



**Six - Month Report(Jan - June 2017)**  
**Afghanistan, A Dangerous Country for Journalists and Media**

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## **Introduction**

Like the first half of last year, the first six months of 2017 was marred by attacks and threats against media and journalists. With increasing insecurity and instability in the country, the threats and challenges against journalists and media organizations have also increased despite a number of measures taken by the government of Afghanistan to improve security and safety of journalists.

Freedom of Expression and Freedom of Press has been under attack by different parties to the conflict, especially terrorist groups. This has increased the risk of losing press freedom which is considered Afghanistan's biggest achievement since the fall of the Taliban in 2001. Among the terrorist groups, the scale of threats and violence exercised by the Islamic State of Khurasan Province (ISKP) against media and journalists have increased. In the latest instance, in May 2017, this group attacked Afghanistan's public broadcaster, Radio Television Afghanistan (RTA), in Jalalabad city that resulted in the killing of four of its employees. This attack and repeated threats issued by this group against media and journalists in Nangrahar Province, has been a serious cause of concern in the press community in Nangrahar and the neighboring provinces in the east of the country.

The lack of seriousness on the part of the government in protecting the value of Freedom of Expression and Free Press has not only added to the concerns, but also created the grounds for elements within and outside the government who are against this value to suppress Freedom of Expression and independent media work. Diminishing attention towards protecting these values and the exacerbating challenge of access to information has raised apprehensions that the state authorities do not believe in the value of media work in the society and its role in strengthening democracy, promoting human rights, improving good governance and fighting corruption.

This is Afghan Journalists Safety Committee's ninth report that documents the figures of violence against journalists. Cases recorded in this report took place between January 1st and June 30th, 2017. In addition to studying the safety condition of journalists, this report also briefly explains the status of Freedom of Expression and reporting across the country in the first half of 2017. It is worth mentioning that the recording of cases of violence against journalists and media workers has been carried out based on AJSC's policies and procedures for documenting cases of violence against journalists. Only cases of threats and violence directly connected to journalism work or have occurred while performing media work have been recorded.

## Facts and Figures of Violence Against Journalists in the First Six Months of 2017

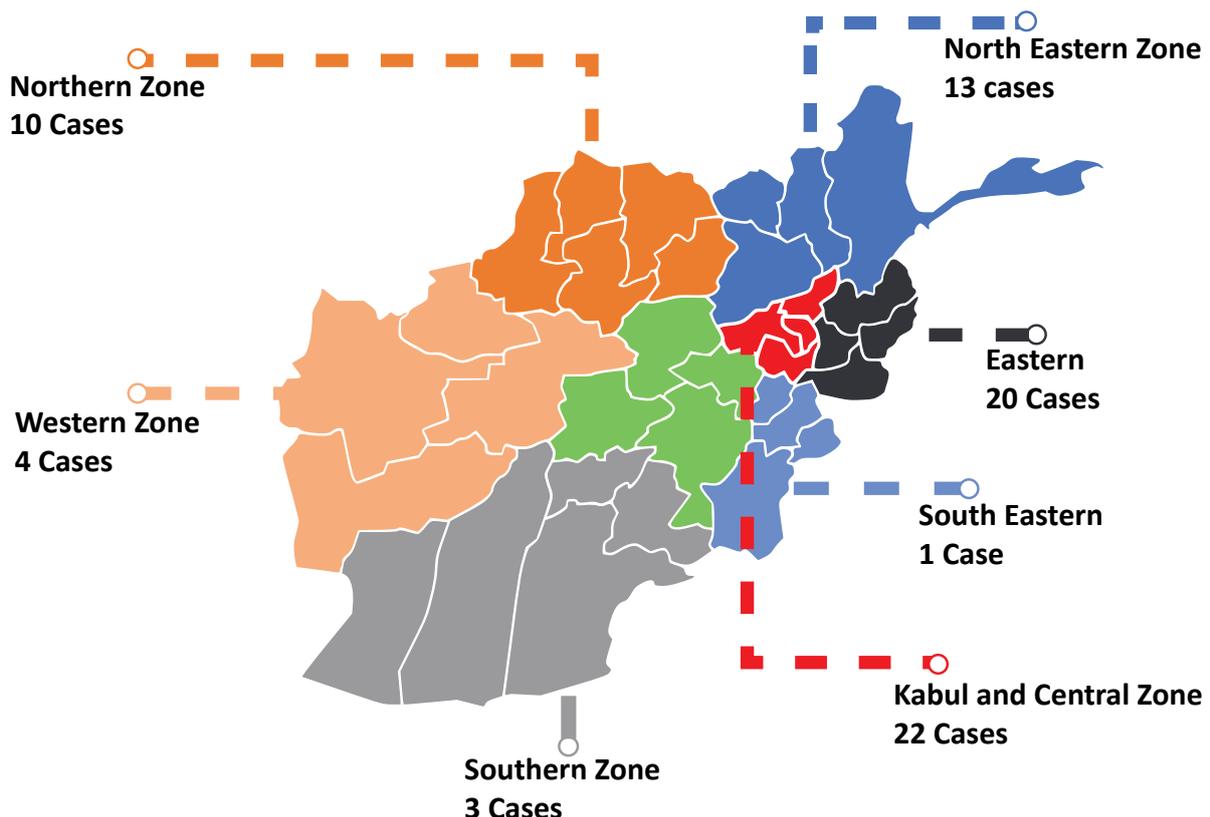
In the first six months of 2017, AJSC has recorded 73 cases which includes killing, intimidation, beating, inflicting injury, humiliation, and detention of journalists. These figures show a 35% increase relative to the first six months of 2016 during which 54 of such cases were recorded. In this period, 10 journalists and media workers have been killed, which has caused serious concern for AJSC about the continued killing of journalists in high numbers. The terrorist groups of Taliban and ISKP are responsible for all incidents of killings. Those who lost their lives were killed either by direct attack on their media outlets or during the terrorist incidents. In the ISKP attack on the compound of Radio Television Afghanistan (RTA), Afghanistan's public broadcaster, which took place in May 2017, four staff members of the media organization were killed. In the attack that was carried out in March on the parliament building in Kabul, 2 workers of the parliament TV were killed. In the big truck bomb attack that took place near the German Embassy, four journalists and media workers lost their lives.

