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**Defending Rights of Journalists &
Freedom of Expression in South Asia**

ASIA BULLETIN

August 2023

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



In the two years since the Taliban's ascension to power, Afghanistan has seen a dramatic rise in media rights violations, censorship, and economic ruin for country's struggling media workers. Credit: AFP

In Focus

Two Years of Taliban Takeover: It would be an understatement to call the Taliban's impact on Afghanistan's media catastrophic. The past two years, starting August 15, 2021, have seen the de-facto authorities drive an increase in media rights violations, dismantle gender equality and women's right to work, mobility, and to education introduce repressive and restrictive legislation targeting freedom of expression, and inspired economic ruin across the country's once thriving media landscape. This month was no different. The IFJ verified the arrests of at least four journalists, with investigations into the arrests of a further three journalists ongoing. Nangarhar journalist Irfanullah Bidar was released from detention on July 25, nearly two weeks after his abduction by unknown persons. Several journalists, including French-national Mortaza Behboudi, remain in detention, with no information available as to their charges. This month also saw widespread opposition to a Taliban proposal to introduce media accreditation cards, a scheme not mandated under any current laws, and the closure of private broadcaster Radio Hamisha Bahar on August 1, following a Taliban incursion allegedly to interrupt a mixed-gender training session on July 31.

Outside Afghanistan, the situation is brighter, but not by much. According to the UNHCR, over 1,600,000 Afghans fled the country since 2021, with a vast majority living in Pakistan or Iran. A 2022 survey of Afghan journalists in Pakistan found that many struggled with housing challenges, acquiring visas, housing, and work permits, education for their children and could not afford even basic amenities and medicines. Lethargic responses to visa applications by Western countries and limited support prospects have forced some Afghan journalists in exile into poverty, starvation, or back to Afghanistan. In response to these conditions, the South Asia Media Solidarity Network (SAMSN) issued a statement calling for urgent international action in

women journalists in exile.



In this bulletin:

- US sanctions nearly 50 individuals and companies in the Maldives
- Thimphu Press Club launches
- ANJU release new report to mark two years of Taliban rule
- IFJ launch solidarity centres in Islamabad
- Sri Lanka project partners development internal union strength reports

The Region

Legislation threatens media freedom: This month, governments across the region continued to introduce harmful, ill-defined, and poorly-consulted legislation directly impacting press freedom and media professionals. On August 7, the Bangladeshi government announced the replacement of the broadly condemned Digital Security Act (DSA) with a new Cyber Security Act. With no input from journalists, media workers, or civil society, the bill is feared by local and international press freedom and human rights organisations to re-create many of the issues plaguing its predecessor. The act will continue to criminalise legitimate expression, grants extraordinary powers to law enforcement, and hold the potential to fine or imprison journalists for their work. Over in Pakistan, controversial amendments to the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulation Act (PEMRA) were first introduced on July 21, and were criticised for the lack of consultation with journalists and media workers. Critics also pointed to the introduction of over-broad definitions of disinformation, and the effective sanctioning of media owners to withhold payment for media workers for up to two months. While the bill was withdrawn on August 8, it was swept through Pakistan's bicameral legislature, ascending into law on the final day of the Coalition government. Across the border, the Indian parliament passed – with no debate – a data protection bill on August 9, granting the government authority to block content and seek information from private firms, eliciting surveillance, freedom of information, and press freedom concerns from media representative bodies and opposition leadership. In a more welcome development, two pleas to India's Supreme Court advocating for stricter regulations on television news channels were rejected, with the court upholding freedom of expression, if for now.



National Issues

Afghanistan: Despite the United States announcing a resettlement program for at-risk Afghan citizens, including women journalists, in August 2021, American authorities have so far failed to commit any resources or efforts to fulfilling their promises to Afghan journalists. Journalists, many of them women, who have since fled to neighbouring Pakistan awaiting visas, have reported facing administrative delays from both the US and Pakistan, poverty, and harassment from the Taliban off-shoot terrorist group the Haqqani Network.

Bhutan: The Bhutan Media Foundation successfully launched the nation's first Press Club in capital Thimphu on July 15. In an inaugural event attended by Prime Minister Lotay Tshering and Journalists Association of Bhutan (JAB) president Rinzin Wangchuk, the Thimphu Press Club (TPC) professes to serve as a forum for professionals. In the weeks since, the TPC has held several forums, press conferences, discussions, and workshops.

Nepal: Communications and Information Technology Minister Rekha Sharma spoke about the value of self-regulation in the media while addressing a Press Council Nepal meeting on August 7. Sharma said that despite challenges, internal management measures and media codes of conduct must be upheld, otherwise new laws may be required.

Pakistan: The Digital Rights Foundation released a policy brief on July 24 derived from complaints received from the Cyber Harassment Helpline in 2022. Of 75 total complaints, 51 were from journalists and media workers, with callers reporting incidents of online harassment, hacking attempts, the deliberate spread of disinformation, and targeted online abuse. The brief stressed the gendered nature of online abuse, with women journalists reporting a disproportionate number of cases.

