalist was arrested and vowed that the Ministry of Interior will introduce the mentioned officer to court.

The incident came only two days after the Minister of Interior, while addressing a media and civil society conference, apologized for violent behavior of some security officials against journalists and vowed to respect journalists and provide security for them. The conference was organized by media and civil society groups to appreciate the performance of security forces.

A Metra TV journalist insulted and threatened in Herat City

Asefa Ghafoori, a reporter for Metra TV in Herat Province, claimed that when together with a colleague she wanted to make a report on the killing of a little girl on the Election Day, they came under violent attack by a local resident.

Ms. Ghafoori said that the child girl was killed after she went together with her mother to the polling site. When the site ran out of polling papers, the voters were pushed out of the site and the little girl fell down on the ground and lost her life.

The report for Metra TV continued: “We obtained permission from Herat Provincial Police Headquarters and the District Governor of Kohsaan to investigate and make a report on the incident. But when we sought the views of a girl who resides in the area, we came under violent attack from a local resident.”

According to Ms. Ghafoori, although officials of Kohsaan District called the attacker as a drug addict, he did not seem to have used drugs when he attacked them.

Ms. Ghafoori called the incident as preplanned and said that the attackers tried to prevent them from talking to the family members of the killed child and reach the details of the case.

She said that the attacker insulted and threatened them to death repeatedly.

Mohammad Massoud Nasiri, News Director at Metra TV, confirmed the insulting of their reporter in the incident in Herat Province and said that they were in the site to make a report.

Mr. Nasiri added: “Fortunately our journalist has not been hurt seriously, but the attacker has wanted to prevent them from doing their work.”

The Metra TV News Director told Media Watch that he has informed security officials in Herat Province about the incident and they have promised to identify and arrest the perpetrators.

While in the last 13 years, the Government of Afghanistan has failed to arrest and take to the court the perpetrators of many cases of violence against journalists, the Ministry of Interior has recently arrested several police and traffic officers that have committed violence against journalists. This needs to be appreciated.

Nai’s Media Watch calls insulting, threatening and beating of journalists as unacceptable and wants the perpetrators of such incidents to be punished.

The Chief Editor of Khama Press dismissed from his job without a lawful reason

Jawed Rostapoor, Chief Editor of Khama Press News Agency, claimed that after he had refused to compromise professional principles of journalism during presidential candidates' campaigning, he was dismissed from job by the Director of the News Agency.

Khama Press News Agency belongs to a political party. When the party decides to support Mr. Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai, a presidential candidate, Mr. Rostapoor, the Chief Editor of Khama Press was asked to provide special coverage of all campaign activities and speeches of Mr. Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai.

Mr. Rostapoor said: "As a journalist and with considering professionalism and principles of journalisms including balance [in coverage] I told him that we function as a media outlet and we should cover campaigning activities of at least three main candidates. But he did not accept and a day later he sent me a dismissal note via a mobile phone message."

Mr. Rostapoor considered such a style of recruitment and dismissal as unprincipled and illogical. He believes that such unprofessional behavior of media owners toward journalists and chief editors concerns the future of journalists and the freedom of speech in the country.

Meanwhile Mr. Khoshnod Nabizada, Director of Khama Press News Agency told Nai's Media Watch that Mr. Rostapoor has cooperated with the News Agency for a while without any written contract, a claim that Mr. Rostapoor has rejected and asserted that his employment at the News Agency has been based on a written contract.

Mr. Nabizada said that the reason behind the dismissal of Mr. Rostapoor, the Chief Editor of Khama Press News Agency, was internal differences which he called it of a usual nature.

Media Watch at Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan believes that no individual can be employed on the basis of an oral contract. This is particularly true for such a position as chief editor which comes next to the director of a media entity and is responsible for the publishing/broadcasting content of the outlet.

This is not the first case of intra-organizational problems in media entities which affect journalists in Afghanistan. Prior to this incident, there have been a number of journalists who have been forced to resign or simply dismissed based on cruel contract terms. Nai's Media Watch calls on the Government of Afghanistan to end procrastination and approve Media Employment Code in which the rights and responsibilities of media owners and of the journalists should be clearly defined.

The Freedom of Speech Avenue officially named in Kabul

The Freedom of Speech Avenue was officially named by the Minister of Information and Culture in the presence of Kabul City Deputy Mayor, members of Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan and tens of journalists in Kabul City on April 24, 2014.