During these six months, like the previous years, most of the violence against journalists in terms of quantity, has been committed by government affiliated individuals and security forces. They are responsible for 34 cases of violence that form 46% of all instances of violence. The violence exercised by government officials is mostly due to the revelations by journalists of illegal activities of these individuals and institutions.

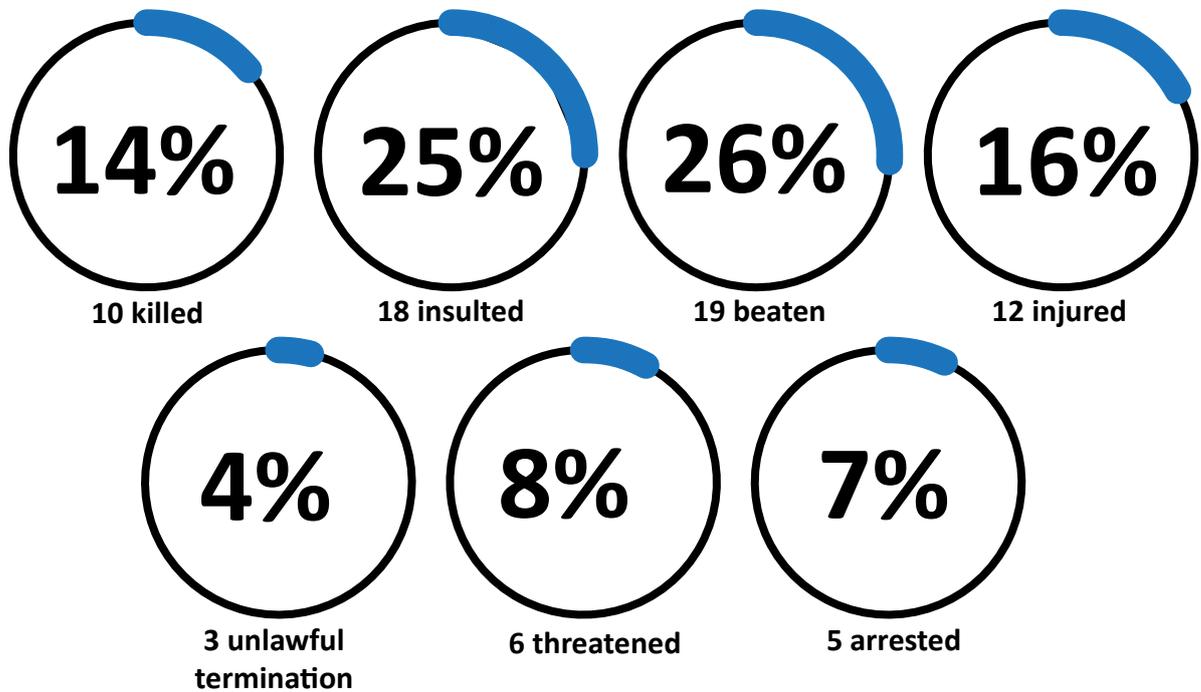
The terrorist groups of ISKP and Taliban feature second in terms of the quantity of violent acts committed against journalists, but the intensity of the violence carried out by these groups is far bloodier and more severe as they are responsible for all incidents involving killing of journalists. The intimidation and violence of terrorist groups against journalists is increasing. These groups mainly threaten media organizations and journalists because they refuse to cooperate with them and succumb to their demands to provide coverage for the news that is supplied to the media by these groups. Ideological aversion of these groups to the concept of Free Press and the important role that the press plays in informing the public is another reason for their animosity towards media and journalists.

