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Defending Rights of Journalists &
Freedom of Expression in South Asia

ASIA BULLETIN

August 2024

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



Anti-government protestors display Bangladesh's national flag as they storm Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's palace in Dhaka on August 5, 2024. Credit: K M Asad / AFP

In Focus

Journalists targeted in Bangladesh's anti-government riots: Bangladesh's media has been under threat in the last month, with riots and unrest erupting nationwide. What began as protests, largely led by university students against a civil service-hiring quota in late June, escalated amid reports of increasing violence from military and law enforcement personnel. Through internet restrictions, the arrests of thousands, the deaths of over 150, and the resignation and exodus of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on August 4, the media stayed on the frontlines reporting. By the end of July, the Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists (BFUJ) reported that hundreds of journalists had been attacked, with four journalists killed, more than 160 injured, and four women journalists assaulted. Two journalists were slain on July 18; Shakil Hossain, of the daily Bhorer Awaj newspaper, was killed while reporting in Bhorer Awaj, Gazipur City, while Mehedi Hassan was fatally shot in the head while covering a clash between law enforcement and protesting students and activists in Dhaka's southern Jatra Bari area. Journalist Abu Taher Md Turab, affiliated with the daily Jalalabad and daily Naya Diganta newspapers, was killed on July 19 when police began firing at protestors in the northeast city of Sylhet. Journalist Pradip Kumar Bhawmik, correspondent for the daily Khabarpatra, was among those confirmed to be killed when he and four others were dragged from the Royganj Press Club in the country's northern Sirajganj District and beaten by a group of unidentified assailants. The IFJ continues to monitor attacks on the media in Bangladesh, standing in solidarity with its affiliate, the Bangladesh Manobadhikar Sangbadik Forum (BMSF), and journalists, and media workers in the country.

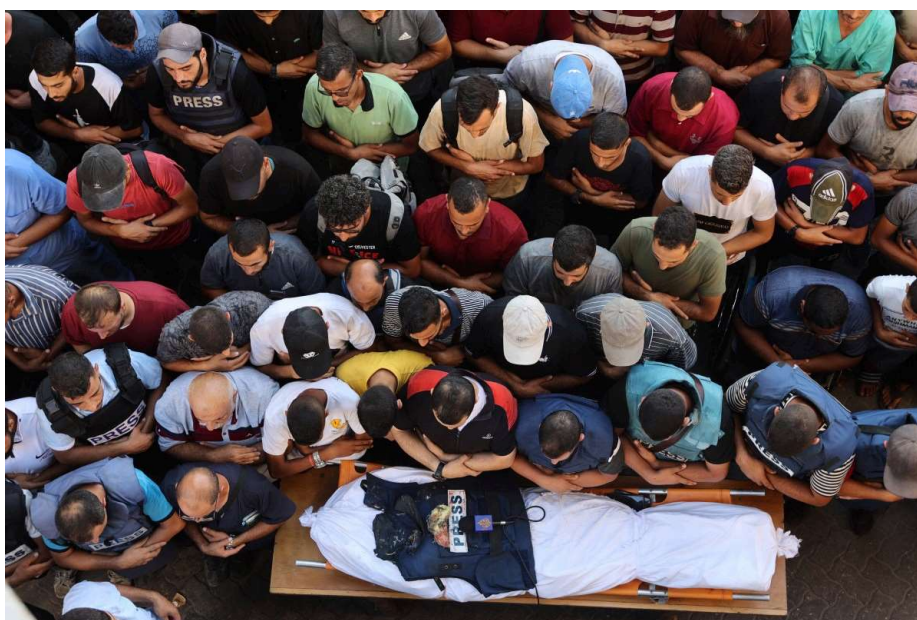


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- **New awards program recognises Sri Lanka's media professionals**
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- **WMFP holds session on misogyny in media**
- **Digital safety training in the Maldives**

Gaza Media Update - August 2024

Since October 7, 2023, Israeli airstrikes, bombardments, snipers, and soldiers have killed over 122 journalists and media workers, with more [assaulted](#), [arbitrarily detained](#), injured, missing, or disabled. At least four journalists have been killed over the past month, all by Israeli airstrikes near Gaza City or in Khan Younis, on which [attacks](#) have continued despite its previous designation as a 'safe zone' by Israeli authorities. The IFJ and the Palestinian Journalists Syndicate (PJS) have [published](#) a safety advisory in English and Arabic for journalists, and have [opened](#) Media Solidarity Centres across Gaza, while the IFJ's Safety Fund has paid for medical kits, equipment battery packs, and direct financial assistance. On August 1, the IFJ [launched](#) a new fund, providing USD 1,000,000 for media institutions across Palestine, in partnership with the International Fund for Public Interest Media. Donate to the IFJ safety fund [here](#).



