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Journalists in Afghanistan constantly face violence from various addresses: state officials, terrorists, mafia and other powerful groups and individuals.

Media Watch recorded two cases of violence against journalists in April 2015. One journalist was taken hostage by Taliban in Logar Province and another was beaten by security officers in Herat Province.

Taliban took a local radio station's journalist as a hostage in Logar Province. Later, they freed him after the local mullah-imam and a number of religious clerics mediated. The journalist's freedom came with a cost though: Taliban beat him, the mullah-imam and other intermediaries before they decided to free him.

The Radio-Zeenat journalist was on his way back to Pul-e-Alam City when Taliban took him hostage. He had attended a religious program in a district in Logar Province. Then a madrasa's superintendent and other mullah-imams mediated and tried to convince Taliban to free him. Taliban did so and also beat the journalist and all intermediaries.

Thirteen years after the establishment of a democratic government in Afghanistan, journalists continue to face physical and mental violence. But the administrations of Afghanistan governments have either come short or refrained from curbing the violence.

Also Afghanistan's journalists have to know and consider that the security situation in the country has deteriorated and this is especially evident in a number of provinces and particularly in their remote districts.

A professional principle for journalists is to refrain from risking their lives for the sake of producing reports. No news or report justifies a cost as high as a journalist's life. Therefore, before travelling to remote or unsafe areas, journalists should coordinate with security officials.

The government of Afghanistan is obligated to provide security for its citizens, especially for the journalists.

However, as records show, time and again law enforcement forces including police and national security staffs have not only come short of providing security for journalists, but they themselves have turned to actors of violence against journalists.





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Recently Herat citizens decided to celebrate Herat Feast at Herat Arg, Qala-e-Ikhtiaruddin. The event was promoted by advertisements which encouraged public to attend. On the Feast day, the influx of overwhelming crowd proved too much for the police forces to control and they resorted to violence. This also included violence against journalists: The police forces prevented journalists from entering Herat Arg. They even went further, insulted and severely beat a journalist for a local radio station in Herat.

The National Unity Government (NUG) should pay closer attention to the security of journalists as the latter is among the most vulnerable in the society.

In one hand, journalists face violence from state officials whose cases of corruption and law breaking they reveal; on the other hand, they face violence and fury from terrorist Taliban, other armed groups and mafia when they publish or broadcast truthful reports.

Weaker law enforcement, no prosecution or punishment of violence perpetrators, and deteriorated security situation constitute the main factors behind an increase in violence against journalists in Afghanistan. A big part of violence against journalists will be addressed if the government of Afghanistan would indiscriminately enforce laws on all citizens across the country, and would identify, prosecute and punish perpetrators of violence against journalists according to the law. It would drop the level of violence against journalists remarkably.





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Mediators freed a journalist from Taliban's captivity

Ajmal Amiri, a journalist for Logar-based local Radio Zeenat, was invited to cover a local madrasa's graduation ceremony in one of Logar districts. On his way back to Pul-e-Alam, Ajmal claimed, eight armed individuals stopped his car, took him out, beat him and wanted to kill him. But with mediation from people around, they spared him.

This journalist spent two hours in Taliban's captivity. His life was under threat but religious clerks mediated and managed to free him.

According to Ajmal Amiri, his armed captivators were receiving instructions from elsewhere through radio connection. After they delivered his specifications to the other side via radio, they received an instruction to execute him.

Ajmal Amiri told Media Watch at Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan: If it weren't for the efforts of the superintendent of the Madrasa, who had invited me for the coverage of the ceremony, I would have already been killed by Taliban.

Ajmal Amiri added that although Taliban beat the superintendent, but he tried to prevent them from harming the journalist. Mr. Amiri thought that perhaps the superintendent had learnt about such a possible threat and so intended to accompany him up to a secure area.

Mr. Amiri added that although he knew about possible risks in the area, he only attended to cover the event on the basis of guarantees that the superintendent promised him to provide.

On the other hand, Noorullah Stanekzai, director of Radio Zeenat, confirmed the incident and told Media Watch: Eight Taliban fighters, dressed in National Army uniforms, attempted to kill our journalist who was spared only by mediation from local people and the superintendent.