In addition to terrorist groups and government officials, in certain instances, members of parliament, provincial councils, governors, warlords and unidentified individuals have also been responsible for committing violent acts against journalists. Likewise, these individuals and groups usually threaten journalists primarily for revelations of their abuses.

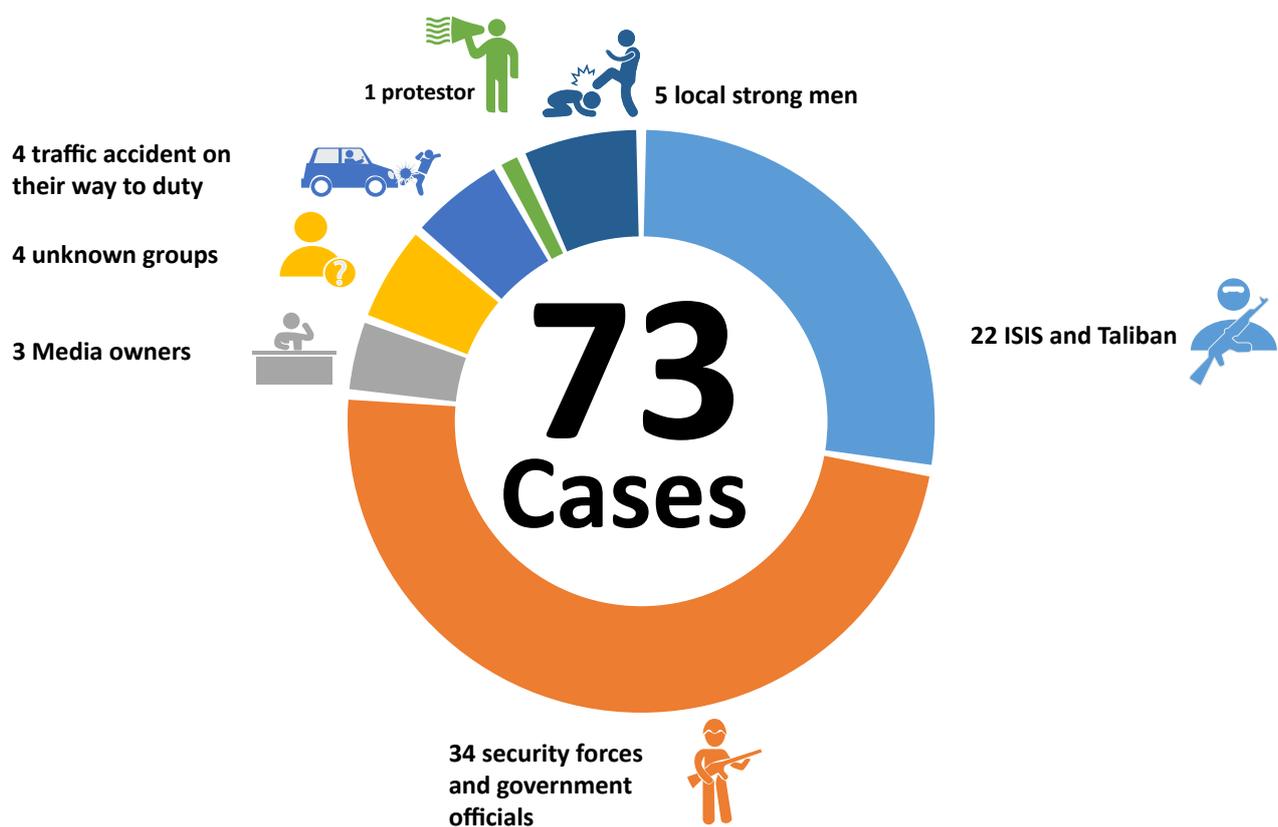
Figures on Violence Against Journalists in Different Zones of Afghanistan:



