



Nai - Supporting Afghanistan Open Media

Media Watch Report Afghan Journalism Freedom Report #17

‘Sidiqullah Tawhidi’
Media analyst

Reporting is a complex profession – one made more difficult when media worker face intimidation, death threats and other dangers. Exacerbating the situation for Afghan journalists are the ongoing insecurity across the country and a lack of respect for the rule of law by authorities responsible for upholding the law.

In the course of performing their jobs, media workers are regularly being intimidated, beaten up and even murdered. Government authorities, freedom of speech organizations and other press advocates must pay attention to the pressures facing the media and respond appropriately. Five years after the fall of the Taliban and the establishment of at least a partial peace, there are still numerous challenges facing journalists. Media Watch is dedicated to documenting those challenges.

Media Watch investigates the following cases in this issue:

1. Suspects in the murder of two German journalists identified, but not arrested
2. Ariana TV chairman Ehsanullah Aryanazai, correspondent Ahmad Fawad Ahmadi are threatened
3. Radio Solh reporter Abdul Qudoos still behind bars
4. Embezzlement charges against RTA director dropped
5. Journalist associations express deep concerns about the situation of journalists
6. Two Afghan journalists attend the Open Society Seminar in Tajikistan

Suspects in the murder of two German journalists identified, not arrested

Police in Baghlan province say they have identified the murderers of two German journalists but no arrests have been made yet. Media Watch urges authorities to act quickly and arrest the suspects.

Karen Fischer, 30, and Christian Struwe, 38, worked for Deutsche Welle.

They were shot in early October while en route from Baghlan to Bamiyan.

The pair had set up a tent for the night when they were gunned down. It is not known if they were targeted because they were journalists or for other reasons.

Baghlan Gov. Sayyid Akramuddin Masoomi told Media Watch in a phone interview that thieves are suspected.

“As far as we know, there are some thieves and agitators in that area,” he said. “These people are the ones who carried out this attack. In the beginning we believed there was some political motive behind their murder, but we later found out that the attackers were a group of robbers who have been identified. Steps will be taken to capture them, but they have not been arrested yet.”

Masoomi said that security issues have delayed the arrest. He declined to give more details when pressed by Media Watch. Ratbill Ahang, a coworker of the journalists, said information about the case is limited.

“We are in touch with Baghlan officials daily,” he said. “They have arrested few people, but nothing has been said regarding the issue. German official also refuse to give details because the investigation is in progress.”

Afghan government officials have said that Struwe and Fischer had not informed relevant authorities about their trip.

“Our colleagues did not have an official mission in Afghanistan, but they wanted to go to that area for making report about Afghanistan,” Ahang said. “Two days before her murder, Ms. Fischer told me that they would stay away from government officials and close to the local people to hear their problems. This could be the reason that they didn’t inform the government officials.”

Both correspondents had been covering Afghanistan for a long time. At the time of their killing they were working on a freelance investigative report for DW TV, according to Ahang. He expressed hope that the authorities would capture those responsible soon.

“We are constantly in touch with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Interior Ministry and Baghlan local officials. And we kindly ask them to arrest and punish the criminals,” Ahang added.

Meanwhile, director of the Baghlan department of ministry of culture and youth affairs Mohammad Eshaq Kawkab said he believed that some police chiefs have not arrested the suspected criminals because they were bribed or pressured politically.

“And even these police officers support [the criminals],” he said. “That is why they have not been arrested yet.”

Media Watch believes that, given the lawlessness across the country, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs must provide foreign correspondents with information about different areas of the country and instruct them to stay in touch with the security departments while traveling to rural areas to ensure their safety.

Ariana TV Chairman Ehsanullah Aryanzai, correspondent Ahmad Fawad Ahmadi threatened

Attorney General Abdul Jabar Sabet accused Herat mayor Mohammad Rafiq Mujaddedi of embezzlement following an investigation that took place in the province. Ariana TV correspondent Ahmad Fawad Ahmadi quoted the attorney general in an Oct. 4 report. After its broadcast, Ahmadi was allegedly threatened with death by Mujaddedi and his son.

Ariana news manager Abdul Ghani Mudaqiy told Media Watch that Ahmadi had to go in hiding after the threat.

“Mr. Ahmadi had to leave his house and hide somewhere. [The mayor and his son] did not stop there,” said Mudaqiy. “They even threatened and insulted me and the chairman of Ariana Television, Mr. Aryanzai.”

Mudaqiy contacted authorities after the reported threat, he said.

“We contacted the Interior Ministry and Herat governor and asked them to ensure our reporter’s safety and we told them that, if [our reporter] is attacked, the mayor and his family will be held responsible,” Mudaqiy said, adding that Ahmadi’s report was impartial and balanced according to journalism standards.

