



Strengthening Journalists' Organisations and Networks in South Asia

Sixth Annual Meeting of the South Asia Media Solidarity Network,

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As the South Asia Media Solidarity Network (SAMSAN) prepares for its sixth meeting, journalists and media professionals in the region face a situation of acute challenges and opportunities. Ever since SAMSAN was floated in 2002, the press freedom situation in our region has presented a mixed picture. The challenges occur along a multitude of dimensions, from political coercion and violence by State and non-State actors, to commercial compulsions and advertiser pressure, all of which tend to adversely influence good journalistic practices.

Information provided by IFJ affiliates and partners in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka – suggests that these countries, all transitional societies in various ways, pose serious professional hazards for journalists. But there have been significant efforts at mobilisation by journalists, which have had the effect of raising public awareness on media freedom issues and building international campaign networks. Even if the security situation has not improved, partly because the civil and political strife that these countries are beset by shows no signs of abating (with the notable exception of Nepal) journalists probably have the collective ability now more than before, to respond constructively. Of course, quite apart from the security aspects, other kinds of restrictions on journalists remain a critical problem and an obstacle to the achievement of press freedom in the region.

Regulatory environment

The regulatory environment in most South Asian countries, especially for the rapidly growing electronic media, remains ill-defined. And with governments usually being unwilling to act decisively against the culture of impunity for attacks against the media, journalists and media workers are frequently compelled to adopt a play-safe attitude. Even where there is no prior restraint on the exercise of the right to free speech, a hostile environment often compels the media to engage in self-censorship rather than risk retribution.

Special laws to deal with situations of internal emergency or insurgency, are a feature in virtually all South Asian countries. These laws retain the potential to be applied against journalists. And though they are not very frequently invoked against journalists, every such instance tends to have a chilling effect on the exercise of the free speech right.

Gender balance

In almost all countries surveyed, women's participation in the profession of journalism is increasing. Yet, women continue, in most countries, to face serious encumbrances at the work place. Some of the IFJ-affiliated unions in the region have begun active programmes to redress gender imbalances – including through gender councils and assuring a level of representation for women in higher deliberative bodies. Media content on the status of women though, tends often to be ritualistic in its obeisance to the principle of equality, or to reproduce stereotypes of women as consumers of products of special advertiser interest.

Union-building

Union-building challenges remain in all countries. Where threats to press freedom are a clear and present danger – as in Sri Lanka and Pakistan – unions have responded vigorously and creatively. Each threat to journalistic freedom has proved a rallying point, attracting others to the cause and

winning the allegiance of unaffiliated journalists. Nevertheless, the relative disinterest of younger journalists remains an issue that the unions will have to address in the interests of their long-term relevance. Structural changes in the media industry, with the electronic media and the web-based media accounting for a growing share of new employment in the industry, make this an especially urgent challenge. Matters are further complicated, perhaps, by a transformation of the role of the union. From basic issues of wages and working conditions, unions today have to deal with a much broader mandate, which embraces quality and ethics in journalism, and legal and regulatory issues.

Nepal

The prolonged political hiatus following Nepal's historic national elections in April 2008 was a period of heightening uncertainty for the media. Political actors, deeply divided by partisan loyalties, showed little tolerance for reporting in the press that sought to reflect the complexities of the situation. But with the resolution in recent weeks, of the most urgent political issues, Nepal's polity may settle down to a more peaceable course, when the guarantees of press freedom that were written into the interim constitution could be reaffirmed. SAMSUN has to take note of the fact that all the principal parties in Nepal have agreed in principle, to the press freedom clauses in the interim constitution. They need now to agree, in consultation with the media community, on the guidelines that will put these principles into practice. Specific atrocities against media personnel have been brought to light in the environment of relative openness that followed the national elections. All parties need to deal with these in a spirit of reconciliation.

Journalists' unions in Nepal, since the nation-wide political movement of April 2006 have played a role as active agents of democratisation. This ensured that the media community had sufficient moral capital to see that strong free speech guarantees and assurances of the public right to information were enshrined in the country's interim constitution.

