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

NEWS BULLETIN

April 2024

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



The gates of the Government Titumir College in Dhaka. Both student and professional journalists continue to face abuse and harassment from political activists. Credit: X

In Focus

The violence against Bangladesh's journalists: In the lead-up to Eid-ul-Fitr, journalists in Bangladesh have faced attacks, harassment, and detention. Journalist Sabbir Ahmed, a correspondent of Shomoyer Alo, was hospitalised after being beaten while breaking his fast on March 22 at the Government Titumir College in Dhaka. The assailants were suspected to be members of the Bangladesh Chhatra League, a student organisation associated with the ruling Awami League (AL), who struck Ahmed with rods and hockey sticks, allegedly for his reportage. On April 2, Sangbad correspondent Anisur Rahman was attacked in the northern Kurigram district, allegedly by the president of a local AL chapter, after reporting on the alleged trading of illicit substances, theft of public land, and illegal extraction of river sand reportedly linked to the chapter's president, Shakhawat Hossain Sabuj. On March 5, journalist Md Shofiuzzaman Rana was arrested after filing a Right To Information report related to a government development project, and held for over a week before receiving bail from a Sherpur court. Likewise, five journalists in the north-western Thakurgaon district were confined in an assistant land commissioner's office for over half an hour on March 14 while covering land-related hearings. Mahfuz Sahu, a media worker, was first detained after recording the hearings, with journalists Neon Dulal, SK Saheed, Faruque Ahmed, and Kawshar Ahmed held after attending to the scene.



SAMSN DIGITAL HUB

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The Region

Across the region, challenges to digital accessibility threaten to impact national information landscapes, and press freedom. In Afghanistan, the Taliban announced plans to [block](#) Facebook in an April 6 interview with Tolo News, with acting Minister of Telecommunications and Information Technology Najibullah Haqqani claiming the social network was 'distracting' youth. Since the group's ascent to power in 2021, Facebook has [emerged](#) as one avenue for news outlets and civil society organisations to share uncensored news, and a critical avenue for women and girls to [access](#) information amid [education bans](#). In India, elections slated for April 19 will [present](#) distinct risks to the Union's information landscape, with potential internet shutdowns, social media restrictions and blockings, and the impact of generative Artificial Intelligence likely to allow misinformation or facilitate government crackdowns. In Pakistan, social media platform 'X', formerly known as Twitter, remains [blocked](#), with acting Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi claiming on March 19 that social media in the country required better regulation, amid allegations of misuse. Despite the website remaining inaccessible, Pakistan Telecommunication Authority Chair Hafeezur Rehman has [denied](#) the agency receiving a formal order from the Interior Ministry ordering a closure of the platform.



Displaced Palestinians return to Gaza City via the Rashid Road on April 14, 2024, travelling through buildings destroyed since October 7. Thousands of Palestinians, including journalists and their families, have been displaced since the start of the conflict. Credit: AFP

Gaza Media Update - April 2024

Since October 7, Israeli airstrikes, bombardments, snipers, and soldiers have [killed](#) over 102 journalists and media workers, with countless more detained, injured, displaced or disabled. On March 26, the IFJ joined 28 other media freedom organisations in condemning the ['collective official silence'](#) from Media Freedom Coalition member states on the killing of journalists in Gaza. On March 25, the IFJ and its affiliate, the Palestinian Journalists' Syndicate (PJS) [organised](#) a parallel event at the United Nations Human Rights Council alongside the League of Arab States to call for the protection of Palestinian journalists. On March 30, the Women's Media Forum Pakistan [released](#) a statement of solidarity with women journalists in Gaza. On April 2, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [announced](#) the Knesset's approval of a law allowing senior ministers to stop the operations of international media outlets. The IFJ and the PJS [published](#) a safety advisory in English and Arabic for journalists, while the IFJ's

National Issues

Afghanistan: Former Radio Nasim editor-in-chief Sultan Ali Jawadi was released on April 6, after over 130 days in Taliban detention. Jawadi, arrested in October 2023, was sentenced to one year's detention on anti-Taliban propaganda and espionage charges in December, reportedly related to the airing of foreign programs. Radio Nasim was shuttered in September 2023 following a raid on the broadcaster's offices, in which Jawadi was arrested alongside reporters Saifullah Rezaei and Mojtaba Qasemi.

Bhutan: On March 24, the first Bhutan Media Foundation training session focused on food systems launched, with assistance of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. The training, held over two days, equipped journalists with the necessary skills to tell meaningful stories focused on rural development and agriculture, with attendees eligible for nominations to Food and Agriculture Reporting Grant and Award pathways.

Maldives: Maldivian authorities have announced plans to appeal a reinstatement order of police officer and sister of slain blogger Yameed Rasheed, Aishath Rasheed, after she was dismissed in 2017 for attending a demonstration marking the disappearance of journalist Ahmed Rilwan. The High Court of the Maldives ruled last month that Aishath's dismissal was improper, awarding six months salary and compensation, and recommending she be allowed to return to her duties.