## Figure on Types of Violence



## Perpetrators of Violence



## Examples of Violence Against Journalists



On 8 March 2017, Farid Tanha, a journalist from Pajhwok News Agency, faced threats and intimidation after publishing a report about land grabbing by member of the Provincial Council of Parwan Province. He was subsequently threatened to death. After Mr. Tanha reported the incident to AJSC, he was transferred to Kabul for some time while AJSC held talks on his case with the pertinent authorities until the issue was resolved. This journalist was protected and supported by AJSC until resolution of the matter.



On 17 May 2017, ISKP attacked the building of Radio-Television-Afghanistan in Nangarhar Province killing four of their staff members. AJSC transferred one of the injured to Kabul for emergency treatment. AJSC also provided psychological counseling for the rest of the employees of the Nangarhar branch of Radio-Television-Afghanistan who had experienced trauma as a result of the terrorist incident in sessions held in Jalalabad and Kabul cities. Additionally, AJSC provided monetary assistance for the family of those killed.



On 25 May 2017, Journalist Fawad Talash and his cameraman Jawaid Sadat of Arezo TV went to interview the governor of Baghlan Province along with two other colleagues. During the interview, the governor intimidated them for asking questions regarding the administrative and security problems in the province and asked them to erase the recorded material from their camera. When they resisted the governor's demands, the four of them were unofficially detained in the governor's office. Immediately after representative of the AJSC in Northeastern zone was notified of the matter, he spoke with the governor and police chief of Baghlan Province which led to the freeing of the journalists and his safe escort to Balkh Province.



On 12 June 2017, Tolo News journalist Ziar Khan, along with several other journalists were beaten up while trying to prepare a report on the delay in the construction work on the second lane of Kabul-Jalalabad highway by the guards of the construction company commissioned to construct the highway. They were illegally detained and locked in a room. When notified, the zonal representative of AJSC in the east raised the issue with the provincial official. The police intervened and detained three guards of the construction company freeing the journalists from illegal detention.



AJSC has undertaken psychological counseling programs for journalists who have survived terrorist attacks or have experienced psychological trauma as a result of such attacks. During the first six months of 2017, over 50 journalists have been treated and provided with the necessary counseling. Over 70 other journalists are due to be counseled as part of this initiative across the country.

The inability to employ safety measures and use necessary equipment in the scenes of incidents and frontlines while reporting has increased the exposure of journalists to further risks. Considering this need, AJSC has been organizing hostile environment training courses and provided for some media workers vests on which the word 'journalist' is inscribed in local languages. These vests will distinguish journalists from the rest of the crowd, particularly security forces during battlefield operations or riots.

## **Inaccessible Information (Presentation of Information that is inaccurate, obsolete or cliché by government officials)**

Lack of access to information has been a lingering challenge during this reporting period as well. Most of the government spokespersons and officials both in the capital and the provinces have dodged direct answers; they have refrained to provide accurate and timely information to journalists and attempted that information remain concealed. This has exacerbated the recent phenomenon of ‘fake news’, particularly in the social media landscape. This is despite the constitutional emphasis of access to information (According to article 50 of the Constitution, access to information is the right of every Afghan) and the implementation of Access to Information law.

The complaint of most journalists concerning government officials is that that they do not supply necessary information on time to journalists. We can bring up as an example how the information was spun in the terrorist attack that was carried out on Sardar Mohammad Daud Khan Hospital (the Army’s 400-bed hospital). Following this incident, the government did not provide journalists with necessary information on the number of casualties. Pressed to inform the public, media had to rely on eye witnesses and unofficial sources to obtain the needed information. This led to the emergence of varying accounts for the number of casualties and how the incident happened, which confused media outlets and the public. Likewise, in the attack that took place on 209 Shaheen Military Corps in Balkh Province, the spokesperson of the army reported the number of casualties to be 8, whereas over a hundred army personnel had lost their lives in that attack.

