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Media Watch Report

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Media Watch Report

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

- Two journalists summoned on the order of Hanif Atmar, the national security advisor
- A journalist escaped an assassination attempt in Balkh province
- A journalist was threatened in his home by an unidentified armed person
- Police and Security officers insulted a number of journalists while they were making reports on a suicide bomb attack in Kabul city
- Journalists banned news coverage of Balkh Police Headquarters' activities for a week
- New print media joined Afghanistan's media family





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The month of Asad (July 23 – Aug. 22) was full of incidents for journalists, media and citizens of Afghanistan. The government imposed clearer restrictions and limitations on freedom of speech. Two specific cases affected the journalists' community of Afghanistan in particular and caused their grave concerns over further restriction of freedom of speech in the country: In the first case, national security advisor, Hanif Atmar, ordered security organs to summon and interrogate two journalists about a critical Facebook page. In the second one, the National Security Council ordered security organs to detain administrators of Kabul Taxi Facebook page.

In another development, a journalist escaped an assassination attempt in Balkh province. Armed motorcyclists chased and then ordered the journalist to stop while he was on his way from Mazar-e-Sharif to Dehdadi district. When they opened fire at the journalist, he managed to escape.

Another journalist in Takhaar province was threatened in his home. The journalist said that an armed individual on the roof of his house aimed at him and urged him to be careful about his movements. He also added that he had recently published a report on a case in which a mullah raped a girl. The report, according to the journalist, made some ulema (religious clerics) angry.

Meanwhile, using abusive language, police and security officers have insulted a number of journalists who wanted to make a report about a Taliban terrorist attack in Kabul city.

In a separate development, Asia and Mehrbaan local TV stations got back their broadcasting licenses. The Ministry of Telecommunication had stopped their broadcasting for they had not paid their due taxes and frequency fees. Journalists and media support organizations protested the Ministry's decision and called it unlawful. As a result of their advocacy, both TV stations were granted back their licenses.

In spite of all unpleasant news for journalists and freedom of speech this month, there were some positive developments as well: One new publication in Kabul and another in Paktia province were initiated.

The Daily Paper 24 in Kabul and Eftekhar-e-Afghan Periodical in Paktia kicked off their first issues. Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan is hopeful that they can continue circulating information in a limited competitive atmosphere.





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Nai supporting open Media in Afghanistan

Two journalists summoned on the order of Hanif Atmar, the national security advisor

On the order of the national security advisor, Hanif Atmar, one of the offices of the National Directorate of Security summoned and interrogated Zaki Daryabi, chief editor of Etelat-e-Roz daily paper, and Jawaad Naaji, a media activist, one after another about a Facebook page called Kabul Taxi on Aug 23, 2015. Kabul Taxi Facebook page mainly criticizes state leaders and officials.

Both journalists feel at risk now. They say that Kabul Taxi Facebook page has criticized [state] leaders and influential personalities. “The National Security Advisor and supporters of criticized leaders think that we are the administrators of this Facebook page and they will put our lives and those of our families at risk,” jointly said both journalists, Zaki Daryabi and Jawaad Naaji.

Jawaad Naaji is a former intelligence employee at the Office of Administrative Affairs and currently performs media activities. On the order of Hanif Atmar, the national security advisor, the National Directorate of Security summoned and interrogated Mr. Daryabi for three hours recently. He was accused of administrating Kabul Taxi critical Facebook page. However, until the very lasts moments of their investigation, the National Directorate of Security investigators did not present any evidence to prove that Mr. Naaji was the administrator of the Page, and he was ultimately allowed to go home.

In an exclusive interview with Media Watch at Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan, Mr. Naaji said: “I feel that there are certain circles to strangulate freedom of speech in this country. If the current situation goes on, soon we will burry freedom of speech in a graveyard known as Afghanistan.”

Similarly, a day before this, the National Directorate of Security summoned and interrogated Zaki Daryabi, chief editor of Etelat-e-Roz daily paper on the same accusation of administrating Kabul Taxi Facebook page. The National Directorate of Security did not present any evidence of his involvement in the Facebook page and ultimately released him after several hours of detention and interrogation.

After the National Directorate of Security summoned and interrogated Mr. Naaji at the order of Mr. Atmar, the national security advisor, he has lost his faith in freedom of speech in Afghanistan. Mr. Naaji said: “This baseless accusation has created terror for the future of my work and put at risk my life and





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Nai supporting open Media in Afghanistan

those of my family.”

Naaji also said: “If I or any member of my family face a security problem, Mr. Hanif Atmar, the national security advisor to the President, will be responsible. With his hurried accusation, he has put at risk my life and those of my family and friends.”

Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan held a press conference in Kabul and called the national security advisor, Mr. Atmar’s act in violation of the law. Nai strongly criticized the government’s imposition of further restrictions on freedom of speech and media and called upon the leaders of the National Unity Government to respect civil rights and freedom of speech.