Security officials in Logar Province have confirmed the incident and added that the journalist should have coordinated with them prior to travelling to the district.

Deen Mohammad Darwesh, spokesperson for Logar governor's office, told Media Watch: There are insecure areas in the Province which are out of government's control. The journalist travelled to one such area without any prior coordination with the Office and security officials.

Journalists have faced threats in Logar Province in the past. The Director of Radio Zeenat said that they have been threatened by the Taliban, unidentified armed persons, parliamentarians, land mafia, as well as security forces so far.





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A journalist's life is more valuable than producing a report or covering news. Before travelling to insecure areas, journalists should coordinate with security forces.

Media Watch at Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan advises all journalists in the country to contact and coordinate with governmental offices prior to travel to any insecure area. They should travel only if they receive guarantees from governmental officials; otherwise, in the absence of any guarantee or any contact with governmental offices, serious risks may threaten their lives.

According to the effective laws in the country, the state of Afghanistan is obligated to provide security for all its citizens, particularly for journalists. It should not allow terrorists to take journalists as hostage or to commit other acts of violence against them.

Police beat up Chief Editor of local Radio Faryad in Herat Province

Khalil Amiri, Chief Editor of Radio-Television Faryad in Herat Province said that police officers beat him while he was passing through the gate of Herat Arg to attend Herat Feast.

A number of Herat citizens and civil activists named April 14 as Herat Feast Day and planned to celebrate it in Herat Arg, Qala-e-Ikhtiaruddin. However, with a violent and inhumane behavior, police prevented guests and journalists from entering Herat Arg.

The Chief Editor of Radio-Television Faryad told Media Watch that he was formally invited to the Feast and produced his invitation and his press card to the guards at the gate. But police did not allow him to get in and instead beat him. It was only by the mediation of Herat Security Director that police finally stopped beating him. Mr. Amiri added that paying no attention to his invitation and press cards, police beat him with their buttstocks and fists before the eyes of hundreds of Herati citizens.

Mr. Amiri said that he had tried to contact security officials as well as Herat Feast organizers to criticize the insulting and violent behavior of the police, but none have responded so far.

A number of journalists in Herat believe that the Feast was only organized for the blue-blooded and state officials rather than Herati citizens. With a very inappropriate and unethical behavior, police prevented citizens including journalists from attending and participating in the Feast.

Bashir Tareq, Chief Editor of Radio Zendagi told Media Watch that the police forces who behaved so erroneously toward the guests and journalists were in fact well-trained officers. Yet it was not clear why they chose to behave so.





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The offices of Herat governor and Herat police chief have to explain why after 13 years since the institution of democratic change in Afghanistan, Herat police do not treat Herati citizens professionally.

Lack of commitment from Leaders of National Unity Government has worsened the situation of freedom of speech and media

Although the National Unity Government signed the Bill of Access to Information into Law, its inattention to enforcement of the Law has caused further problems on the way of access to information. On the other hand, the National Security Council has accelerated its efforts to cut access of people to information, particularly security information.

Abdulmujeeb Khalwatgar, Executive Director of Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan, told Media Watch: The National Security Council's latter decision will not only limit freedom of speech but will eliminate it in Afghanistan.

"A number of official spokespersons and media personnel in provinces cannot talk to media anymore; the government has intended to provide information to media through a controlled channel," added Mr. Khalwatgar. Mr. Khalwatgar said that the Leaders of the National Unity Government have made written pledges to media that they would support freedom of speech and media, particularly people's access to information, through a new approach.

"Unfortunately, they have not only broken their pledge, but have created a circumstance in which we are on the verge of losing whatever open environment the previous administration had created for media," added Mr. Khalwatgar.

Given the poor performance of the Leaders of National Unity Government, Mr. Khalwatgar expressed his concerns over the possibility that Afghanistan may lose its relatively better regional position in freedom of speech and media.

Meanwhile, a number of citizen stated that in the absence of freedom of speech and media, democracy would have been incomplete in a society.