Following these two incidents, the government faced pervasive criticism from journalists for failing to provide correct, timely and accurate information. These criticisms were leveled in a direct meeting organized by AJSC to facilitate discussion between journalists and government spokespersons. In this meeting, the journalists demanded that the authorities and responsibilities of government spokespersons be specified so that they are enabled to make timely decisions and provide accurate information based on their own authority.

As per the law of access to information, government agencies should appoint a person to act as the source for providing information. Yet, this shortcoming is still visible in some government agencies. For example, the President’s Office, the Supreme Court and the General Directorate of the Administrative Affairs of the Office of the President are still to have official spokespersons.

Likewise, per the law of access to information, the commission to provide oversight for the implementation of this law has been formed. Yet, this commission, due to lack of administrative and financial independence, has proved unable to properly provide oversight on implementation of the law of access to information or pass appropriate policies to expand access to information. The journalist community has proposed that the law on access to information be amended and the commission be given more authority.

Access to information in the provinces has been a challenge for the provincial journalists as well. In certain provinces, governors and spokespersons discriminate between journalists in supplying information. This means that if journalists maintain good personal relationship with the governor or police chief, they are likely to be granted access to good information, but if they are removed from the powers’ close circle of friends and refuse to prepare subjective reports, they are deprived of access to information. In certain provinces, local leaders have made attempts to lure journalists and prevent publication of critical reports.

Most of the local offices in the provinces do not recognize the law of access to information at all and thus do not consider themselves obliged to providing information. On top of that, the presence of warlords in remote areas and insecure provinces has made reporting difficult and created obstacles for free flow of information.

## **The Intra-organizational and Administrative Problems of Afghan Journalists**

Journalists in Afghanistan still face serious intra-organizational problems. The hiring and firing of journalists and media workers rarely take place in compliance with the Labor Law or the Statute on Establishment and Operations of Mass Media. Some media organizations do not possess an administrative policy altogether. In these organizations, journalists and media workers are hired without due consideration of administrative processes. Likewise, they are dismissed without justifiable grounds or reasons. Some do not even get their monthly salaries on regular basis.

Although the Deputy Minister's Office for Publication and Broadcast of the Ministry of Information and Culture has officially requested media to send the Ministry copies of their staff contracts, no media outlet has yielded to the request even though this request is made based on the Media Law, Labor Law and the Statute on the Establishment and Operation of Mass Media.

Many female journalists and media workers complain of being deprived of their legal rights, especially in receiving sick leaves.

The Administrative Conflict Resolution Committee, which is supposed to address the legal and administrative dispute between media outlets and their staff, has not been established yet as stipulated in the Statute on the Establishment and Operations of Mass Media, so many disputes between journalists and media organizations remain unresolved. In most cases, currently these complaints are forwarded to the Mass Media Commission that nevertheless fails to address them because of absence of necessary documents and copies of contracts.

### **Negligence of Media Organizations on Safety of their Staff**

Most media outlets, when they dispatch their reporters to the frontlines or other insecure areas, they do not equip them with safety gear. They would not even display any badges or distinguishing marks showing their identity as journalists to the warring sides. Therefore, these journalists' lives remain in danger.

Lack of coordination with security forces prior to going to insecure areas is another challenge. AJSC has recorded incidents where journalists have been injured or killed because they have traveled to insecure areas without gathering sufficient information about the safety of the area or coordinating with the local security forces. Journalists also get killed during terrorist attacks or while they embed with security forces to cover war.

Also many media organizations do not see themselves obliged to providing training for their reporters dispatched to cover war, terrorist incidents, chaotic situations or protests. This shortcoming carries the consequence of reporters getting beaten or injured for lack of awareness and trainings in these areas.

Considering the pressing need for equipping journalists with the knowledge and skills of keeping them safe, AJSC has been providing hostile environment training courses for journalists across the country.

