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Defending Rights of Journalists &
Freedom of Expression in South Asia



July 2023

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



During ongoing ethnic violence in India's northeastern Manipur state, Indian Army soldiers conduct a scouring operation in the Kanto Sabal village close to Imphal 20 June 2023. Credit: AFP

In Focus

Manipur Unrest Impacts Media: As Indian state authorities and security personnel attempt to address months of unrest in the north-eastern state of Manipur, restrictions, shutdowns, and actions by police and security forces present distinct risks to press freedom and journalists' right to report safely. The emergence of conflict in May saw internet shutdown orders strike the state. A May 3 order by the Commissioner (Home) of Manipur suspended all internet broadband and mobile data services for five days, with a second order following the next day, extending the suspension across all services. According to the Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF), the bans have been continuously extended, creating an effectively indefinite ban. Legal considerations of the shutdown have seen the provision of limited internet access under some circumstances, with an interim court direction on June 16 ordering the partial restoration of internet access for 'whitelisted' websites under Manipur State supervision to be allowed. A further interim order on July 8 has directed the government to allow connections through leased lines and consider some home internet access in the state. According to Nikkei Asia, despite the partial lifting of restrictions, the lack of universal internet access for news outlets may compromise independent reporting in the state, with outlets based in the region's hills, associated with Kuki-Zo peoples, facing greater constraints than those in the valley regions, which are associated with the predominantly Hindu Meitei people. Some Kuki-Zo people have accused the operational mainstream valley outlets of having biased coverage, with some outlets producing conflicting reports to official narratives.

The deployment of security personnel in response to the conflict has also directly impacted the state's media community, with journalist unions and representative organisations condemning assaults and harassment suffered by three journalists and media workers by Rapid Action Force

threatened by security personnel, with an AMWJU statement claiming that RAF staff pushed the pair and ordered them to return from where they came despite the pair identifying themselves as media personnel. In a separate incident later that evening, ToM TV video journalist Ibungo Laishram faced harassment while attempting to return home at night. The state-wide conflict emerged in May following a clash at a Kuki-Zo-led protest against a Meitei push to attain 'Scheduled Tribe' status, which would allow the politically dominant and largely valley-dwelling community to purchase land constitutionally reserved for Kuki-Zo peoples. The unrest has thus resulted in the deaths of over 140 people and the displacement of over 50,000.



In this bulletin:

- Arrests of prominent political leaders in Golam Rabbani Nadim murder
- MJA training on election reporting
- JAB calls for reintroduction of Right To Information law
- Impact of gendered harassment and trolling
- WMFP's Twitter Space on advocating for a raise

The Region

Online harassment rife globally: Across the region, women in journalism have been subject to gendered media rights violations, with online harassment virulent across the globe. White House correspondent for the Wall Street Journal Sabrina Siddiqui faced a slew of online abuse from right-wing trolls after she asked Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi about reports of discrimination faced by religious minorities in India at a June 22 press conference at the White House. What followed was a targeted harassment campaign, some led by Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Information Cell head Amit Malviya, attempting to undermine, insult and denigrate Siddiqui. BJP supporters and others spread several rumours, claiming she subscribed to an 'Islamist' ideology, sought to 'attack India', and identified her mother's Pakistani heritage as reasons behind her allegedly biased reportage. The move has been condemned by the White House Correspondents' Association and the White House. Hyderabad-based Telugu journalist and YouTuber Thulasi Chandu has faced similar harassment over a long period and no action has been taken on her complaint filed back in January 2022 with the cyber wing of the Hyderabad police. In a June 24 Facebook post, she expressed serious concerns for her safety following a barrage of threats. Her coverage of national issues on her YouTube channel has inspired a torrent of abuse, trolling, and threats from right-wing trolls and activists, often associated with the BJP. She has been labelled 'anti-Hindu', a 'communist', and has been subject to threats of sexual assault and other attacks on her safety across her publications and videos. Thulasi is one of several Telugu-language journalists subjected to relentless online abuse, and lack of action on the part of the authorities allows perpetrators to continue with impunity, said the NWMI in a statement. In this environment of harassment and abuse, the need for international solidarity has never been greater. The Women Media Forum Pakistan, a pioneering advocacy and professional organisation for women in Pakistan's media sector, issued a statement in solidarity with Russian journalist Yelena Milashina, who was subject to a brutal attack in Chechnya in relation to her investigative reporting.



Members of the Journalists Association of Bhutan at the JAB Annual General Meeting in Thimphu on July 10, 2023. Credit: Facebook

National Issues

Afghanistan: With many fleeing their homes following the Taliban's takeover in 2021, Afghan journalists in Pakistan [continue](#) to face significant challenges. With some organisations estimating over 250 Afghan journalists remaining in Pakistan, inaction by global governments, failure of Pakistani authorities to provide visa renewals, reports of harassment by security forces, and even [detainment](#), have left many journalists and media workers in a state of limbo and vulnerable to arbitrary state action.

Bhutan: On July 11, the Journalists' Association of Bhutan (JAB) [called](#) on Bhutanese authorities to reintroduce the Right To Information Law at its annual general meeting. Other topics of discussion included the exodus of journalists from the industry, struggles concerning access to information surrounding official Standing Operating Procedures, and other press freedom and industry-wide concerns.

