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Defending Rights of Journalists &
Freedom of Expression in South Asia



August 2022

Welcome to the IFJ's monthly media bulletin for South Asia's Media Solidarity Network (SAMSAN)



1 year of **solidarity** with
Afghan media workers

Afghans residing in India protest the Taliban's military takeover of Afghanistan outside the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) office in New Delhi on August 23, 2021. Credit: Sajjad Hussain / AFP

In Focus: Press Freedom & The Taliban - One Year On

Afghanistan's media has faced one of its bleakest years in history. In the year since the Taliban assumed control of the country on August 15, 2022, Afghanistan has seen a dramatic increase in media rights violations, including censorship, closures, and new media restrictions, all contributing to an ever-worsening economic crisis for media workers. Although Taliban leaders declared their supposed intent to respect press freedom and women's rights, this quickly proved to be untrue as a wave of attacks, harassment, intimidation killings, legal restrictions and forced closures swept the nation.

Violence has been ever-present; from beating journalists while reporting, intimidating journalists into retracting articles and arbitrarily detaining and 'disappearing' journalists, to attacks on media houses and assaulting women journalists, life under the Taliban regime has been an increasingly perilous period for all media workers. On September 19, 2021, the interim director of the Government Media and Information Centre (GMIC) announced 11 new media regulations, restrictions that have been used to curb press freedom and justify the arbitrary detentions of journalists and media workers. The IFJ has reported on the blocking of access to international media, the censorship of women's activism, and attacks and forced closures of

An economic crisis has devastated media organisations, with a Deutsche Welle Akademie article finding that an overwhelming majority of media houses have reported state repression and financial challenges. Following the Taliban takeover, funding from advertising and international organisations has been impossible to access. It is, unfortunately, no surprise that a survey conducted by the Afghanistan Independent Journalists Association (AIJA) in February 2022 found that 318 media outlets across 33 provinces have closed since August 2021. The number of media houses across all formats has continued to decline, with 51 out of 132 television stations and 132 out of 293 radio stations closing by February 2022. Local media report that journalists have been forced to find alternate employment, working in agriculture, trading food on the street and performing daily wage labour.

Women journalists have faced especially difficult circumstances, with the Taliban's imposition of repressive gender-based discrimination throughout its regime. On May 19, the Taliban's so-called Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, issued a decree to women broadcasters to cover their faces while on-air, a rule termed 'final and non-negotiable'. Women journalists are not allowed to access information freely, and their duties are limited. A survey by an IFJ affiliate found that women journalists face gender-based violence, job losses, and economic insecurity, among other bleak circumstances.

It is now more important than ever that the international community continues to support journalists and media workers who remain in Afghanistan and those in exile. The IFJ has launched a global appeal to all its union members to support Afghan journalists by donating to the IFJ Safety Fund. A model letter is also available to urge governments to issue further emergency visas and increase their humanitarian support for Afghan media workers fleeing persecution.

In this bulletin:

- Attacks on press freedom and dissent in Sri Lanka under new president
- Indian journalist Mohammed Zubair released on bail
- Maldives ratifies controversial amendments to evidence act
- FNJ to campaign for raise in journalists' minimum wage
- Pakistan's National Commission for Human Rights (NCHR) to launch special 'complaint cell' for women journalists

The Region: Attacks on media begin under Sri Lanka's new president

Continued attacks on press freedom and dissent have left journalists and media workers in Sri Lanka deeply concerned. Despite the resignation of former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, wide-reaching and prolonged 'state of emergency' measures have been used to crack down on dissent and press freedoms to international condemnation. President Wickremesinghe's first month in power has seen widespread attacks on press freedom and journalists typical of his predecessor. On July 22, military personnel assaulted at least four journalists and media workers covering the raid of the Galle Face protest site, in which unarmed protestors and journalists were attacked and detained. Later that morning, Sri Lankan military personnel attacked Xposure News journalists Rasika Gunawardana, Shabeer Mohammed and Chaturanga Pradeep Kumara, with Kumara detained for hours

Rajapaksa's resignation and departure gave some hope to journalists and media associations, these instances of violence are a grave sign for media freedom in Sri Lanka under the new president.

National issues

Afghanistan: Following the Taliban's takeover in August 2021, Afghan journalists and humanitarian actors are increasingly subjected to human rights violations, a Civicus report has found. During his May 2022 visit to Afghanistan, Richard Bennett, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan, reported frequent cases of intimidation, harassment, attacks, arrests as well as killings or disappearances of journalists and other civil society actors. Bennett highlighted the ongoing extrajudicial and revenge killings of former members of the security forces and concluded that Afghanistan is currently facing significant human rights challenges.