### **Violence Against Media and Journalists**

Expansion of conflict and insecurity from the East and South to the North and West of the country has increased the level of threats against journalists. Based on AJSC's analysis, escalation of violence and insecurity in the country has got direct impact on increasing of violence against journalists and media outlets. The killing of Ariana News reporter, Nematullah Zaheer, in Helmand province and a number of other journalists by this group is an indicator of this trend.

In the past, when journalists faced problem or threats from certain Taliban commanders and individuals, by contacting spokespersons of this group, the threat would alleviate or cease at times. But after the Taliban took over Kunduz in 2015, they changed their policy and approach towards the media. They began attempting to coerce media into abiding by their demands.

Lately, increased activities by a higher number of armed groups have resulted in a situation where journalists are faced with more threats. Members of ISKP group that has been active in a number of provinces, especially in the Eastern parts of the country, and have organized suicide attacks in Kabul and other provinces, have created new headaches for media and journalists.

The attack by this group on the Nangarhar branch of Radio-Television-Afghanistan (RTA) in Jalalabad city shows that this group is more brutal than Taliban, as they have stolen the terror thunder from the Taliban in killing civilians. This attack, which resulted in the killing of four and wounding of one journalist, also destroyed the building and studios of this station in the province.

AJSC and some media outlets received evidence from the intelligence agencies showing full awareness of the governor and other provincial officials of the suicide attack on RTA. The date of the letter AJSC received shows that at least four days ahead of the attack, it had been reported to the security agencies as well as the governor of Nangarhar province that ISKP had planned to attack four government agencies including RTA, but the governor and security officials failed to take any serious measures in this area and the negligence of security agencies resulted in this horrific attack that killed four employees of the media agency and wounded one.

It is very unfortunate that the RTA compound in Jalalabad still lacks the necessary security measures as it is possible that similar attacks be launched and endanger the lives of more employees of RTA in Nangarhar province. The employees of this media agency have proposed that their studio be transferred to a secure area for their own security, but to this date, their proposal has not been approved by the government.

ISKP' radio (Radio Caliphate) has constantly threatened the local media and journalists of Nengrahar province. It has repeatedly called on them to quit their jobs otherwise they will face grave consequences. There is thus serious concern that with increasing threats, some local journalists leave their jobs.

Direct and telephone threats by terrorist groups against journalists and media workers are also increasing. In many instances, the Taliban have ordered local radios to stop broadcasting government announcements or advertisements, entertainment programming and music. They have also attempted to suppress broadcast of female voice, and they have warned that if the mentioned radios ignore their warnings, they will be attacked.

Logar is one of those provinces where radios face many problems posed by the terrorist groups. Threats posed by terrorist groups against media agencies can potentially stop broadcast of a number of local media agencies or can influence media content. In that case, we will witness a dangerous backward turn in the media sector in the country where Freedom of Expression and Freedom of Press will be subjected to censorship and suppression.

### **A Look at the Condition of Female Journalists in Afghanistan**

Despite the increasing challenges confronting media workers, female journalists continue to work in the media. Although in the past few years, the presence of women in media has diminished due to worsening security and increasing threats posed by terrorist groups against media and journalists, commitment of many female journalists in continuing their profession persists.

Since an important part of the AJSC's work involves improving the working condition for female journalists, AJSC has held several meetings in the first six months of 2017 on prevention of sexual harassment of female journalists in work place and the society at large. AJSC has also held discussions on the draft of the procedure on prevention of sexual harassment.

Over the past decade, when female journalists would face problems, especially sexual harassment, fearing shaming and retribution by the society, they would abstain from discussing this issue publicly. But today, female journalists have broken away from this tradition, and freely discuss the otherwise concealed problems of women. They do not fear discussing or writing about such issues on the media. This is mainly visible in Kabul.

One TV station, Zan TV, which is dedicated to women affairs has been established in Kabul. This is the first ever TV station which is dedicated to women. It will broadcast both entertainment and news. More than 70 women produce content for the station.

The challenges faced by working female journalists in the provinces have increased though. Today, there are no female journalists and media workers in at least 10 provinces of Afghanistan, Zabul, Uruzgan, Ghor, Panjsher, Paktika, Sar-pul, Logar, Nooristan, Laghman and Kunar. A reduced presence in media of female journalists has led to diminished coverage of matters relating to women

In Herat, most females who graduate from journalism schools are discouraged from working in the media industry because women working in the media is looked down on, therefore, families often resist to allow female members to work in the media. Most female graduates of journalism schools end up working as school teachers to be safe from shaming by public as well as their families. Despite these challenges, continued efforts are being made to facilitate and expand media work opportunities for women in the media. Recently, women activists in Herat Province founded the Female Journalists Foundation to defend the rights of female journalists in a unified and coordinated manner.