However, the drafting of the new constitution is likely to be a long process. There is the strong prospect of a clash on fundamentals between the mainstream parties and a political group that was, until recently, an underground insurgent outfit and has now emerged as the largest parliamentary bloc.

There is also a vast gulf between realities on the ground and the principles of media freedom that have been agreed in the higher councils of Nepali politics. Attacks on media personnel and institutions continue to occur at an alarming rate, while basic job security remains a distant dream for most journalists and media workers. Part of the problem arises from the weakly institutionalised character of the Nepali media and overall weaknesses of the economy, which continues to be dependent on aid and remittances. However, the new politics is likely also to entail a new economics. And the Nepali media community is, by all accounts, ready to negotiate the best possible outcome for free speech and the right to information in the new constitutional framework.

Pakistan

Pakistan's general elections in February 2008, the constitution of a new government in March, and the removal from authority of the last remnant of military rule in August, paves the way for a new beginning on press freedom. Threats to Pakistan's journalists came in a torrent in November 2007, after General Pervez Musharraf, then president and army chief of staff, declared a national state of emergency. However, the election of a civilian government and the removal of the military ruler, offers an opportunity for journalists' organisations and defenders of human rights to push hard for positive action while the time is ripe for change. In this regard, SAMSUN has to take note of and appreciate the new government's stated intent to repeal the most draconian laws that were introduced under the recent short-lived emergency regime, such as the amendments to the Press and Publications (Registration) Order and the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority ordinance, that allowed for stringent controls on media content.

Although the media rights situation worsened considerably in Pakistan throughout 2007, the current year has brought renewed reasons for hope. The new governments that have been sworn in at the federal and provincial levels following nation-wide elections in February 2008 have held out early assurances that they would be mindful of the special needs of a free press. The newly installed federal government has taken early steps to rescind overly stringent regulations governing the electronic media. All possible coercive actions against the media, such as blocking television channels, have been firmly ruled out of court by the new coalition parties.

State and non-State actors in Pakistan, however, retain formidable powers of violence and coercion, which threaten the functioning of a free media on a day-to-day basis. There has been no effort to confront the culture of impunity that prevails in cases of journalists being harassed, abducted or attacked, often with lethal effect. The media industry also owes the community of journalists a debt for its steadfastness in adverse times in the cause of free speech and the right to information. Minimally, this debt could be discharged through the prompt implementation of the statutory wage awards for media workers that have been successively notified, only to be ignored by the industry.

Sri Lanka

At the other end of the spectrum, Sri Lanka's descent into seemingly a deeper cycle of violence since the short-lived ceasefire was formally abrogated in January 2008, has made the environment for journalists and press freedom defenders even more dangerous. Admittedly, however, the early optimism engendered by the 2002 ceasefire had been eroding all through the last three years. The relationship between the State, civil society and the media has deteriorated rapidly.

It has been common practice for ministers and other prominent political figures to impugn the patriotism of conscientious and critical-minded journalists. With few willing to publicly condemn such rhetorical excesses, the ground is prepared for more serious threats to the safety and security of journalists and media workers across the island. Physical attacks, harassment, restrictions on movement and death threats have become a part of the working lives of journalists, photographers and all those engaged in the gathering, publication and dissemination of information in Sri Lanka.

Since January 2005, 18 journalists and media workers have been killed for reasons directly connected to their work. In terms of world comparisons, only Iraq has fared worse as a place where journalism is an actively dangerous profession.

Yet concerted and united action by various stakeholders in media freedom, has yielded benefits. Amidst a deteriorating environment for media freedom, with senior officials of the government and the armed forces showing little compunction about accusing journalists of "treachery" and worse, the government of Sri Lanka did feel compelled to set up a cabinet sub-committee that would remain engaged on a continuous basis, with the grievances of the journalists' community. Though the subsequent performance of the cabinet subcommittee has been indifferent, this qualified success of the community of journalists suggests that pressure applied persistently and with the support of international campaign groups, can yield results. It is a basic premise of the campaign for press freedom in war-torn Sri Lanka, that an independent and critical media that enables different communities to engage in a public conversation, is essential to the quest for peace.