While cutting the ribbon on the Freedom of Speech Avenue, Dr. Sayed Makhdoom Rahin, Minister of Information and Culture, stated: “We are happy to name this avenue as the Freedom of Speech Avenue on the eve of World Press Freedom Day. I take this as good news that Freedom of Speech is institutionalized in Afghanistan and it will never recede. You proud and brave guardians of journalism (journalists and media staff) will carry on the torch as successfully as you performed during the election. Going through this way you will make our dear nation even more proud.”

Engineer Khozhman Oloomi, Deputy Mayor for Urban Services at Kabul Municipality, described the start and end points of the Freedom of Speech Avenue as following: “The Freedom of Speech Avenue starts from the crossing of Ankara Avenue and Hanzala Mosque, passes the Office of Attorney General and ends by Zarghoona High School in Shahr-e-Naw Area.”

Abdul Mojib Khalwatgar, Executive Director of Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan, called the naming of the Freedom of Speech Avenue as a big achievement for the freedom of speech in the country and added: “Afghanistan is the first country among its neighbors and in the region to name an avenue for the Freedom of Speech.”

Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan has been advocating for naming of the Freedom of Speech Avenue for the past two years. It also appreciates the efforts made by Afghanistan journalists and media staff that ultimately made this possible. Nai congratulates all journalists and supporters of Freedom of Speech in Afghanistan for the success in their civic campaigns.

Beforehand, another avenue in Kabul City was named after Ajmal Naqshbandi, a journalist who was killed by Taliban in Helmand.

Nai’s Media Watch considers the naming of Freedom of Speech Avenue as a big achievement for freedom of speech in the country and believes that from now on journalism and media activism have crossed media boundaries to involve all citizens in protecting this value.

The Freedom House report on Afghanistan media is not realistic

Freedom House has recently published its annual report on freedom of press in the world in 2014 which has placed Afghanistan in the category of “Not Free” countries.

This means that the situation of freedom of speech in Afghanistan is similar to that of North Korea. While the Freedom House organization is located in the United States, it has not distinguished among severely despotic countries and semi-democratic countries.

There is no doubt that freedom of speech and press continue to face challenges in Afghanistan, but this never implies that the kind of media limitations that are enforced in North Korea also exist in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan’s Constitution and Media Law indicate the truth that the situation of freedom of speech and press in Afghanistan is better than in its neighboring and many totalitarian countries.

Generally no one is legally pursued for criticizing the State in Afghanistan. No journalist is currently imprisoned in the country. Although files and cases for journalists have been created, due to the presence of legal protections, no journalist has been convicted in a decisive court order yet.

President Karzai decided in a meeting with media representatives to freeze all legal files and cases against journalists whereas in North Korea no one has the right to talk about the President of the country even in their families.

In Afghanistan’s neighbor, the Islamic Republic of Iran, web bloggers, let alone journalists, who implicitly say the truth, spend hard days and difficult nights in Tehran’s Evin Prison.

No one has been banned from writing in Afghanistan yet. The laws here do not give such a mandate to the State. However in Iran for instance, Ms. Zhila Bani-Yaghoub has been punished by spending one year in prison and refraining from writing for another 30 years. Hundreds of journalists and writers have been imprisoned for even longer terms.

In Afghanistan we complain about the State’s lack of attention to media critiques, not about permission to criticize. We complain about neglecting journalists’ complaints, not about State’s official order to press the journalists.

In the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, journalists cannot write anything about Taliban. The country carries a bold figure of killed journalists.

In the Central Asian countries, especially the ones that neighbor Afghanistan, principles of freedom of speech are still unrecognized. Has anyone the right to criticize President Islam Karimov in Uzbekistan, President Imam Ali Rahman in Tajikistan, or President Gurbanguly

Berdimuhamedow in Turkmenistan? However, media in Afghanistan criticize state officials from the President to the local lower ranks without any limitation. Nai's Media Watch emphasizes that this does not mean that journalists do not face challenges in Afghanistan. There are certain people inside the state apparatus who cannot tolerate freedom of speech and press and try to limit them. But they have never succeeded.

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.

For more information on Media Watch project please contact our team at:

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

Note:

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