In the Northern zone, especially in Balkh Province, the situation of female journalists is better compared to the neighboring provinces. The presence of women in the media has increased and more female journalists go out in the field for reporting. Today there is larger acceptance on the part of the public for women working as journalists in the media—something that is a challenge in many provinces of Afghanistan. Continued operation of radios that have exclusive broadcast for women such as Rabia-Balkhi Radio and Banu Radio indicate the better working condition for women in this Province. Women run these radios and their programs have a large female audience base.

In the provinces of Kandahar and Nangarhar, because of the presence of terrorist forces and the rule of traditional values, the activities of women, especially female journalists, are faced with serious challenges which includes security threats as well as social pressure and constraints. As a result, females keep a more discreet presence in the media in these provinces and many media outlets don't have female staff.

In some other provinces like Bamiyan, Takhar and Badakhshan, women do work in some media outlets. However, their number is not as significant as it should be.

The working condition is not favorable for women in the southern zone of the country. For example, the De Heelo Caravan Radio in Khost City that used to employ over ten female workers is now only staffed by a few volunteers. In Paktya and Khost provinces, the diminishing presence of female workers is very noticeable as well. Threats posed by the Taliban on one hand and financial constraints and tribal customs on the other hand prevent women from maintaining an active presence in the media in these provinces.

Female journalists have now reached a new level of awareness to rise in defense of their right to work beside male journalists to protect the human values. This awareness of female journalists has created hope that Freedom of Expression and Freedom of Press have been institutionalized to a certain extent, though this new development is not easily digestible by conservative politicians and terrorist groups.

## **Conclusion**

Security challenges against journalists are increasing. The heightening level of insecurity and instability in the country directly increases the level of violence and threats against journalists. Terrorist groups pose the biggest threat against journalists. Increasing threats by the Islamic State of Khurasan Province (ISKP) group against media and journalists, especially in the Eastern parts of the country, has raised serious concern, especially about the safety of journalists.

Increasing threats against media and attempts made by terrorist groups to control media content by way of intimidation, has created concern about self-censorship and compromise of the freedom of media content.

Terrorist groups, besides putting pressure on media to publish or broadcast favorable news about their activities, also coerce media organizations in the insecure areas of the country into refraining from publishing or broadcasting government announcements and advertisements, especially those by the security forces, entertainment programming, music and women's voice.

Although the government of Afghanistan has taken a number of measures for safety of journalists, the most important of which being the establishment of the Joint Committee for Security and Safety of Journalists, these measures, due to weakness in their implementation, have not brought about the desired outcomes. Besides negligence on the part of the security forces in providing security for media, especially after receiving intelligence regarding specific threats against media is unacceptable. Today there is an urgent need to protect Freedom of Expression and Freedom of the Press more than any other times in the past, as this has been the most significant achievement of Afghanistan in the past decade and half.

Most media organizations do not dedicate necessary attention and resources to the safety and security of their staff, especially journalists who are dispatched to the frontlines to provide news coverage of war. Taking all necessary measures for the safety of media workers is the media organizations' legal, administrative and moral obligation.

Afghan journalists are still grappling with intra-organizational problems. Hiring and firing of journalists do not take place according to the Labor Law or the Statute on Establishment and Operation of Mass Media. A number of media organizations even lack an administrative policy altogether. Journalists and media workers, in most cases, are hired without due consideration of administrative processes and are then simply dismissed without justifiable grounds. Some do not even get their monthly salaries on regular basis. Violation of the labor law and the statute on establishment and operations of mass media is customary in the offices of media organizations, which result in trampling upon the rights of journalists and media workers.