Bangladesh

Bangladesh came under a nationwide state of emergency in January 2007, following a collapse of political consensus on the modalities for conducting general elections. The media was among the first to feel the pressure, as most critical social commentary vanished from print and the air waves, on the *diktat* of the emergency administration.

A semblance of business as usual was restored when the military-backed administration realised that a free media was its only guarantee, in the vacuum created by the suspension of politics, to gauge public moods and attitudes. However, every juncture at which the public has challenged the

regime – as with protests in Dhaka University over the course of the year and overt expressions of discontent by the farming community about the failure of essential supplies – has drawn forth new official strictures against the media.

Traditions of free reporting and critical press commentary have been difficult to suppress, but every episode involving an untrammelled exercise of press freedom invariably brings forth a warning from the military backed government about the need for self-restraint on the part of the press.

The emergency regime in Bangladesh has committed itself to a restoration of an elected government before the end of 2008. However, ongoing investigations against corruption and official malfeasance have implicated the heads of several media organisations. Generally speaking, the media in Bangladesh is weakly institutionalised, and the absence of a proprietor or principal financier has led to the virtual collapse of several newspapers and broadcasters. The media in Bangladesh will be tested in the months ahead by the need to maintain rigorous public scrutiny over the basic reforms to which the emergency administration has committed itself. In the absence of such scrutiny, public confidence in the democratic process will remain at a low ebb.

Over the year-and-a-half of the emergency dispensation, the press perhaps has realised that it has a common interest, indeed, a vital stake in ensuring that basic norms of democracy are honoured and that the bitter contestation between the country's two main political formations does not come in the way cooperation on issues of basic interest to journalism. At the same time, the military-backed government has implicitly acknowledged that it has to play by certain rules of accountability, by bringing in draft laws on the right to information and on community radio. The RTI law was opened up for public debate in March, but when last reports came in, the media community had unanimously rejected the available draft, because of the inordinate number of exceptions it granted in terms of the application of the act, and the number of institutions that would be immune to public scrutiny under its terms.

Afghanistan

In Afghanistan, the media community is struggling to enshrine some agreed rules of conduct in a restive and deeply polarised environment. The transition to democracy is proving a rocky process and with every seeming gain for press freedom, there have been several losses. The situation is serious and there is no room for complacency, but it should also be noted that Afghan journalists have made significant progress in recent years in moving toward a free, independent and diverse media.

Afghanistan has, since the fall of the Taliban regime, witnessed a significant increase in media size and diversity. However, with the economy failing to pick up momentum and levels of poverty remaining high, there has been no growth in advertising spending, placing a significant impediment on the growth of an independent media. Donors who supported media development in the early years of post-Taliban Afghanistan imposed strict deadlines for media organisations to become self-sustaining, conditions that for the most part could not be met. Many donors have since pulled out, although the Afghan media continues to sustain itself through bridging donations and other short-term financial commitments.

Readership of the print media is limited and will remain so until the literacy deficit begins to be bridged at an accelerated pace. Television audiences are potentially very large, but will remain an unrealised potential until innovative methods of bringing electricity to each human settlement in Afghanistan can be found. This leaves radio as the sector with immediate potential for the most rapid growth in content and audience.

Radio has been a growth sector in the Afghan media, supported by a reasonably growth-friendly regulatory environment. Innovative revenue models have been tested, although a reliance on influential local advertisers may undermine the independence of broadcasters. There also have

been overt and covert threats to independent broadcasting by aggrieved individuals and organisations.

Since January 2007, the media rights monitoring unit of the Afghan Independent Journalists' Association (AIJA) has recorded eight violent deaths of journalists. The worst of the hazards faced by media practitioners in Afghanistan was represented in the murder of two women media workers within days of each other. Both had offended against strong social strictures in force. Uncertainties in the legal provisions governing the right to free expression were epitomised in the death sentence handed down in January to Syed Parvez Kambhaksh, a young journalist and student.

