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

ASIA BULLETIN

January 2024

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



Police clash with youth activists in Kerala on December 23. Journalist VG Vineetha was accused of collaborating with organisers of a December 10 protest in which a shoe was thrown at Kerala's chief minister. Credit: Facebook

In Focus

Charges on Charges For India's Journalists: Journalists across India have faced criminal charges for their work, with both state and Union authorities responsible. On December 23, Channel 24 journalist VG Vineetha was accused by police of collaborating with the organisers of a student protest, in which a shoe was thrown at Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan. Vineetha has been summoned for questioning, in a move condemned by local unions and the Kerala Editors' Guild. In Manipur, Hueiyen Lanpao editor Dhanabir Maibam was arrested and held for several days on January 4 after a report on the eastern town of Moreh amid the ongoing conflict was deemed to have incited hatred on racial and religious grounds, while Kangleipakka Meira editor-in-chief Wangkhemcha Shyamjai was arrested on December 29 after reporting on the ongoing conflict. Three months after the arrests of NewClick founder Prabir Chakraborty and administrative officer Amit Chakraborty, the Indian Income Tax Department froze the portal's finances on December 18. Delhi police have petitioned the court for further time to complete its probe of anti-terror charges under the Unlawful Activities Prevention, following August allegations launched by the New York Times that NewClick had accepted funds to spread pro-China messaging. In Jammu and Kashmir, authorities have failed to release jailed journalist Sajad Gul despite an extant High Court order from November 2023 deeming his detention an "abuse of preventative law", and that no allegations against the journalists suggest Gul had compromised state security.



In this bulletin:

- **Pakistan's media figures affirm support for gender equality**
- **Maldives Trust in Media report launched**
- **Palestine's journalists face slaughter**
- **FMM register as trade union**
- **NPU sign new agreement**

The Region

New Year, Same Problems: As a new year dawns on South Asia, media continue to face issues of censorship, violence, and economic insecurity. In Afghanistan, 2024 will mark the third year of the Taliban's return to power, with a media sector warped by a comprehensive and draconian media policy. Women journalists have been driven out of the profession, prohibited from working in broadcasting, conducting interviews with men, or even holding the same job title as men. Critical coverage has all been barred, with journalists abducted, detained, and beaten by Taliban officials with complete impunity. Pakistan set for a General Election on February 8, has already seen restrictions on freedom of information, with concerns raised about threats to the information landscape. No work has been done to address the killings of journalists. In India, journalists and media workers have continued to protest attacks on press freedom and their labour rights. 2023 saw income tax officials raid offices of both the British Broadcasting Corporation and NewsClick, the ongoing detentions of journalists in Jammu and Kashmir, and the murder of Maharashtra journalist Shashikant Warishe. 2024 will see India's parliaments debate the draft Broadcasting Services (Regulation) Bill, 2023 and the Digital Personal Data Protection Act 2023, while the Telecommunications Bill 2023 requires Presidential Assent, inspiring concern among media stakeholders. Bangladesh's recent elections were marred by electoral violence against journalists and media workers, while in Sri Lanka, an amended Online Safety Bill will face parliamentary scrutiny in 2024, with critics identifying the bill's potential to limit freedom of expression online. The impact of economic woes on the media sectors of Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bhutan will most likely continue to be seen through the coming year.



Al Jazeera Gaza Bureau Chief Wael Al-Dahdouh prays for his son Hamza Wael Dahdouh, who was killed while travelling on assignment near Rafah. Credit: AFP

Gaza Media Update - December 2023

Since December 15, 18 Palestinian journalists and media workers have been killed by Israeli airstrikes, bombardments, and snipers, bringing the total number of slain Palestinian journalists to 88 since October 7. According to data from the Palestinian Journalists Syndicate (PJS), a further 23 media professionals have been severely injured, with Israeli authorities detaining at least 58 journalists in the West Bank and Gaza. This month, the IFJ called on the Israeli government to revoke its ban on foreign media outlets from the Gaza strip, while the Maldives Journalists Association (MJA) released a statement condemning Israeli attacks on journalists, and endorsing legal action against Israel. The IFJ and the PJS published a safety advisory in English and Arabic for journalists, while the IFJ's Safety Fund has paid for medical kits, equipment battery packs, and direct financial assistance. Donate to the IFJ safety fund here.

National Issues

Afghanistan: On December 24, the Afghanistan Journalists Center (AFJC) urged Taliban officials to overturn a July directive banning the publication of women's voices in the southern Helmand province. In a statement, the AFJC aired their concern over the discriminatory practice and called the order a violation of the fundamental rights of women and the media.

Bhutan: Through Bhutan's recent elections, online mistruths and political campaigning have impacted the nation's information landscape. On December 15, The Office of the Media Arbitrator fined a People's Democratic Party coordinator after the staffer shared a video allegedly portraying hate speech and defamatory remarks, with 32 individuals warned or fined that their online presence had contravened election guidelines.

Maldives: On December 22, The Maldives Media Council (MMC) instructed internet service providers to block access to two news websites, kuresee.com and diyavaroo.com, claiming they had violated registration regulations and advocated against the 'public interest'. The MMC overturned the order on December 28, following pressure from the Maldives Journalists Association and other freedom of expression advocates.