Abdulmujeeb Khalwatgar, chief executive officer of Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan said in the press conference: “What the national security advisor, Mr. Atmar, did is beyond and against the law. President and the Chief Executive Officer should ask Mr. Atmar for explanation.”

Nai executive officer added: “Unlike it was expected that after approval and signing of the Law of Access to Information, the situation of freedom of speech and media would improve, the National Unity Government has turned circumstances for media even worse than they were at the time of the former government administration.”

Kabul Taxi

Kabul Taxi is a critical Facebook page which has attracted a high number of fans in a short period of time. It publishes critical and satirical material and criticizes government leaders and officials in satirical and explicit terms. The page was initiated five months ago. It has so far written about and criticized performances of political leaders and ethnic and religious influential figures. Yet the identity of its administrators has remained unknown.

The latest writing published on the Page was about national security advisors. It was titled “Atmar Music Band”. It disclosed names of the national security advisors and their monthly payment.





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Nai supporting open Media in Afghanistan

The national security advisor considered the piece as leaking the state's secret information and called it a violation of the law. He asked national security organs to identify and arrest administrators of Kabul Taxi Facebook page.

Abdulmujeeb Khalwatgar, chief executive officer of Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan, called the national security advisor's claim as irrational and added that names of national security advisors are not among the state's secret information.

Mr. Khalwatgar commented on the satirical pieces: There is no problem with writing satires as indicated in the Mass Media Law. A satirist can discuss a social or political problem and can name individuals and politicians. Mr. Khalwatgar added that according to the Mass Media Law, any complaint against media should be addressed to and investigated through the Mass Media Commission.

After Nai held a press conference and issued a statement, the National Security Council responded to Nai's protests and those of other social networks' users, with publishing a statement in their official Facebook page. In their statement, the National Security Council called freedom of speech as a government's achievement and promised to protect it.

Part of the statement released by the National Security Council reads:

“In violation of the country's effective laws, a Facebook page with unknown identity has recently published state's secret information including identities of the National Security Council's staffs. This will undoubtedly cause serious security risks.

Office of the National Security Council, in accordance with the principle of freedom of speech and people's right of access to information, demanded the relevant offices to deal with violators involved in the case as law dictates, and to prevent further disclosure of security sector's secret information.”

Meanwhile Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan believes that appointment of advisors to the National Security Council has always been announced through media and what the National Security Council calls as 'secret' is nothing more than a pretense.





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Nai supporting open Media in Afghanistan

Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan believes that any summoning of journalists by security or judicial organs without any clear and sufficient reasons and prior to investigations by the Mass Media Commission is considered an assault on freedom of speech.

Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan calls upon the President and the Chief Executive Officer of the country to honor their previously made promises to protect freedom of speech; to prevent state officials from committing unlawful acts; and to ask the national security advisor for explanation about this latest case.

A journalist escaped an assassination attempt in Balkh province

Abdulhameed Saafi, journalist and news anchor at Arzo Television in Balkh province, escaped an attack by armed persons on the way from Mazar-e-Sharif to Dehdadi district, Balkh province.

Mr. Safi lives in Dehdadi district of Balkh province and works in Mazar-e-Sharif. He travels from home to work and vice versa, each way 15 kilometers, every day. He told Media Watch in an interview: “On Wednesday in the evening, like every other day, I was done with my work in Mazar-e-Sharif and began to drive to my home in Dehdadi district. On the way I realized that two motorcyclists were chasing my car. At first, I did not take them seriously and continued on my way. A little later they ordered me to stop by an orchard. I learned that the situation was not normal so I did not stop and drove even faster. The armed motorcyclists were left behind and opened fire at my car from the back. Fortunately the bullets did not hit me but they severely damaged my car. I was so terrified that I lost control of my car, deviated and plunged off the road.”

Mr. Safi continued: “After my car plunged off the road, they did not come after me. This shows that the attackers were not simply thieves or rubbers. They thought that the bullets hit me and I was already killed, so they left.”

In order to learn more about the case and whether police has captured the attackers, Media Watch contacted Balkh Province Police Headquarters.





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Nai supporting open Media in Afghanistan

Sher Jan Durrani, spokesperson for Balkh Police, said that they had no information about the case and added: “No one has complained to Balkh Police about such an incident yet.”

Media Watch expresses its concerns over increased violence against journalists and calls upon the Ministry of Interior of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to step up their efforts in providing security for citizens and particularly for journalists. Media Watch also calls upon Balkh Police Headquarter to seriously investigate this criminal case and identify and arrest the perpetrators.