Bangladesh: Bangladesh's Minister for Foreign Affairs AK Abdul Momen has criticised the nation's journalists for their alleged 'disconnection' from ordinary people at a discussion at the Foreign Service Academy on July 21. The Minister claimed that journalists published 'excessive coverage' of comments made by foreign dignitaries around human rights concerns in Bangladesh, and criticised their perceived inexperience. Participants advocated for capacity-building programs to fill this gap.

India: Manipur's information landscape has been severely impacted by ongoing conflict, with media monitors recording a significant rise in misinformation, unsubstantiated reports, and doctored or misleading videos. Law enforcement in the state has started filing cases against those seen to circulate rumours or spread misinformation. The internet shutdown imposed on May 3 when the conflict erupted, has only been partially lifted.

Maldives: On July 31, the United States imposed sanctions on 20 individuals and 29 companies newly designated as being operatives or collaborators with terrorist organisations in the Maldives, including those found to have targeted journalists or media workers. The news comes a week before the nine-year anniversary of Journalist Ahmed Rilwan Abdulla's disappearance on August 7, 2014, with a 2019 investigation finding a Maldivian Al-Qaeda affiliate responsible.

Sri Lanka: Sri Lankan Ministry of Mass Media has partnered with the United Nations Development Program to hold a series of workshops to build media capacity and organise meetings with ownership of private media outlets. At a keynote address at a workshop on August 3, Minister Dr Bandula Gunawardhana claimed to understand the need for outlet-led media regulation, yet has espoused to lead a wave of 'responsible media'.



FNJ leaders and membership hold a sit-in protest at the Nepal Press Council's offices, demonstrating against labour exploitation in the country's media sector. Credit: Facebook

Featured Actions

ANJU release report on Afghan media issues: The Afghanistan National Journalists Union have released a new report highlighting the media closures, repressive legislation, and media rights violations that have defined the past two years of Taliban rule. The report, featuring data from both surveys and interview, outlines the impact of Taliban restrictions, the economic collapse of the media industry, and sexist media regulations, and stresses the importance of Afghanistan's media in the wake of such dramatic change.

SLWJA address media ID card concerns: The Sri Lankan Working Journalists Association (SLWJA) will hold an event on August 19 to address the needs of their membership regarding Media ID cards and employment issues. SLWJA previously stressed the need for journalist-defined identification in an interview with BBC Sinhala published on August 3. Interested parties are invited to confirm their attendance by contacting association President Duminda Sampath and Deputy Secretary S Nishanthan.

NUJ-I to hold National Convention: From August 26-27, the National Union of Journalists, India will hold a National Congress in Jaipur. Among the demands include an improvement in working conditions for journalists, the formation of a media council and media commission, the implementation of a Journalist Safety Law, and health insurance for journalists nationally. The congress is being organised by the Journalists' Association of Rajasthan and is expected to include over 1,500 journalists.

FNJ protest labour exploitation at press registrar: Members and leadership from the Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ) held a sit-in protest at the offices of the Press Council Nepal, advocating against labour exploitation in the media industry. FNJ President Bipul Pokhrel announced the federation's intentions to hold a series of demonstrations to cement the rights of working journalists and protested inaction from the Press Council and the Department of Information and Broadcasting.

IFJ Blog

The implications of generative AI on Pakistan's complex media landscape must be fully understood through changes in journalism, media ownership, and state interference. In a conversation with journalist Haroon Ur Rasheed Baloch, media development expert Adnan Rehmat stresses the need for a human-focused use of AI technologies in media. [Read more here.](#)



IFJ At Work

Solidarity centres for Afghan journalists open in Islamabad: The IFJ and the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ) have opened two guest houses in Islamabad for Afghan journalists currently awaiting visa or resettlement decisions for third countries. The guest houses will also provide accommodation, meals, health, and psychological support, amongst other humanitarian services. This work was built with IFJ and PFUJ support for Afghan journalists forced into exile and was supported by UNESCO.

Twitter space on perceptions of women in Pakistan's media held: On August 3, the Women's Media Forum Pakistan (WMFP), led by the IFJ, held a Twitter space attended by an international audience of both women and men, discussing perceptions of women in Pakistan's media. In a valuable discussion, the opportunities and barriers to women in media were discussed, including the impact of societal perceptions, the policing of gender roles within the industry, and struggles to attain recognition for equal work. This work is supported by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED)

Sri Lankan project partners finalise union evaluation reports: The IFJ's Sri Lankan affiliates, the Free Media Movement (FMM), the Federation of Media Employees Trade Unions (FMETU), and the Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association (SLWJA) are all finalising their Union Capacity Audit reports. The institutional union strength assessments comprise one of several initial stages in the IFJ's three-year intensive support program, which will aim to develop membership-driven national action plans. This work is supported by Union To Union (UTU).

FROM THE MEDIA

Editors Guild Calls Press and Registration of Periodicals Bill “Deeply Distressing – [The Wire](#)

How Reporters Can Safeguard Their Sources- [Nieman](#)

Bangladesh's press freedom lowest in South Asia – [The Business Standard](#)

AIC says concerned over potential media-related legislation- [Business Recorder](#)

Global Digital Media Giants “Deeply” Concerned with Pakistan’s AI Policy - [Pro Pakistani](#)

Bangladesh to replace criticized digital security law - [Jurist](#)

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