Pakistan: Members of the Minawali District Bar Association took industrial action on December 23 following a police raid on the house of lawyer and journalist Khurshid Anwar Khan. Khan's home was

Bangladesh: Bangladeshi critics, journalists and media workers living overseas have reported a wave of threats, harassment and violence directed at their relatives in Bangladesh by political activists. Several journalists claim that the violence, allegedly tied to the ruling Awami League, has occurred following the publication of critical or other government-related reports.

India: Experts have identified three new pieces of legislation as presenting distinct risks to press freedom through their abilities to censor content, intercept communications, and facilitate internet shutdowns. In a December 20 expert panel, the potential of the 2023 Telecommunications Bill, the Broadcasting Services Regulation Bill, and the Digital Personal Data Protection Act of 2023 to surveil, harass, and silence critics was identified.

Nepal: Freedom Forum's annual media report has revealed further attacks and labour rights violations against journalists, with authorities failing to address impunity for crimes against the media community. The Forum found at least 52 media rights violations occurred, with assaults occurring the most frequently. An economic downturn has continued to affect media houses, with journalists and media workers facing retrenchments and insecure work.

Sri Lanka: Public security minister Tiran Alles announced on January 4 that the highly controversial draft Online Safety Bill

correspondent's home for political activists associated with the opposition Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party.

foreign delegations, and media stakeholders, Alles reaffirmed his government's commitment to introducing the bill. Public submissions were closed on January 8.



IFJ At Work

Trust in Media report launched: The IFJ and the Maldives Journalists Association (MJA) published a report on December 19, providing insight into public opinions of the media in the Maldives. The report, titled 'Media Mirror: Unveiling Public Trust in Maldivian Media', combines survey and media-stakeholder interview data to provide a comprehensive analysis of public perceptions of the media, including its reliability, consumption patterns, and its relation to Maldivian democracy, among other considerations.

WMFP completes campaign for gender equality in Pakistan's media: On January 11, the Women's Media Forum Pakistan (WMFP) completed the "Pakistan's Media Needs Women" campaign, its first awareness and advocacy campaign for gender equality in Pakistan's media. Utilising national gender mapping research, the campaign has raised awareness of key issues facing women in Pakistan's media, and secured 26 sign-ons from leading union, press club and news outlet figures to institute transformative change for both women in media and the industry as a whole. Subscribe to the forum's mailing list to learn more about future WMFP events and campaigns.

NPU to conduct advocacy campaign: On December 20, the IFJ and the Nepal Press Union signed an agreement with the Media, Safety and Solidarity Fund (MSSF) to support an advocacy and training program across Nepal. Through 2024, the NPU will hold three provincial workshops in Gandaki, Lumbini and Bagmati on legislation impacting the media organised alongside union strengthening and rights-based campaigning.



On December 20, the Free Media Movement officially registered as a trade union in Sri Lanka, following years of institutional strengthening work. Credit: Facebook

Featured Actions

FNJ provide support for earthquake victims: The Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ) conducted a site survey on December 20 in support of journalists, media workers, and news outlets in the central-western earthquake-affected districts of Jajarkot and Rukum. The FNJ has provided financial relief to members of the media community affected by the natural disaster, garnered through an emergency relief initiative.

MJA celebrate Maldives Industrial Relations bill: The Maldives Journalists Association has joined the Maldives Trade Union Congress (MTUC) in celebrating the ratification of the Industrial Relations and Official Safety and Health bills by the Maldivian Parliament. The MJA's Secretary General, Naif Ahmed, welcomed the passage of the bills at an MTUC press conference on December 20.

FMM registers as a trade union: After several years of work under the UTU program, the Free Media Movement in Sri Lanka successfully completed the registration process to become a trade union in December 2023, a core component of the organisation's National Action Plan. The new FMMTU will work to further safeguard journalists' fundamental rights and devise comprehensive strategies for the empowerment of media personnel across all Sri Lankan provinces.

From the media

AI-powered misinformation is the world's biggest short-term threat, Davos report says - [AP](#)

Bengal governor's 'Constitution' warning to TMC govt on ED attack - [Hindustan Times](#)

Death threats to a sports journalist condemned - [Business Recorder](#)

Covering the Gaza conflict: Western media and the imperfect search for balance - [Dawn](#)

Deep Fakes and Disinformation in Bangladesh - [The Diplomat](#)

Indian journalists targeted by Israeli spyware again: What do we know? - [Al Jazeera](#)

168 violations of journalist rights recorded last year - [Pajhwok](#)

Beyond the battlefield: rethinking the journalist-PR dynamic in modern media - [Reuters](#)

TAKE ACTION!

Register events on [AI for Diversity, Equity & Inclusion and Gender Equality](#)

Enrol in the [Logan Science Journalism Program](#)

Submit your nominations for the [Human Rights Press Awards 2024](#)

Register for the online [ITCILO Labour Inspection and Compliance Course](#)

Sign up for the Advocacy Assembly's [Shutdown Academy](#)

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International Federation of Journalists
Asia-Pacific Regional Office (APRO)
245 Chalmers Street
Redfern, NSW, 2016
Australia

Contact IFJ Asia-Pacific:
www.ifj.org/regions/asia-pacific

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