Mourners and colleagues recite a prayer over the body of Al-Jazeera Arabic journalist Ismail al-Ghoul, killed along with his cameraman Rami al-Refee in an Israeli strike during their coverage of Gaza's Al-Shati refugee camp, on 31 July 2024. Credit: Omar Al-Qattaa / AFP

The Region

Freedom of Speech and Media under threat: Across the region, overt censorship and new restrictions continue to erode press freedom for the media in South Asia. In Pakistan, the government has confirmed the [implementation](#) of a digital firewall to monitor and censor online traffic, [including](#) the granting of access to track and control internet usage, with a focus on major social media platforms

Taliban has intensified its crackdown on the media, [issuing](#) suspension letters to 14 outlets and shutting down 7 since the beginning of 2024. Journalists continue to face severe [restrictions](#), with those still working amid an economic crisis facing threats or detention. In Bangladesh, the interim government has [condemned](#) journalists for their coverage of political events leading up to the violent protests that ended on August 5, with Home Affairs Adviser M. Sakhawat Hossain [warning](#) on August 12 that media outlets continuing to report on these issues would be shut down, underscoring the increasingly hostile environment for press freedom in the region.

National Issues

Afghanistan: On July 22, the Taliban's Ministry of Telecommunications and Information Technology [suspended](#) the broadcasting licenses of more than 14 media organisations in Nangarhar, alleging that each had failed to pay licensing fees from between one to ten years. Since the Taliban's takeover in 2021, media organisations have faced an [unprecedented economic crisis](#), with other outlets [suspended](#) in attacks against freedom of expression.

Bhutan: The Prime Minister of Bhutan, Tshering Tobgay, [invited representatives](#) from the Bhutan Media Foundation, the Journalists' Association of Bhutan (JAB), state media bodies, and media houses, to discuss the challenges facing the media in a meeting on July 26. Tobgay emphasised the importance on capacity building, and highlighted opportunities for media houses to access economic stimulus funds.

Maldives: August 8 [marks](#) ten years since the forced disappearance of Maldivian journalist Ahmed Rilwan Abdulla by an extremist group, with the journalist's family still [waiting](#) for the official information relating to his killing. The IFJ, the Maldives Journalists Association (MJA), and eleven other press freedom and human rights organisations, issued a joint [statement](#) calling for President Muizzu to publish official reports into the killing, and for Maldivian human rights authorities to conduct an immediate public enquiry into his death.

Pakistan: The Supreme Court of Pakistan [registered](#) another autonomous 'suo moto' case hearing on July 29, designed to provide an independent and transparent investigation into the prominent 2022 killing of journalist Arshad Sharif in Kenya. At the session, the

Bangladesh: Some media reports originating in India, focusing on the targeting of Hindu Bangladeshis, have been deemed misleading by prominent journalists and media associations. An analysis of media coverage published by Al Jazeera [found](#) that some coverage, that had echoed claims of widespread violence against Hindu households, was rather politically-motivated, driven by association with the former-ruling Awami League.

India: YouTube journalist Gaurav Kushwaha was [killed](#) on July 30, the second media worker to be killed in Bihar's Muzaffarpur district in the past two months after journalist [Shivshankar Jha's killing](#) in June. According to media reports, Kushwaha was found hanging from a tree near his residence, having received a phone call the night before asking him to come outside. Kushwaha was known for his coverage on social media platform YouTube, and his family had reported threats to the police prior to his death, however the motive behind the killing is currently unknown.

Nepal: Mohan Singh, chief reporter of Karnali Awaz.com, was [assaulted](#) by a nurse working at a health service office in Jajarkot on July 18. Reportedly, Singh was taking photos while listening to the complaints of people receiving treatment at the facility. Staff at the office allegedly attempted to detain Singh, before calling law enforcement, who confiscated his camera and deleted his photographs.

Sri Lanka: A new awards program, ran by the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce, will [recognise](#) Sri Lanka's media professionals, with over two awards supported by the International Labour Organisation and the

Legal Assistance application between Pakistan and Kenya had been [drafted](#), with the next meeting in Pakistan's cabinet to approve it.

young journalists in media viability, while also celebrating the promotion of entrepreneurship in media.