Maldives: On the eve of the Maldivian presidential elections in September, [calls](#) for authorities to address the harassment, abuse and other media rights violations faced by the archipelago's media community have been made. Pressure from religious groups, recent restrictive

Bangladesh: Shamim Gazi, a provincial leader of the political party The Bangladesh Chhatra League has been arrested in the country's northern Jamalpur district concerning his alleged involvement in the killing of journalist Golam Rabbani Nadim. According to authorities, Gazi confessed his involvement in the June 14 [killing](#) of the journalist. A total of sixteen people have been arrested with regard to the incident, with Bangladeshi authorities reporting that Nadim's murder was [related](#) to recent reports of corrupt practices and other irregularities conducted by Union Parishad chair Mahmudul Alam Babu. Nadim is the fourth journalist in South Asia and the second in Bangladesh to be killed in 2023.

India: Indian political cartoonists have [continued](#) to be a valuable voice of dissent in India's media landscape despite a rise in threats, trolling and criticism from officials. In an interview with The Wire, cartoonists Manjul and Satish Acharya detailed the dramatic rise in online hate and trolling on social media, with others asserting the crucial role that political cartooning holds as an avenue for protest, dissent, and the preservation of India's democracy.

Nepal: On July 2, Rekha Sharma, the

of media outlets are all significant issues, with authorities often failing to address the violence, harassment and killings of journalists and media workers. Eight years after his disappearance and an official report pointing to his abduction and eventual horrific death, journalist Ahmed Rilwan's family still awaits [closure](#).

Pakistan: Senior journalist Azam Chaudhry has reportedly been [fired](#) from public broadcaster, the Pakistan Television Corporation (PTV), following questions he posed to Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif concerning challenges to freedom of expression in Pakistan. Despite Information Minister Marriyum Aurangzeb [claiming](#) that Chaudhry was neither a permanent employee of the broadcaster nor asked to leave, journalist organisations including the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ) have condemned his dismissal and called for the reinstatement of his program.

the minimum wage as determined by the government, with Press Council Nepal Chair Balkrishna Basnet expressing their opinion that those found failing to pay a minimum wage for journalists should be liable for criminal prosecution. The statements by officials come following the united call of the Minimum Wage Fixation Committee to increase the minimum wage for journalists.

Sri Lanka: Sri Lanka intends to introduce a new law to address candidates who [violate a 'code of conduct'](#) and news organisations that violate media guidelines. The cabinet voted to amend the Provincial Council, Local Authorities Election Ordinance and Referendum Act to pursue legal action against news organisations. A separate law, the Election (special provision) Act, will facilitate special voting centres for selected voters and address candidates who violate a 'Code of Conduct' during election periods.



Participants take part in the Maldives Journalists Association's (MJA) intensive two-day Investigative Journalism Bootcamp in Male on July 8, part of the MJA Investigative Journalism Fellowship 2023. Credit: MJA

Featured Action

MJA training on election reporting: From July 7-9, the Maldives Journalists Association (MJA) [held](#) a [series](#) of training sessions for journalists ahead of the nation's upcoming national elections. The sessions, supported by the IFJ, Alinea, Internews, and the European Commission, comprised a one-day Election Reporting Fundamentals Training and a two-day Investigative Reporting for Elections Bootcamp and Mentoring program. The program was designed to help equip journalists with greater knowledge and experience covering future elections, in a broader push to encourage greater professionalism within the sector. Both sessions were [run](#) by expert trainer Dilrukshi Handunnetti.

PFUJ strengthens work on lobbying and leadership: The Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists

address opportunities for growth in internal union processes, enhance leadership and activist capacities, and create sustainable and effective advocacy strategies and campaigns based on member requirements and inputs. This work will be conducted through ongoing support from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).

NUJ-I seminar on press freedom and The Emergency: The National Union of Journalists - India held a [seminar](#) in New Delhi on June 24 discussing press freedom-related concerns through a comparative lens of contemporary issues, and examinations of The Emergency, a 21-month evocation of emergency powers by former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi starting in 1975 through which over 200 journalists were detained. The session came four days after the [establishment](#) of the NUJ School of Journalism and Communication at the organisation's General Assembly meeting on June 20, which will aim to hold workshops, training camps and other seminars.

IFJ Blog

Every day, faceless online trolls launch attacks against women journalists – not just for doing their jobs, but simply for being women. These journalists and their support networks in South Asia call for more to be done to protect women in media from online violence, writes Olivia Cleal. [Read more here.](#)

IFJ At Work:

Projects kick off in Pakistan: A successful project application review process in Pakistan has resulted in the signing of agreements with four project partners across five projects, with further agreements to be completed. The projects, conducted across the country, aim to enhance the capacity for media workers to advocate for their professional rights, encourage the involvement of women in journalists' unions and press clubs, and conduct a series of internal union-strengthening efforts among journalist representative bodies, including the PFUJ and its affiliate unions. This work is supported by the National Endowment for Democracy.

WMFP's Twitter Space on advocating for a raise: The Women Media Forum Pakistan (WMFP) held a Twitter space on July 6, addressing self-advocacy around pay raises and conditions for journalists and media workers. During the session, women journalists emphasised their struggles around sustainable career progression and shared their experiences of management failure to provide equitable facilities and salaries, struggles with confidence, and being denied opportunities due to sexist attitudes. Participants also shared their struggles with precarity in the workplace, with many journalists and media workers only receiving informal and precarious contracts, and being forced to sign away their rights to join a union upon employment.

From the media

Journalism Under Siege: Attacks On Journalists Highlight Democracy's Fragility – [The Probe](#)

In Kashmir, Journalism Is Out And Films Are In – [BQ Prime](#)

Fake news warfare in Pakistan – [Pakistan Observer](#)

Former reporter suing CNN for unfair dismissal and racial discrimination – [The Guardian](#)

India welcomes its first regional AI news anchor, 'Lisa' – [The Economic Times](#)

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