



Nai- Supporting Afghanistan Open Media

Media Watch Report

Journalism Freedom Report # 14

Azizullah Habibi
Media analyst

With the ongoing deterioration of the security situation in Afghanistan, the work of the media becomes both constrained and more dangerous. During the previous month, journalists and media outlets have suffered both human and financial loss as a consequence. One reporter was killed, another was beaten, audio equipment as well as cash have been stolen from journalists as a result of their daily activities as journalists. Other journalists have been imprisoned, harassed and threatened. Even though accessing critical information on these incidents is increasingly difficult and in some cases, impossible, media watch has covered the following stories during the last month:

- Reporters of Tolo TV were beaten by gunmen in Paghman district
- An Ariana TV cameraman was killed in an explosion in Qandahar city
- A Azadi Radio reporter was threatened in Helmand by the Governor
- A Department for Vice and Virtues (*Amer ba Maroof wa Nahi az Munkar*) was created with potential negative impact on freedom of speech and association.
- The media of Daikundi province face editorial pressure from local authorities.
- Pajhwok News Agency reporter had equipment and money stolen in Nemroz Province.
- Three journalist unions merged to form Afghanistan's National Union of Journalists
- A Journalist Support Fund was created.
- A work shop on Research Journalism was convened by The Center for International Journalism for more than fifty journalists in the eastern and northeastern zones.

1. Reporters of Tolo TV beaten by gunmen in Paghman district

On the 29th of July 2006 [7th of Asad], reporters of Tolo TV were beaten while filming a demonstration in Paghman District, Kabul Province. The demonstration concerned Abdul Rab Rasool Sayyaf, a member of the lower house of Parliament as a representative of Kabul Province.

Noorullah Rahmani, one of the reporters, said that seven gunmen beat him, the Tolo TV cameraman, Qais Rahmani, and their driver. In addition, he said the gunmen took away their camera and the film of the demonstration.

The demonstration was held by a number of local residents from Paghman District who claim that their land had been taken from them, through no formal legal or commercial transaction, by Mr Sayyaf, a representative of Kabul citizens in the lower house of Parliament. This demonstration lasted for two days from 28th to the 29th of July 2006 [6th, 7th of Asad] and resulted in some violence and the death of two demonstrators.

Around 400 people from Paghman district, joined the demonstration on the 29th July [7th of Asad] to object the so called “land grabbing” activities of Sayyaf, and the death of a person during the first day of the demonstration (the other person died later in hospital).

Mr Rahmani said that after filming the demonstrators burning Sayyaf’s effigy and interviewing key community members present, the Tolo TV team headed to the Police Headquarters of Paghman District to continue researching this story, when gunmen intercepted them and beat them in an area close to Zafar Vault and their camera was confiscated. Mr Rahmani believes these gunman were connected to Sayyaf, however there is no clear evidence of this.

Abdul Razaq, the Chief of Police in Paghman District, confirmed the beating of Tolo TV staff in an interview with Pajhwok News Agency and said that the identities of those persons had not been established yet.

Media Watch tried to interview Abdul Rab Rasul Sayyaf concerning the issue but was unsuccessful.

Seddiq Ahmad Zada, spokesperson for Tolo TV told Media Watch “this is not the first time that our reporters have been beaten and threatened; such events have happened many times in the past too.” Ahmad Zada claimed that government authorities are ignoring these issues when they are reported. Tolo TV contacted the Ministries of Interior and Culture and Youths Affairs and other relevant agencies many times and submitted official letters to them, but such letters haven’t been responded to so far.

In a press release by Saad Mohseni, the General Director of Tolo TV and Arman Radio, on the 29th May 2006 [8th of Jawza] he stated that “saboteurs and criminals should not be permitted to hinder media or media staff, or to beat or intimidate them.”

Yusof Stanizai, spokesperson for the Ministry of Interior, condemned the beating of reporters, and said that such actions were a violation of the law and that the Ministry of Interior had started investigations into the case and would seriously follow up on it.

Rahimullah Samander, chairperson of Afghanistan Independent Journalists Association, condemned the beating of reporters in a press conference and said that it demonstrated there were no satisfying security conditions in Afghanistan, specifically for reporters. Samander said the cause of insecurity was the presence of weapons with irresponsible persons.