Bhutan: On June 28, the Bhutan Broadcasting Service organised a discussion regarding the 'Legal Guidebook for Bhutanese Journalists', jointly developed by UNESCO and the Journalists Association of Bhutan, which aims to protect Bhutanese journalists from legal harassment. The guidelines cover a broad range of issues including fundamental rights, defamation, defence to defamation, invasion of privacy, use of intellectual property, covering elections, confidentiality of sources, access to information, and access to court proceedings, among others.

Maldives: On June 26, Maldives Police Service arrested three suspects in connection with the abduction and

Bangladesh: Under the 2020 amendments to the National Online Media Policy, the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission began shutting down unregistered news portals on September 28, 2021. Information and Broadcasting ministry secretary Maqbool Hossain stated that online news portals need to be registered to halt the dissemination of fake news and misuse of online media. On June 16, Hossain predicted that more than 250 additional news portals will be registered by July 2023. Media unions and journalists' organisations have criticised the provision, arguing that it is an attempt to restrict media freedom.

India: Social media platform Twitter sued the Indian government in the Karnataka High Court on July 5 for arbitrarily ordering the removal of several tweets. This marks the first legal challenge by Twitter since the introduction of the Information Technology Rules 2021, which allows the authorities to demand that critical or anti-government posts or accounts be hidden from Indian users. Article 19, Access Now, and other international organisations claim that the law undermines citizens' rights to freedom of expression.

Nepal: On June 26, Maldives Police Service arrested three suspects in connection with the abduction and murder of journalist Ahmed Rilwan and the murder of blogger Yameen Rasheed. The arrested suspects

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Rasheed. The arrested suspects include Ahmed Ismail, Ahmed Muaz, and Ismail Abdul Raheem. According to the Presidential Inquiry Commission on Disappearances and Deaths, Rilwan was abducted in 2014 and killed five years late in 2019. Rasheed was fatally stabbed on 23 April 2017.

Pakistan: Journalists in the Parliamentary Reporters Association (PRA) staged a walkout from the Senate press gallery on June 15 to protest the targeted killing of a journalist and the attempted abduction of another female journalist. The protesting journalists also demanded the implementation of a journalist's protection bill. Senator Irfan ul Haq Siddiqui assured the journalists that concerns over the safety and security of journalists would be discussed in parliament.

to the Presidential Inquiry Commission on Disappearances and Deaths, Rilwan was abducted in 2014 and killed five years late in 2019. Rasheed was fatally stabbed on 23 April 2017.

Sri Lanka: Media rights violations have increased following anti-government protests in March 2022. On July 9, at least eight media workers were beaten and violently assaulted by security forces and police personnel while covering the anti-government protest outside the Prime Minister's residence in Colombo. A team from Newsfirst were assaulted including, journalists Sarasi Pieris, Judin Sinthujan, Janitha Mendis and camera operator Warun Sampath.