Pakistan: On March 27, the Attorney General for Pakistan (AGP) made assurances that no journalist who received a notice from the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) would be arrested, at least until the next hearing of the court-led Suo Moto case against the alleged harassment of journalists. The move comes nearly two months after the arrest of Asad Ali Toor by the FIA, and the summoning of 47 journalists and media workers for their

Bangladesh: Global rights bodies have expressed concerns over the rejection of a United Nations Human Rights Council review of key recommendations for civic space in Bangladesh. On March 26, CIVICUS and the Asian Human Rights Commission noted the failure of the Bangladeshi government to accept all 301 recommendations, only 'noting' a further 90, including recommendations to repeal the controversial Cyber Security Act, passed in September 2023.

India: YouTube has blocked two episodes of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) series 'Foreign Correspondent' focusing on the 2023 killing of Sikh separatist Hardeep Singh in India, after Indian authorities requested the restriction under the Information Act. India previously requested YouTube block a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation broadcast focusing on the killing in early March.

Nepal: On March 22, the Nepali Ministry of Home Affairs announced its intentions to withdraw a decision to increase media surveillance, following widespread opposition from the Federation of Nepali Journalists and other media stakeholders. The decision comes two days after a ministry circular instructed government officials to restrict media seen to promote disharmony, anti-national sentiments, misleading or baseless measures, or encroach on personal privacy, prosecuted through a dedicated official hired through local government offices and police.

Sri Lanka: The first prohibition under the widely criticised Online Safety Act was issued by the Colombo Magistrate's Court on April 4, with the former Chairman of the Public Utilities Commission of Sri Lanka Janaka Ratnayake filing the case against a former personal assistant, who he alleges shared personal information in WhatsApp groups and with talk shows on YouTube. The act is designed to be operated through a President-appointed commission, which despite not yet

IFJ At Work

WMFP hold climate change talks: On March 25, the Women's Media Forum Pakistan, an IFJ-led Pakistani women's media collective, held an online discussion discussing issues and concerns facing women journalists covering climate change-related stories and techniques for effective story pitching. The session was held to commemorate International Water Day on March 22, and was conducted with support from the National Endowment for Democracy.

Annual affiliate snapshot launched: The IFJ Asia-Pacific's annual affiliate snapshot launched on April 5, designed to reveal a picture of media union strengths, challenges, and areas for growth, supported by Union To Union. The 2024 survey will focus on building union power, with specific emphasis on how the IFJ can support its affiliates through projects, programs and advocacy initiatives. Responses are open until April 19, are entirely online, and take approximately 30 minutes to complete. Any inquiries for union executives should be directed to ifj.coordinator@ifj-asia.org.

IFJ to launch South Asia Press Freedom Report: The IFJ, on behalf of the South Asia Media Solidarity Network (SAMSN) is completing preparations for the launch of its 22nd annual South Asia Press Freedom Report. The report will feature individual country chapters, a database of detained journalists and media rights violations, and two special chapters exploring contours of press freedom and democracy through recent elections, and concerns over economic viability and trust in media. The report will be launched on May 3 to mark global celebrations of World Press Freedom Day.



The newly elected SLWJA executive in March, 2023. Credit: Facebook

Featured Actions

NPU strengthen union structures: Following three successful regional labour and legal rights training sessions in January and February, the Nepal Press Union (NPU) will progress to the final stages of its agreement with the IFJ and the Media Safety and Solidarity Fund. The next stage of the agreement will involve the organisation and member-led approval of an NPU national action plan, following a comprehensive review of the union's capacities, membership, and structures.

SLWJA elect new executive: Following elections on March 26, the Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association (SLWJA) has elected a new executive, with a new policy series focused on representation to be implemented through newly established committees. This election has increased the representation of both women and young leaders to SLWJA leadership and comes following significant progress through the SLWJA's projects under the Union To Union program.

From the media

Five Journalists jointly receive 'Afghanistan Journalist of the year' award – [Khaama Press](#)

Exiled Afghan journalist shot, injured in Pakistan - [VOA](#)

A Trans Journalist With the Taliban in Transition – [The Austin Chronicle](#)

In Modi's India, 'harassment' of independent media, 'squeeze on free expression':
Financial Times – [Newslandry](#)

Geo, The News London reporter on Indian RAW's hit list: report – [Geo News](#)

Decline of investigative journalism in China is a part of global phenomena : Academics -
[UNB](#)

Press Centre Nepal calls for convening FNJ convention on stipulated date - [Khabarhub](#)

Truth will tell, despite suppression of the press – [Mission Network News](#)

Geo, The News London reporter on Indian RAW's hit list: report – [Geo News](#)

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IFJ Asia-Pacific**

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