They believed that presence of freedom of speech and free media in the country has made significant impacts in shaping a path toward society's progress.

They thought that media have so far had significant achievements in informing people on their country's current affairs, elevating their political consciousness, and encouraging their overall progress in life.





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Mohammad Taqi Manaqebi, a university professor, told Media Watch that freedom of speech was one of the pillars on which democracy stands. It is a must for forming a free and democratic society. Its absence will leave democracy defective.

Ilyas Ehsaas told Media Watch that in developed countries freedom of speech and media are strongly supported and appreciated. They inform people on their country's internal affairs as well as on developments in their surroundings.

“When I do not have open access to information, I will never be able to take a good decision. So freedom of speech is highly valuable in every aspect of life,” added Mr. Ehsaas.

Currently if freedom of speech is limited in Afghanistan, people will not be able to express their opinions and different perspectives will not reach to politicians and bureaucrats. Problems in the society will remain masked and there will subsequently be no solutions devised to take on them.

Media in the Decade of Transition Conference was held in Kabul

Directors of media institutions in Afghanistan held a two-day conference titled “Media in the Decade of Transition” in Kabul. The conference aimed to discuss challenges that media and journalists face in the country. Afghanistan's Journalists Federation, which includes all journalists' unions and media institutions in the country, organized this two-day conference in which over 100 journalists, media activists and directors from all over the country participated.

The main concerns of media institutions include a decline in international financial support for Afghanistan's media, an increase in the incidence of violence against journalists, and restrictions that fundamentalist groups impose on media.

Media institutions are concerned that international support and funds for Afghanistan media will decline while terrorist groups will increase their threats against journalists during the “Decade of Transition”.

But officials in the National Unity Government stated that they were well aware of the challenges that stand before media and journalists and they will support freedom of speech.

Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, the Chief Executive Officer of the National Unity Government, addressed the conference attendees on April 25, 2015 and emphasized on his pledge and firm support for freedom of speech and media's free activity. “Freedom of speech and free media activity,” added CEO Abdullah, “are among the most fundamental values and achievements of our people in the past 13 years.” CEO Abdullah emphasized that





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“based on Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 34 of Afghanistan’s Constitution, freedom of speech and protection of freedom of speech and free media activities are binding international and national responsibilities of the state of Afghanistan. Therefore, as I pledged in my election’s campaign to protect and support freedom of speech and free media activities, here I firmly reassure you one more time today that supporting and protecting freedom of speech and you, the journalists, are among my top priorities.” CEO Abdullah added: “Since the beginning of the National Unity Government I have often met with media directors and civil society activists who have been active in supporting freedom of speech. We have discussed and investigated the problems and have taken necessary measures to prevent any possible threats.” “I will particularly focus on your suggestions and will fulfil the government’s responsibility to stand with you,” said CEO Abdullah.

The Chief Executive Officer asked journalists not to let terrorist activities be promoted through media: “Under no circumstances media should allow to be used as a serving tool for terrorists’ propaganda. This is a national responsibility and you are aware of it.”

But journalists asserted that it was their responsibility to try to gather information and report on any incident that may happen while government’s spokespersons come short of their responsibilities and do not respond to journalists’ questions.

At the same time, violence against journalists has increased every year. The statistics gathered by Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan show that the incidence of violence against journalists in 2014 has increased by 64% comparing to last year. Emergence of new extremist groups such as “Islamic State” or ISIS has posed even more serious threats for Afghanistan’s journalists.

Media Watch Director, Sediqullah Tawhidi said: “Conservatives, retrogressive forces, armed groups and terrorists will put further pressure on media. In this two-day conference, we will explore ways of tackling those threats as well as ways of making the government fulfil its obligation to protect and support us.”

Media organizations criticized the government for its constantly chanting slogans of protecting and supporting media and journalists in the past 13 years, but have failed to match their slogans with action.

Tens of journalists lost their lives or were injured or beaten or insulted in the past 13 years but the perpetrators of the violence have not been prosecuted yet.