The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) worked with local journalists' organisations to seek a definitive understanding on the limits to free speech, especially where it concerns the application of blasphemy laws. Journalists' organisations have sought clarity from political and judicial authorities in Afghanistan on the free speech clauses in the national constitution. Unfortunately, the courts allowed the constitutional reference to free expression to be defeated by a clause that gives pre-eminence to customary law wherever the constitution is silent. The Kambhaksh case remains a challenge that journalists and the media community in Afghanistan have to meet. In doing so, they could well dispel many of the ambiguities in Afghan national law on the limits to free speech.

India

In India, outright attacks on media personnel appear to occur with less regularity, at least in proportion to the population, than elsewhere in the region. However, press freedom risks being weakened by increasing concentration of media ownership that limits options for the expression of diverse views. As such, challenges in the regulatory environment are on the priority list for defenders of press freedom in the world's most populous democracy.

Attacks on eminent journalists by vigilante groups with a grievance against their work, continue. In an alarming recent instance, a top police official in the western Indian state of Gujarat, responded to some incisive reporting on his service record by filing sedition charges against the country's top newspaper group. Journalists have also tended in recent times to get caught in the political crossfire between various groups and those in authority have not hesitated to use compliant officers of the law to harass and victimise journalists.

The internal dynamics of the Indian media continue to reflect diverse trends. Regions such as the north-eastern states, Jammu and Kashmir and the central Indian plateau, continued to suffer from serious internal strife. The media is often caught between the demands of rival insurgent groups on one side and state security agencies on the other. In the big cities and more economically dynamic states of the south and the west, the media continues to grow and diversify. However, there are worries that what appears to be a diversity of media sources is not really so diverse. Media concentration could become the norm.

There was little moreover, to suggest an improvement in the conditions of employment of journalists and other workers in the regulated sector, where the Indian Working Journalists' Act applies. Growth has been very rapid in the unregulated sector and the competition among rival companies for scarce skills has perhaps led to improved wages. Employment conditions, however, are governed in the main by short-term contracts. And rapid personnel turnover has been a feature of the pattern of growth in this sector.

Significant ethical dilemmas have surfaced for the Indian media over the last few years, almost all of them as a consequence of intense competition for advertising revenue among the country's proliferating broadcast channels and print entities. Some ethical violations caused great public concern and resentment. In the circumstances, there was a tendency for the debate on media regulation to be overtaken by the advocacy of extreme measures by the Government and judiciary. Although India's media remains well organised to fight back against any real or perceived threat to

its rights and privileges, public trust could be eroded by the increasing evidence that the media follows no norm other than that of profit maximisation.

IFJ Activities

The year gone by has been one of intense turmoil in a region that is home to more than a fifth of humanity. Journalists and the media in all countries surveyed have responded constructively to the complex challenges they face. This meeting will take stock of some of the developments over the recent past and seek to work out viable action strategies for the future.

The IFJ and its affiliates in South Asia have in recent years conducted the following actions to build the trade union and campaigning capacity of journalist organisations in the region.

- Continued trade union campaigns with journalists' organisations in the region including a protest campaign in solidarity with Pakistan journalists for fair wages and the implementation of the Seventh Wage Board award. In Nepal the IFJ has been working with the Federation of Nepali Journalists on strategies for implementing the new Working Journalists Act.
- Published an annual South Asia press freedom report every May since 2003. The sixth annual IFJ press freedom report, *In the Balance: Press Freedom in South Asia 2007-8*, was released on 3 May 2008.
- Conducted train-the-trainer programs in Nepal, India, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka (see details below).
- Since March 2005, coordinated a monthly SAMSUN e-bulletin distributed widely in the region, which has become a well-respected clearing house of information about press freedom and journalists' rights in the region.
- Worked with local organisations to conduct trade union campaigns for journalists' organisations in the region, including the global protest actions in November 2007 to support journalists in Pakistan after the declaration of a nation-wide emergency, which involved the suspension of media freedom.
- Released the revised IFJ safety handbook *Live News: A Survival Guide for Journalists* currently available in the region in English, Sinhala, Tamil and Bangla, with other version under consideration.