The continuing shortcomings in the area of access to information has also been a lingering challenge in the first half the current year as this issue has not been addressed. The majority of government spokespersons and those in charge of the affairs have avoided responding and providing timely and accurate information for journalists. The lack of supply of correct figures on the part of the government has eroded the credibility of the government to present correct facts and figures, especially on terrorist incidents, and has exacerbated the problem of fake news phenomenon. Clear examples of this phenomenon can be seen in the attacks that were carried out on Sardar Mohammad Daud Khan hospital and 209 Shaheen Military Corps. This tendency of the government has forced journalists to refer to unofficial sources to seek facts and figures on the number of casualties and losses. This has not only created confusion among media organizations as well the audiences, but it has also dealt a blow to the body of the government as an entity capable of supplying accurate information to public and thus has helped the propaganda undertakings of terrorist groups.

There is no standardized and cohesive system within the government of Afghanistan to collect and disseminate information. This is one of the reasons behind the inability of the government to provide accurate information to journalists. The current regime of information collection is obsolete, non-standard or basically non-existent.

There has been a notable decrease in the number of female journalists working in media organization primarily because of increasing insecurity and the worsening threat environment. The absence of female journalists is especially noticeable in the more insecure provinces. A reduced presence in media of female journalists leads to diminished coverage of matters relating to women.

## **Recommendations:**

- With the expansion of insecurity and increasing threats and violence against journalists in the country, the government of Afghanistan must take serious security measures for protection of journalists and media, and exert more efforts to prevent casualties of journalists and reporters in the country. In the event of serious implementation of the tasks of the Joint Committee on Safety and Security of Journalist that was formed last year, the security problems of journalists and media will be addressed to a large extent. This committee should have clear legal authorities in case of emergence of threats against media and journalists. The cooperation of security agencies with journalists and media organizations should increase with preservation of the independence of the latter and in no way attempts are to be made in censoring information and influencing the publications or broadcast of media outlets.
- Media organizations should too undertake serious measures towards improving safety of their employees. Improving the protection and security of the work environment, developing safety procedures and policies, providing safety training and first aid for the staff, providing safety equipment for journalists reporting from war fronts and undertaking psychological counseling after occurrence of incidents are some of the measures that media organizations can take. Media can seek the Safety Committee's cooperation in these areas.
- Safety must be the top priority of all journalists. No news can have a higher value than the life of the journalist reporting it. Journalists must put all their efforts in ensuring their safety. In the event of need for assistance, journalists can contact the Safety Committee.
- Media support organizations should make further efforts to assist media and journalists in the areas of security and safety. In due consideration of the worsening threat environment, there is need for further preventive measures. Further coordination and cooperation amongst these organizations can increase the effectiveness of their work.
- All government organizations should pave the ground for easy access to information. The government should refrain from supplying inaccurate figures and concealment of facts regarding terrorist attacks. In case the credibility of government as the official apparatus for providing information is lost, the spinning and circulation of inaccurate data that are obtained from unofficial sources will muddle the information space and weaken credibility of media outlets. This confusion will pave the ground for the success of propaganda campaigns by terrorist groups and spread of fake news.
- The government of Afghanistan should strengthen the Commission on Oversight for Access to Information and grant to it the necessary authorities in implementing the Law on Access to Information. The Law on Access to Information should be amended to enable the oversight commission to act as an independent body.
- The government should reform the discriminatory practices exercised by certain public officials, especially governors, in providing access to information so that access to information is provided equally to all concerned journalists. Besides, the government should increase the number of spokespersons, especially in agencies where there is more demand for information.
- Government agencies either do not have figures or in case they do have figures, they are not consistent with the figures provided by international organizations like the World Bank or the Asia Foundation. The government should create a proper and standardized system for collection and dissemination of information.
- The intra-organizational problems of media agencies should be seriously addressed by the media organizations themselves and the Ministry of Information and Culture. Owners of media organizations should be obliged to make their personnel contract consistent with the statute on the establishment and operations of mass media organizations and Afghanistan's labor law.

- Considering the diminishing presence of women in media, media organizations should exercise affirmative action in recruiting and promoting female journalists. The lackluster presence of women in media has resulted in diminishing coverage of women-related issues and news.
- The Ministry of Information and Culture and media advocacy institutions should review the Cyber Crime Law and instances that are against human rights values and the provisions of the Constitution of Afghanistan should be amended.
- The International Community should take a specific position on improving the safety of journalists and protecting freedom of the press, and undertake support programs in this area. The achievements of Afghanistan owes to the generous financial, political and moral support of the international community. Hence, the international community should not let these achievements get eroded or eliminated. International community can support programs aimed at boosting journalists' safety and helping media organizations attain self-sustainability.