Mr. Tawhidi added that the government should prove by action that it protects and supports journalists: “We hope that the gap between journalists and the government be bridged. Whenever a journalist is threatened or beaten, responsible governmental organs should immediately act and prosecute the perpetrators. Whenever





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this happens, it will mean that the government supports and protects us.”

At the end of the conference, participating media organizations intend to share with the government and international community their suggestions and concerns on the challenges that lie ahead of media.

Asr-e-Andisha Monthly was published in Kabul

The first issue of Asr-e-Andisha Monthly was published in Kabul and was officially introduced in a ceremony in the Media Hall of the Ministry of Information and Culture in which the Executive Director of Nai, and a number of journalists and writers took part.

In his address to the participants, Shamim Shah Didar, the publisher of Asr-e-Andisha Monthly said that the Monthly will be a free and independent medium which will pursue the following goals: raising intellectual capacity and motivating writers as well as contributing to promote the culture of book reading.

Mr. Didar also said that the newly published monthly will contribute to promotion of freedom of speech and fact-based reporting in the country. Introducing cultural heritage of the country will be another of the Monthly's goals.

Speaking in the ceremony, Nai Executive Officer, Abdulmujeeb Khalwatgar, made a number of suggestions for professional improvement of the newly published monthly.

Mr. Khalwatgar said that he hoped for Asr-e-Andisha to provide a space for discourse among different age groups including juvenile and young adults and to serve as a bridge between social and print media.

Another speaker, Fahim Seddiqi, Director of Khatt-e-Naw Organization said he was hopeful that with their robust management youth can spark a big change in the country's media community.

Media Watch called the launch of new publication as an important step in the areas of freedom of speech and youth activities in the country.

Media Watch is hopeful that the young team of Asr-e-Andisha Monthly comes up with a different approach and takes bold steps to promote freedom of speech and the culture of book reading in the country.





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Civil activists launched campaign to promote culture of reading across the country

A number of civil activists organized a symbolic program titled “Reading Papers, Expanding a Culture of Reading and Responsible Citizenship for Building and Bringing Positive Change in the Society” in Kabul on April 8, 2015. They invited their fellow citizens to take responsibility toward their society.

Sayed Ehsan Taaheri, Director of Rawand-e-3 and one of the organizers of the program told Media Watch: Our main goal is to persuade people to read papers and take responsibility toward their society.

Mr. Taaheri added that their next step will be to organize an even more expanded program in the provinces of Badakhshan, Balkh, Bamyan, Kunduz, and Helmand soon. They have planned to ask for assistance from mosques, local councils, and families in promoting this culture.

Chief Editor of Kherad Weekly, Jawed Rostapoor, told Media Watch that organizing such movements in Afghanistan has been very important. They will help promoting a culture of reading particularly among youth. He added that reading is an integral part of social life in other societies.

Mr. Rostapoor said that he found challenges on the way of implementing such a plan in Afghanistan: We have several problems including lack of an institutionalized culture of reading as well as lack of a perspective that should look to the issue as a need to improve.

According to Mr. Rostapoor, there is a need for creation of environments conducive for reading. He added that essential opportunities and facilities such as public libraries, reading centers, and appropriate family environments have not been adequately provided so far.

Cultural commentators believe that there is not enough popular interest in reading print papers; however, there have been tens of print media operating in the country in the past 13 years.

Meanwhile, Media Watch Director, Sediqullah Tawhidi, called the current movement a symbolic civil act. However, he expressed his concerns over a declining trend in the interest of Afghanistan citizens in reading books.

“It is very good to organize such a campaign to persuade youth to read papers,” said Mr. Tawhidi.

He added that among the least developed countries, Afghanistan is perhaps the only country where the majority of its people have no interest in reading print media. Mr. Tawhidi added that due to a low level of literacy and an overall lack of interest in reading print media, the latter has faced serious financial problems.

Mr. Tawhidi further added that one of the media’s main activities is to teach and inform their readership. Therefore, they have to take into consideration the standard ways of writing and reporting so that they can win trust of a larger number of their readership.





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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/Media-watch.htm>

Note:

1. To maintain confidentiality and to protect sources it was not possible for Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan to corroborate the incidents by carrying out additional investigations.

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