It is worth mentioning that two months ago, a Tolo TV cameraman was beaten by one of the members of the lower house of Parliament, Khial Mohammad Hussaini, a representative of Ghazni province. (See Media Watch report #12)

2. Cameraman of Ariana TV killed in suicide explosion in Qandahar city

On the 22nd July 2006 [31st of Saratan 1385], a cameraman of the private television network, Ariana TV, was killed while reporting in Mirwais Mena of Kandahar city due to a suicide explosion.

A 5.30pm on 22nd July, a suicide bomber detonated an explosion killing two coalition forces soldiers and injury of eight others. Half an hour later, another suicide bombing occurred, in the same area targeting people engaged in transporting bodies and the injured. According to state officers, ten civilians were killed and around 25 people were injured.

Abdul Jamil Sapand, a reporter of Ariana TV, who was present at the scene of the second explosion, told Media Watch “after the first explosion, we arrived at the scene without delay and gathered the necessary information and then we wanted to go the hospital and get some information on the condition of the injured. But when we approached our vehicle, there was another suicide attack as a result of which our cameraman got severely injured.” According to Sapand, the cameraman sustained burn injuries to his body and shrapnel injuries to his head. Sapand added that they took Abdul Qudoos to the hospital but he died half an hour after admission to the hospital.

Abdul Ghani Mudaqeq, head of the News Section of Ariana TV in Kabul, expressed great sadness at the loss of Abdul Qudoos. He told media watch that Mr Qudoos, was a hardworking and active employee and had contributed significantly to their Kandahar operations.

Abdul Qudoos, the cameraman for Ariana TV had been a resident of Helmand Province and had most recently been living in Kandahar.

Praying ceremonies for Abdul Qudoos Hand were conducted in various provinces of the country, including Kabul, Kandahar, Khost, Mazar-e- Sharif, and some other provinces by different people and organizations, from media, to NGO’s and government agencies such as Ariana TV, the Bayat Foundation, Ministry of Culture and Youths Affairs, Faculty of Journalism of Kabul University, Committee for defending Journalists, Nai Agency, and the Independent Association of Reporters in Afghanistan.

In a completely separate incident, an Ariana TV vehicle was damaged on the 31st July 2006 [9th of Asad 1385] in Jalabad City when an explosion occurred adjacent to the car. This explosion occurred during the prayer ceremony in the city for Maulawi (religious

scholar) Mohammad Yunos Khalis, a Mujahideen leader. Five people were killed and many more were injured.

3. Reporter of Azadi Radio threatened in Helmand by the Governor

On the 13th July 2006 [22nd of Saratan 1385], a number of news reports published by a range of media outlets, including Azadi Radio, claimed approximately 100 persons had been killed in Nawzad District of Helmand Province due Coalition Forces (CF) combat activities. However the Governor of Helmand claimed that only 19 people were killed by CF combat activity, all of whom were Taliban.

On the 14th July, the Governor of Helmand, Eng. Mohammad Daud, summoned Salih Mohammad Salih, a reporter for Azadi Radio, and asked him why an incorrect report had been aired concerning the number of casualties in the CF activities.

Salih said “I told him that the message was provided by a spokesperson of Coalition Forces in Helmand province through his translator, Zalmai, to the media and that I hadn’t said any thing from my own.” Mr. Salih added, “after that, the Governor asked the spokesperson of Coalition Forces, Captain Drew and his translator, to come to the office of the Governor. The spokesperson for Coalition Forces confirmed that they had sent the message to a BBC reporter. Salih Mohammad added “then, the governor of Helmand put me under pressure and said they had submitted the report to the BBC reporter ‘but why did you air it?’, and he put me in jail for one hour.” Salih said he was humiliated and offended and in addition was accused of having links with the Taliban.

Salih said during this meeting, the Governor kept stressing that he didn’t have the right to obtain information from a source other than the State. However Article 6 of the Afghanistan Media Law provides that *‘journalists shall enjoy legal support in the conduct of their related professional activities including [development of] reports that critical analysis and commentary’*.

In addition, another paragraph of the same Article provides that *‘Journalists shall have the right to refrain from disclosing the sources of their information, unless the authorized court has ordered a disclosure thereof’*.

Regardless of the provisions of the above Article, Salih argues that the Governor of Helmand forced the reporter of Azadi Radio to reveal the source and imprisoned him for an hour without good reason.

Salih said “they released me from prison after the reporter of BBC world service, told the Governor that if he didn’t set me free, he will report the imprisonment of a reporter by the governor of Helmand”.