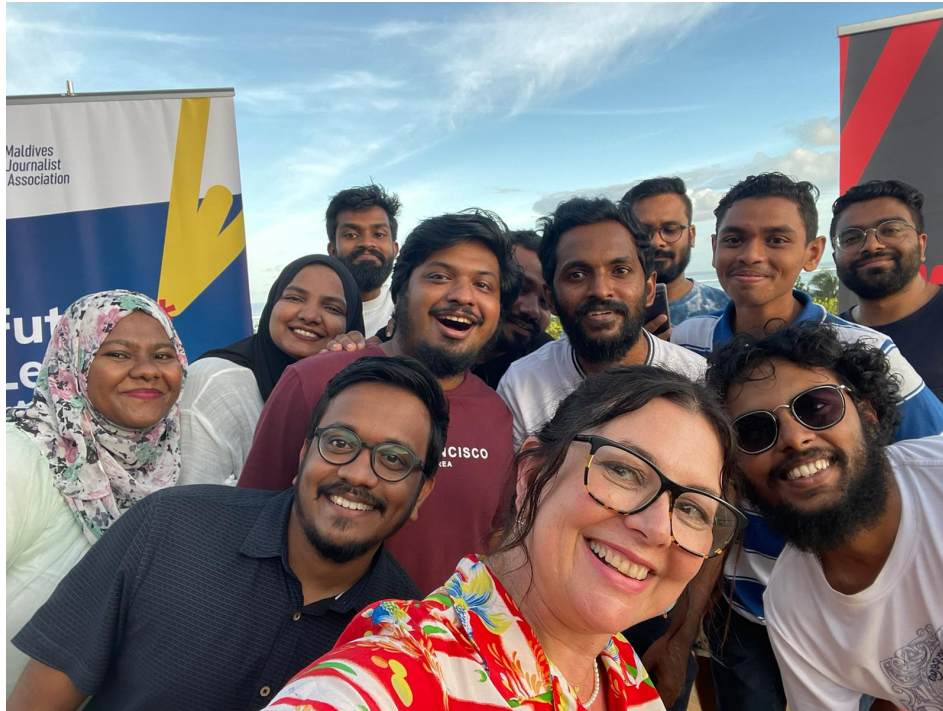
Featured Action

Nepal: The Nepal Press Union (NPU) held its ninth general assembly from July 22 to 23 and elected its new Executive Committee. In a close election, Shiva Lamsal was elected as the union's Central President, with Dilip Poudel and Madhac Dhital as General Secretary and Treasurer respectively. There were also positions awarded to account for gender and regional identity.

Sri Lanka: On July 30, the Maldives Journalists Association (MJA) held its general meeting, passing 44 amendments to the constitution. The amendments aim to strengthen the democratic governance of the association, increase gender equality, and refine organisational processes to help foster a strong and educated union base. The IFJ has been providing continued support throughout this process.

IFJ Blog

At a recent press conference, former Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan denied claims that he oversaw the repression of journalists during his tenure. Naya Daur author Shahzad Sarwar has compiled a dozen examples of media repression, intimidation and violence faced by journalists during Khan's governance. This piece has been republished with permission from Naya Daur. Read the full article here.



Participants take part in the Maldives Journalists Association's (MJA) Future Leaders Workshop, with training from IFJ Asia-Pacific Director Jane Worthington. Credit: IFJ

IFJ At Work:

IFJ Conducts UTU Grantee Orientation: On August 9, the IFJ conducted an orientation program for project grantees under the IFJ UTU Global Union Strengthening project. Participants were instructed on valuable project information, including communications and visibility guidelines, financial reporting etiquette, and results-based reporting methods. The project, which runs until November 2022, is operating in five countries across six unions and involves affiliates from India, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka.

IFJ Releases Afghanistan Newsletter: On August 15 the IFJ released a second special Afghanistan newsletter, highlighting the struggles of free media and journalists under Taliban rule. Marking the anniversary of the '[Fall of Kabul](#)', the newsletter includes key case studies of media rights violations, analysis of trends in media, updates on the IFJ Afghanistan safety fund, interviews with journalists and other key resources. [Read the full newsletter here.](#)

IFJ prepares for Digital Bootcamp: IFJ prepares for Digital Bootcamp: The IFJ, with support from Fredrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), is organising a Digital Organising Bootcamp for young union leaders from across South Asia. The Bootcamp will be held in Kathmandu, Nepal, and will bring together young union leaders from Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Philippines, Nepal and the Maldives. The Bootcamp will run for four days in September and will focus on digital organising, union renewal, and institutional inclusion of young and women workers.

IFJ launches new Initiative in Pakistan: With support from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) has begun a new advocacy and financial strengthening initiative with the Digital Media Alliance of Pakistan (DigiMAP) and

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diverse media.

From the media

Journalist forced to sell food on street to survive amid economic crises in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan – [Mirror Now](#)

What Is The Purpose Behind Freedom Of Speech And Expression? – from [The Headlines of Today](#)

Commentary warns: journalists face an uncertain future - from [Big News Network](#)

Need For Innovative Journalism - from [The Rising Nepal](#)

Why are so many journalists being killed in Bangladesh?- from [Al Jazeera](#)

Stop govt interference with freedom of speech: Ex-civil servants tell Apex Court - from [Counterview](#)

Need For Innovative Journalism – [The Rising Nepal](#)

Sri Lankans turn to social media for help as economic crisis bites - from [Thompson Reuters Foundation](#)

TAKE ACTION!

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Submit entry for the [Young Journalist Award](#)

Read the IFJ's South Asia Press Freedom Report 2021-22 – [Solidarity and Survival: The Story of South Asia](#)

Submit article on ["Youth, gender identity and power in digital platforms"](#)

Sign up for ["Become a digital investigative pro" training](#)

Take the survey [Journalism and the Pandemic Project: Assessing and Responding to COVID-19's Long-Term Impacts](#)

Apply for the [News Equity Fund](#)

Read and share: When home becomes your newsroom – [The IFJ guide](#) to ensure your rights at home #RIGHTSATHOME #SAFETELEWORK

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International Federation of Journalists**Asia-Pacific Regional Office (APRO)**

245 Chalmers Street

Redfern, NSW, 2016

Australia

Contact IFJ Asia-Pacific:

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