A journalist was threatened in his home by an unidentified armed person

Erfan Barzgar, local journalist for Iranian Radio Dari in Takhaar and Kunduz provinces, claims that on Aug 3, 2015 at around 12:00 AM, an unidentified gunman who hid on the roof of Mr. Barzgar’s house intended to shoot him.

Mr. Barzgar says that a possible motivation behind the incident might be a previous report that he had produced and published on a case in which a religious clerk had raped a girl in Kalafgaan district, Takhaar province.

He added that in his report he had took into consideration all sides of the case, but Takhaar’s Council of Ulema (=religious clerks), called his report as an accusation against the involved religious clerk.

The local journalist for Iranian Radio Dari told Media Watch at Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan that three months ago when he published his report, it provoked controversy and the Council of Ulema in Takhaar province discussed it in their meetings. They decided that the journalist should be sentenced to death. Then he shared the information with security organs.

Mr. Erfan also said that he had previously received threatening phone calls and had shared the information with security organs on a timely basis. After their investigations, they found out that the threatening caller was himself a police officer in one of security districts in Kabul city.

.... Noor Mohammad Hakimi, Takhar Police Chief, told Media Watch: “After the journalist contacted us, we immediately proceeded to the incident’s scene and have ever since taken the case under investigation.”





نی حمایت کننده رسانه های آزاد افغانستان
Nai supporting open Media in Afghanistan

He added that police is equally responsible for the security of all citizens and “it is our duty to arrest perpetrators in such cases and refer them to judicial organs.”

Media Watch at Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan condemns all kinds of violence against journalists and calls upon security organs to arrest perpetrators of such cases and refer them to judicial organs.

Lack of police investigation of cases of violence against journalists in the past 14 years has heartened enemies of freedom of speech and those people whose crimes, law-breaking, corruption and debauchery media have revealed. They in turn have taken journalists and media off their way.

Media Watch calls upon both leaders of the National Unity Government to honor and act upon their electoral campaign promises to protect freedom of speech and media and to take to the courts the perpetrators of violence against journalists. They should not allow further harm to freedom of speech in the country.

Police and Security officers insulted a number of journalists while they were making reports on a suicide bomb attack in Kabul city

A number of journalists expressed their concerns over increased incidence of security forces and police’s insults and misbehavior towards journalists.

Security officials and police insulted and misbehaved with journalists and photojournalists who were filming and making reports on the scene of a bloody suicide bomb attack in Kabul on Aug 22, 2015 . The attack took place in Microrayon-e- Chaar (Fourth Microrayon) area in front of Shinozada Hospital in Kabul city. It took many casualties, most of them civilians, and inflicted extensive damage to the businesses, apartments, and passing vehicles in the area.

Massoud Hossaini, a renowned professional photojournalist in Afghanistan, was among those insulted by security forces while taking pictures from the scene of the attack.

Mr. Hossaini told Media Watch in an interview: “Security officers were insulting me by calling abusive words and preventing me from taking pictures. One National Security officer threatened to break my legs





نی حمایت کننده رسانه های آزاد افغانستان
Nai supporting open Media in Afghanistan

if I did not go away from the scene.”

Mr. Hossaini added: “One National Security officer repeatedly called me abusive words and insulted me before other soldiers and journalists.”

Naweed Barezai, a journalist for Pazhwaak News Agency, was also insulted by security officers on the same day. Mr. Barezai told Media Watch: “Security officers, particularly National Security officers, had an inappropriate behavior towards journalists. If we had not overlooked their misbehavior, they may even have beaten us. They called us abusive words and told us ‘if you do not go away, we would come to you and turn your situation even worse.’”

Media Watch at Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan believes in access to information as a lawful right of citizens and condemns any acts of insult or misbehavior against journalists.

Security officers and all security organs should understand that as their duty is to protect people’s life and property, journalists’ duty, according to the law, is to circulate information. They have the right to access breaking information on various cases including on security incidents and to spread them to the citizens of the country.

People of Afghanistan have the right to know what has happened in their environment and what reactions has an incident triggered. Security officials cannot deprive citizens from their fundamental right.

On the other hand, security circumstances in Afghanistan are not favorable to country’s citizens in general and to the journalists in particular. In order for their own safety, journalists need to follow security procedures and guidance provided by security officials on the scenes of terrorist and suicide bomb attacks so that they remain safe from any probable risk.





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Journalists banned news coverage of Balkh Police Headquarters' activities for a week

The Advocacy Committee for Journalists Rights and Safety in Northern Afghanistan banned news coverage of Balkh Police for one week. A number of Committee members visited Balkh Police Headquarters to get information on how cases of violence against journalists have been investigated. However, Balkh Police Chief avoided meeting with them and his secretary insulted them. The visiting journalists took the latest actions by Balkh Police as an insult to them and left the police office.