The spokesman for the Governor of Helmand, Haji Muhaideen Khan, confirmed the existence of problems between reporters and the Governor of Helmand and added that it was natural that a person who lives and works in a community will face some problems, adding “it is not worth to follow and magnify the case.” Haji Muhaideen also said that since the problem is solved now, its further publication should be prevented.

Media Watch discussed the problems of reporters in Helmand Province with the Deputy Minister for Publications, Ministry of Culture and Youth Affairs, Deen Mohammad Mobariz Rashedi. He expressed no awareness of the existence of such problems and added that no one, including a Governor, has the right to imprison, threaten, or offend a reporter or force him/her to obtain information from a legitimate source.

Media Watch also contacted the office of the spokesperson for the Ministry of Interior concerning the issue, where they also stated they were unaware of such problems and that if a reporter or any other individual faces obstacles such as those outlined above, they should contact the Complaints Hearing Section of the Ministry of Interior.

4. The Department for Vice and Virtue (*Amer ba Maroof wa Nahi az Munkar*) established

After more than four years after the fall of the Taliban, the Department for Vice and Virtue is being re-established. On 6 June 2006 [16th of Jawza] members of the Council of Religious Scholars requested the President of Afghanistan establish an entity under the title of Vice and Virtue. The request was accepted by the President and a number of scholars under the chairmanship of Fazel Hadi Sheenwari, previously the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court and Head of the Council of Afghan [religious] Sholars. Sheenwari was charged with establishing this entity within the framework of the Ministry of Hajj and Religious Affairs (MHRA).

Judge Sulaiman Hamed, Deputy Minister for Ideological Affairs, MHRA says “ordering good deeds and preventing vices is one of the pillars of Islam, and pursuant to orders of Quran, there shall be a group within the Islamic Society which invites people to do good deeds and prevents them from committing vices. Since presently Afghanistan is an Islamic State and the matter is mentioned in the constitution, the leadership of Afghanistan decided to create an organ within MHRA to take action accordingly.”

Suleiman Hamid added “the Department for Vice and Virtue is not a new structure. It has been present throughout history during Islamic Governments and in Afghanistan too such an entity was functioning. For example, during the reign of [King] Mohammad Zahir, there was an entity within the supreme court called Ihtesab [accountability] which exercised the same function.” According to the Deputy for Ideological Affairs, MHRA, they intend to recruit professionals with high education levels, who should be able to make good judgements and be effective in encouraging people to do good deeds and prohibit them from partaking in vices.

Simultaneous with the publication of this message, some actors in the field of media expressed concern about the establishment of the Department for Vice and Virtue and have said it was possible that the commencement of work by this Department will result in restrictions on the media. Sayed Aqa Hussaini Sancharaki, head of the National Union of Journalists of Afghanistan said in an interview with the Media Watch “in as much as this entity is established at the request of the Council of [religious] Scholars, which deem the broadcasting by most of private media outlets, especially the visual outlets, as against the principles of Sharia [Islamic Jurisprudence], it is assumed that one of the principle functions of the Department will be limiting the work of media outlets. I think the first

goal of this Department will be to collide against media, especially visual media outlets.” According to Sancharaki, the Council of Scholars had a number of times reprovved and asked for the termination of such broadcastings. (In media watch reports numbers 4, 5, and 7, detailed information has been presented in this regard.)

Conversely, the Deputy for Ideological Affairs, MHRA, Judge Suleiman Hamid, said the concerns of the media were unjustified and added “in Afghanistan, there is a media law and the authorities for the Department of Vice and Virtue will take action where they encounter violations of this law by media outlets [audio, video or print], and will take the relevant media to court.”

According to the deputy of the MHRA, another field of work of the Department will be to combat propaganda launched against Islam. He stated “pursuant to the law approved by the cabinet and the national assembly, one of the duties of the MHRA is to prevent anti-religious [anti Islamic] propaganda. Prevention does not mean creation of another government within the government. It means that we will take action in coordination with other relevant and responsible organs such as the police, and judicial and justice authorities to prevent those who trespass the limits determined by law.”

In the media, the establishment of the Department for Vice and Virtue is mostly pronounced as the creation of religious police. But according to the deputy minister MHRA, this is not a police organization but a professional religious entity which invites people to do good deeds and bans them from indulging in vices. He added that the department that was going to be established would be different from the one that existed during the Taliban’s government and the rough methods applied by them [the Taliban] in their duties will no longer exist.