Recent country-specific activities include the following:

- Developing a program of solidarity actions around human rights and journalists' safety in the region. This involves notifying all partner organisations about violations sufficiently early, through e-mail and other techniques, giving all journalist communities under threat a broader sense of power and support.
- In Afghanistan, the IFJ helped to launch the Afghan Independent Journalists' Association (AIJA) and organised the highly successful National Media Summit in Kabul in July 2007. This Summit resulted in the adoption of the National Media Charter for Afghanistan. The IFJ has worked with the AIJA to establish a joint safety office, and has conducted training of trainers in safety and in political and election reporting as well as published a Media Guide for election reporting in Afghanistan. These activities have helped to strengthen the Association, and its profile and membership have increased.
- In Afghanistan the IFJ, together with the International News Safety Institute (INSI) and working with our partners the AIJA, delivered crucial safety training to 50 journalists in October and November 2007.
- Through targeted training programmes in Nepal and Sri Lanka, the IFJ has worked with local partners to establish national media rights and safety monitoring and advocacy networks with the capacity to provide daily monitoring and reporting of violations through daily reports and a monthly e-bulletin, as well as campaigning and advocacy actions.
- In Nepal, the IFJ worked with local and regional partners on four international press freedom and solidarity missions following the monarchical coup of February 1, 2005.

Throughout 2006 and 2007 the IFJ worked with the Federation of Nepali Journalists and the Nepali Press Union to deliver training skills, capacity-building, training needs analysis, strategic planning workshops, union management and organisational development workshops, and to establish a media rights violations monitoring office.

- In Nepal, the IFJ conducted a series of safety training workshops with an expert safety trainer in May 2008 for journalists in regional areas who are at increased risk of attack from local political factions. Further workshops are being planned for late 2008 and early 2009.
- In Sri Lanka, the IFJ has led a number of press freedom and safety missions, and participated in an international mission on press freedom and freedom of expression in October 2006. Since that time the IFJ has worked to conduct a broad series of training workshops on conflict reporting, safety, and public service journalism. The IFJ has also established a Journalism Prize for Human Rights Reporting organised through IFJ affiliates and SAMSUN members, and worked with local affiliates on Gender and Human Rights summits in 2008.
- In Sri Lanka, the IFJ and the Free Media Movement organised a four-day advanced training design workshop to create a new safety training module for journalists. Further adaptation and development of the module will result in a safety training package for use by all SAMSUN members.
- In India, the IFJ conducted a series of state of the media and journalists' safety roundtables and fact-finding missions in three conflict prone areas – Jammu and Kashmir, the north-east, and the central Indian state of Chattisgarh and its immediate environs, between 2006 and 2008. As well, workshops were held with local affiliates on union organising (particularly in regard to contracts), training skills, gender equity in media and unions, and reporting HIV.
- In Pakistan, the IFJ led international press freedom missions to the country in February 2007, November 2007 and March 2008, and continues to campaign with the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists for press freedom and workers' rights. In November 2007 the IFJ organised a Global Day of Action for press freedom in Pakistan. As well, the IFJ led a four-day training skills for conflict and safety reporting workshop for both Indian and Pakistani journalists in Karachi in July 2006; media monitoring training in Islamabad in March 2008; and leadership training in August 2008.
- In Pakistan and India, the IFJ conducted a year-long joint program on the challenges for journalists in covering conflict, including research on the reporting of conflict between the two countries, a high-level conflict reporting summit in New Delhi in 2007 and a series of conflict reporting training workshops in both countries.
- In Bangladesh, the IFJ conducted a series of activities in 2007 including training skills for unions to deliver training on human rights and conflict reporting. Further workshops were held 2008 including an agenda to bring unity to the various journalists' organisations in Bangladesh to campaign jointly for professional and industrial rights. The program culminated in the publishing of a handbook in Bangla for conflict reporting and safety.