Abdulhamid Rahimi, a member of the Advocacy Committee for Journalists Rights and Safety in Northern Afghanistan, said that although they had already set an appointment to meet with Balkh Police Chief, various pretenses were made and he declined to meet with them after they have already waited for one hour. Mr. Rahimi continued: "We spent more than one hour in the waiting room at the Office of the Police Chief. When we told the secretary that after one hour of waiting we had to meet with Police Chief, he told us to wait for another five minutes. After five minutes, we wanted to meet with the Police Chief but this time his secretary told us either to wait more or to leave at once." Mr. Rahimi commented that it was not only that the Police Chief did not want to meet with them, but his secretary also treated them disrespectfully.

The Advocacy Committee for Journalists Rights and Safety in Northern Afghanistan convened a press conference and announced a one-week ban on news coverage of Balkh Police activities. However, Balkh Police Chief, Sayed Kamaal Saadaat, denied any disrespectful behavior by his secretary and cited his extremely busy and packed schedule as the reason for postponing of the meeting with members of the journalists' advocacy committee. Balkh Police Chief said: "Here comes all sorts of people; a woman comes and complains why she was not given the priority; another person comes and says he should be given the priority because he is a member of the Provincial Council. I have my own schedule here. Here it is not like any other Police Chief office. I have no single minute without a task to do. I do not think they have waited for one hour and a half."

The Advocacy Committee for Journalists Rights and Safety in Northern Afghanistan consists of five media and journalists advocacy organizations and focuses on advocacy for journalists and media in that part of the country.

Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan strongly condemns any insult or misbehavior towards jour-





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Nai supporting open Media in Afghanistan

nalists and journalists' advocacy organizations and calls upon government officials to prevent such unlawful acts in the future.

Instead of insulting and arrogantly behaving towards journalists and journalists' advocacy committee, Balkh Police Headquarters Office should coordinate and cooperate in improving security condition and should identify and arrest perpetrators of violence against citizens, particularly of violence against journalists.

New print media joined Afghanistan's media family

Daily Paper 24 in Kabul

Daily Paper 24 began to publish in Kabul. Hussain Alizada, chief editor of Daily Paper 24, says: "The primary goal of this paper is to report and circulate information. The secondary goal involves critique of the society and state."

There are seven journalists working for the Daily Paper 24.

Daily Paper 24 is printed in four pages with a circulation of 2,000 every day. The daily printing cost for the Paper amounts to AFS 9,000.

Lack of financing is a constant concern for journalists who initiate print media. In the past, there have been many daily and weekly papers which have ceased their publication because of inadequate funds.

Mr. Alizada said that a sizeable budget is required to sustain publishing of the Paper and that if they cannot attract commercial advertisements, he will be concerned for the future of his daily paper.

Mr. Alizada added: "Anyone living in Afghanistan needs to be concerned for his life in the first place, let alone initiating a work and be sure that you would take it until the end. Nothing is predictable in Afghanistan. Tomorrow may bring problems."

Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan calls publish of Daily Paper 24 as a valuable step towards expansion of media and wishes the Paper to be successful in the competitive market.





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Media Watch expects the professional staffs of the Daily Paper 24 to pursue principles of journalism, consider the expectations of their audience, publish contents of value, inform public opinion, and expand culture based on humanitarian values.

Media Watch calls upon the government of Afghanistan to unconditionally support the country's media, particularly print media, as they struggle to reach self-sufficiency through publishing commercial ads. The state of Afghanistan is obliged by the Constitution to support this section of media.

Eftekhaar-e-Afghan Periodical initiated in Paktia province

Eftekhaar-e-Afghan Periodical is different from other print media even on a national level for it does not publish news, but material on anthropology, human rights, sociology, philosophy and culture. It also declines to publish any political material. Fared Ahmad Taskin, chief editor of the Periodical, believes that first a society's culture should be polished; political issues come next. Mr. Taskin said: "Our motto is to inform and enlighten man. With our work, we would like to promote culture and humanism in the society."

Eftekhar-e-Afghan Periodical is published in Pashto language in four pages and 2,000 circulations in Paktia. Due to lack of budget, the publication cannot predict a precise timeframe for publishing its next issues and, therefore, has called itself a periodical. The next issue of the Periodical will be published as soon as sufficient funds will become available.

The pale culture of reading printed papers in Afghanistan has always been a subject of criticism for print media staffs and cultural figures. But due to the Periodical's unique characteristic, the chief editor of Eftekhar-e-Afghan is hopeful that it can attract more readerships in Paktia and other neighboring provinces.

Media Watch at Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan welcomes Eftekhar-e-Afghan's debut in the family of Afghanistan's media and supports this periodical and its unique character.

Print media in Afghanistan usually focus on news and political issues. Eftekhaar-e-Afghan is among few print publications that mostly concentrate on promoting and enhancing a culture of citizenship which is praiseworthy.





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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.

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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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