Taliban military personnel ride motorbikes during a military parade as they celebrate the third anniversary of the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, in Ghazni on August 14, 2024. Credit: Mohammad Faisal Naweed / AFP

Three Years On: The Struggle for Press Freedom Under Taliban Rule

The Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan three years ago on August 15, 2021, marked the beginning of a severe assault on press freedom and independent journalism in the country. What was once a growing media landscape has been systematically dismantled, as the Taliban moved to swiftly to silence dissent and control the narrative in the media. Within the past three years, journalists, who were once at the forefront of reporting on Afghanistan's challenges and triumphs, now [operate](#) under constant threat, with many forced into exile or hiding. Media outlets have been [shuttered](#), female journalists have been [driven](#) out of the profession, and those who remain are subjected to harassment, violence and the ever-present fear of retribution. From May 1, 2023, to April 30, 2024, the IFJ's South Asia Press Freedom Report [recorded](#) 14 unlawful arrests of journalists, the closure of three media outlets, only 600 active female journalists [compared](#) to 2,833 women media workers prior to the takeover, and a total of 33 media rights violations. The series of restrictions, excessive control, and censorship imposed by the Taliban has not only eroded the independence of the media but also led to a sharp decline in journalistic freedom of expression and the economic viability of media outlets. As a result, Afghanistan is [experiencing](#) one of the darkest periods of press freedom in its history.

IFJ At Work

Union strengthening work commences: Projects in Sri Lanka under the IFJ's Union to Union program have commenced, with the Free Media Movement (FMM), Federation of Media Employee Trade Unions (FMETU), and Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association (SLWJA), all delivering targeted plans nationally. The work builds from union capacity audits, undertaken in 2023, and will centre on research, union capacity building, and direct outreach and training sessions, among other objectives.

WMFP Space on Misogyny: The Women's Media Forum Pakistan (WMFP) held a Zoom session on August 5, [detailing](#) the impact of sexist abuse, harassment, and attitudes on the lives of women in the media. The session focused on rising online attacks against women, with particular attention given to attacks against anchor person Gharidah Farooqi, and renowned activist and human rights defender Tahira Abdullah on a podcast.

Featured Actions

MJA hold Digital safety training: On August 12 and 13, the Maldives Journalists Association (MJA) held a two-day training session covering digital safety and security for media professionals. The training covered the importance of planning and risk management, while also sharing techniques of effective data protection, as well as email and mobile device security.

SLWJA, FMM talk Freedom of Expression: Representatives from Free Media Movement (FMM), Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association (SLWJA) and other trade unions have again advocated against the implementation of online laws targeting freedom of expression, in a press conference on August 12. This builds off consistent advocacy by the SLWJA and the FMM against repressive laws including the country's Online Safety Bill, among others.

JAB hold skills-boosting session for women in media: On July 24, the Journalists Association of Bhutan (JAB) held a training session designed to increase the skills of women in media, attended by 21 journalists, including freelancers and those working with media houses. Supported by the Swiss Embassy in New Delhi, the 'EmpowerHer' program covered digital media tools, fact-checking, investigative reporting strategies, and advanced media techniques across three days of training.

From the media

AFP photographer Christina Assi carries the Olympic Flame in honour of journalists killed on duty - [AFP](#)

Systemic repression of human rights defenders in Indian-Administered Kashmir - [Frontline Defenders](#)

Minister rejects reports firewalls are supposed to control social media - [Samaa News](#)

X ban may be lifted if social media rules framed: Azma Bukhari - [Dawn](#)

Broadcast Bill threatens independence of press, curbs free speech: Congress – [Business Standard](#)

Social Media Declaration: Paving the Way for Ethical Use of Media - [Groundviews](#)

Meet NAT, the AI-generated presenter offering soft news to Mexican audiences – [Reuters Institute](#)

Opinion: Cost of Free Speech – [Telangana Today](#)

TAKE ACTION

Learn how [Employers Can Help End Domestic Violence](#)

Apply for the ITCILO's [Course on AI, Disinformation and Diversity](#)

Apply for the [Daphne Caruana Galizia Prize](#)

Apply for the The Fund for Investigative Journalism

Register for the Earth Journalism Network's [workshop on renewable energy](#).

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