It is too early to decide what problems the Department will create against the operation of media. But with an evaluation of the background of the General Religious Scholars Council there is a risk that the visual media may gain significant attention from this new entity.

5. Media face obstacles in Daikundi province

Media outlets in Daikundi Province claim that whenever a news message or report is published/broadcast through a radio or print media that is not favored by State Organs, or that criticizes them, the Chief Editor/Manager of the media outlet is threatened and imprisoned.

Mohammad Reja, manager of Neeli Radio and Chief Editor of Daikundi weekly reported in an interview with Media Watch that during the previous month, he was summoned many times to the Police Headquarters of Daikundi, was intimidated by the ex-police chief, Habibullah Ahmadi (since dismissed) and was even imprisoned for a short term. Reja said “they put me in jail because our radio broadcast a satirical song. The song was sung by Ali Shahrestani and accused (allusively) the state departments of inadequacy of work and attention in the discharge of their duties.”

In addition, the chief editor of another non governmental publication, who did not want his name disclosed, has complained of similar limitations “previously, I would mostly

write stories about cases of coercion and illegal acts conducted by state authorities and would present the [evidentiary] documents therefore. However, upon pressure and intimidation by the previous governor of Daikundi, I had to stop the publication for some time.”

The Deputy Minister for Publications, Ministry of Culture and Youth affairs, Din Mohammad Mobariz Rashidi confirmed, in an interview with the Media Watch, the existence of problems for media outlets in Daikundi Province and added, “State authorities do not have any right to limit and prescribe [the work of?] media . Pursuant to Media Law, journalists have the right to have access to information and State authorities don’t have the right to unjustifiably hinder the work of journalists.” Mobarez added that we earnestly request all entities, whether related to the State or otherwise, to provide information sincerely and amicably to journalists.”

The office of the spokesperson for the Ministry of Interior stated it was not aware of this issue in Daikundi, and declared that there had been no complaint as of yet, however they promised to follow the issue and where such cases do exist, they will take action to resolve them.

It is worth noting that the new chief of police in Daikundi, Mohammad Ali Rezai, said in an interview with Media Watch “I am not aware of the conduct with media in the past. However, from now on, media outlets in Daikundi will not be controlled by the police.”

6. Pajhwok News Agency reporter robbed in Nemroz Province.

On 6th of Saratan, 1385 [27, Jun, 06], the vehicle transporting Abdullah Ilham, a reporter for Pajhwok News Agency in Nimroz Province, from his duty point to Kandahar, was stopped by gunmen in Jawzmadad area of Maiwand District, Kandahar Province and all his equipment and private possessions were stolen.

Ilham told Media Watch “the vehicle carrying us was stopped by gunmen wearing local clothes, and was diverted many kilometers to the right of the road, all the passengers of the vehicle were forced out of the vehicle and one of the robbers stood in front of me and put his hand in my pockets and placed all the contents [of my pockets] in his towel. In the same manner, the pockets of other passengers of the vehicle were emptied one after another.” Ilham said those that resisted the robbers or exchanged reasons were beaten to the extent that all their clothes were smeared with blood. Ilham added “the robbers even took away the cold water that we had”.

It is worth mentioning that in recent months, the security situation of the southern and southwestern Afghanistan has increasingly been deteriorating which has affected the mobility of media in these areas.

7. Three Journalist Unions merged under the title of Afghanistan’s National Union of Journalists

One of the main changes in the field of journalism in the month of July 2006 has been the merger of 3 journalist associations into Afghanistan’s National Union of Journalists (ANUJ). The three associations were previously known as Afghanistan’s General Union

of Journalists under the chairmanship of Hamid Noori, the Free Journalist Union of Afghanistan, under the chairmanship of Hamid Hamy, and the National Union of Afghan Journalists, under the chairmanship of Professor Mahmood Habibi.

Preparatory work for the merger started on the 1st of July, 2006. The heads of the three unions announced their readiness to join the ANUJ Union through letters endorsed by members of their leadership committees. The administrative and executive board of the ANUJ convened a meeting and, on July 20th, declared its agreement to the merger of the above mentioned unions.

On July 27th members of the executive boards of the three unions and more than 20 prominent journalists of Afghanistan, held a joint meeting to discuss this merger and the creation of an integrated entity. As a consequence they decided that during the next meeting on the 4th of August, an executive board composed of the leaders of the three unions and freelance and non member journalists would be formed. The board should facilitate the General Assembly or General Congress of the union within the next 6 months and the president, deputies, and organizational structure be designated through free and transparent elections.

According to Sayed Aqa Hussain Sancharaki, the interim head of the National Union of Journalists, the purpose of establishing the ANUJ is to create a stronger and larger union structure, to do more efficient work serving the fledgling journalism of Afghanistan. The union aims to build the professional capacity of journalists, as well as bring journalists from across the country together to share skills, technology, and methods of journalism. In addition the ANUJ will define and promote professional principles of journalism, and help journalists understand their responsibilities and the dimensions of their professional duties.

Meanwhile, some of the members of the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) declared their opposition to the merger through issuance of a declaration on 5th August 2006 [14th of Asad, 1385]. However according to Sancharaki, the interim president of the NUJ, one of its founding members, stated that of 11 founding members, 9 of them including the president of the union, in whose name the union is registered, have agreed to the merger. The only two who are not in agreement with the merger are Hafizullah Barekzai and Dr Sabaoon.

Said Aqa Sancharaki said they intend to commence the printing of a 20 page monthly journal under the title of *The Journalist* in Dari, Pashto and English. It is worth noting that another union named Afghanistan Independent Journalists Association (AIJA) under the chairmanship of Rahimullah Samander also exists, and is separate to the ANUJ.

8. Journalist Support Fund established

A journalist support fund was established by the Acting Minister for Culture and Youths Affairs on 2 July 2006 [11, Saratan, 1385].

The fund, managed by a supreme council composed of 10 individuals, will oversee donations and determine 'journalists in need' for allocation of spending. According to Din Mohammad Mobariz Rashidi, Deputy Minister for Publications, Ministry of Culture

and Youth Affairs, and a member of the supreme council for the fund, it will be a 'welfare' fund and the supreme council will be governed by an independent structure. This fund is created acknowledging hardships faced by journalists conducting their everyday duties.

So far USD\$5000 has been donated to the support fund by local businessmen and wealthy families interested in media and journalists. This amount will be deposited to a bank account to be opened in Kabul Bank.

Concerning the conditions under which journalists will be eligible to receive assistance from the fund, Din Mohammad Mobariz Rashidi, Deputy Minister of Publications, Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism says "a regulation has been drafted concerning the affairs related to this fund, pursuant to which the persons eligible of receiving assistance will be determined. For example, if a person has a disease which is difficult to treat or if a person's close relative passes away, such a person will be eligible for receiving assistance." Mr. Rashedi said the work is proceeding to develop the Regulation.

It is worth noting that approximately 2500 journalists are working through out Afghanistan.

9. In depth journalism workshops run by Afghan Media Development Agencies.

A two week workshop on Investigative journalism was convened by CIJ in Kunduz City on the 18th July 2006 [27, Saratan, 1385] for journalists in the northeastern zone.

In this workshop, 30 individuals from the provinces of the northeast including Kunduz, Takhar, Badakhshan, and Samangan participated. During the workshop, the methods for indepth research into a topic were taught and journalists were instructed to practically develop such reports upon choosing different subjects.

Rahmatullah Hamnawa, a reporter for Radio Salam Watandar in Kunduz Province and a participant in the workshop, said the workshop was useful and added that convening such workshops was very necessary for upgrading the quality of journalists in Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, another similar workshop for 22 journalists of the eastern zone, namely Kunar, Nooerstan, Laghman and Nengrahar provinces, was held in Jalalabad City.

In addition on the 2nd July 2006 [18, Dalwa, 1384], Nai convened a training session for Investigative journalism in which 25 journalists located in Kabul attended.

For any queries or information please contact:

Azizullah Habibi
Media Law Mentor
Nai- Supporting Afghanistan Open Media
Mobile: + 93 70293970
azizullah@nai.org.af

OR

Jawid Ahmad
Media Monitor
Nai- Supporting Afghanistan Open Media
Mobile: +93 799340831
jawid.ahmad@nai.org.af

www.nai.org.af

Note: To maintain the confidentiality and to protect sources it was not possible for Nai to corroborate the incidents by carrying out additional investigations. None of the material herein may be reproduced without permission from Nai.

This newsletter was made possible through support provided by the U.S. Agency for International Development, under the terms of Award No.HAD-A-00-03-00119-05 and by the European Commission, under project ASIE/2005/16775/106772. The opinions expressed herein are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Agency for International Development or the European Commission.