“Mr. Ahmadi is still worried because the mayor is a popular person who can create problems for him, but at the moment he is continuing his work and there have been no further threats against him,” Mudaqiq added.

Speaking to Media Watch, Ahmadi gave more details of the threat against him.

“Quoting the prosecutor, I had reported that the mayor would be punished because of accusations that he misused his position,” he said. “At 8:30 that night, the mayor phoned me and said that the news was not true and I had to change my report. I insisted that it was true as I had evidence from the prosecutor. He denied the accusation and threatened me. He said if I don't correct the report he would collect a thousand people the next day and destroy the Ariana TV antenna and also attack me. He also verbally insulted me.

“After a few minutes, the mayor's son called me and said, 'If you do not retract the broadcast news in one hour I will come to your house and kill you.' I told him that he can't do that, and he doesn't have the right to do so. Then I hung up, but he called me again and threatened me again.”

A day following the Ariana broadcast, the mayor allegedly organized a protest in Herat, with demonstrators chanting against journalists and the media, accusing them of spreading false rumors.

“The Interior Ministry informed the Herat police chief of the threats and later the mayor came to my office and apologized, claiming he was spoke in anger in the heat of the moment and his son had also wrongly threatened me. However, early that morning I had been threatened by an unknown caller,” Ahmadi said.

Media Watch contacted Herat Mayor Mohammad Rafiq Mujaddedi, but he declined to comment. Herat's mayor has not been arrested despite a warrant. Mujaddedi is backed by senior officials including the president of the Upper House of Parliament, Sebghatullah Mujaddedi.

Media Watch believes that when government officials and authorities disrespect and violate the law, it harms ordinary citizens, including reporters who have little protection.

Jabul Seraj Radio Peace Reporter Abdul Qudoos still detained without a trial date

Jabul Seraj Radio Solh (Radio Peace) Reporter Abdul Qudoos is still languishing in jail without a trial date in sight. Abdul Qudoos was arrested in February based on allegations that he made a failed attempt to murder a Parwan province legislator Samea Sadat.

Media Watch believes that the authorities have violated Abdul Qudoos right to due process. According to Afghan laws, he should have been tried within 40 days of his arrest. The charges against him should be dismissed or he should be given a fair trial immediately.

Abdul Qudoos worked as a reporter and technician for Raio Solh for two years, according to the station manager, Zakia Zaki.

Sadat was attacked while traveling on a road between Parwan and Kabul provinces. According to Zaki, Abdul Qudoos was attending a training course at Nai when the attack took place. She described the events following his arrest.

“First, the police took Mr. Abdul Qudoos to the Counter Terrorism Section of the National Security Department of Parwan, but because there wasn't enough evidence against him, after 40 days he was taken to the Office of the Attorney General in Kabul. We also need to consider that after the detention of Mr. Qudoos, Ms. Sadat alleged that Qudoos was provoked by me to kill her, but she couldn't provide any evidence for her accusation, so the police couldn't arrest me.

Zaki offered her view of why Abdul Qudoos' case has not gone to trial.

“During all this time he hasn't been investigated because there is no evidence against him,” she said. “Ms. Sadaat has complained that he campaigned for me during the parliamentary election, but she has no other evidence. We suspect that a conspiracy is involved here and an innocent reporter is locked up because of Ms. Sadaat and the interior minister. Court official Abdul Baset received several calls during the hearings and was forced to adjourn the court. This clearly proves that there is a conspiracy behind the Mr. Qudoos' detention. If it wasn't a conspiracy he should have already been freed.

“I think the main criminal is Jabar Taqwa, the governor of Parwan province because he is the leader of the area and he should have probed the crime scene. Currently, Ms. Sadaat is parliamentarian and at the same time she is the head of the Parwan department of education. I'm upset with the President because he hasn't paid attention to Abdul Qudoos' case although an open letter was sent to him.”

While Media Watch has reported on this case before Samea Sadat, spoke to Media Watch for the first time. While declining to comment at first, she told Media Watch that she did not file any complaint against Abdul Qudoos.

“I haven't filed any complain in this regard; government officials themselves arrested [Abdul Qudoos],” she told Media Watch. In the conversation, she also alleged that Ms. Zaki had threatened her.

“You can ask whatever you want from the interior minister and his lawyer, but the most important thing is that Mr. Abdul Qudoos is not a journalism faculty graduate and therefore he is not a journalist. Why doesn't Media Watch investigate murders – why does it only want to report on this? Whatever the prosecutors say is right, I have no doubt about that.”

She asked the Media Watch not call everyone a reporter. At the end of her interview, she accused Media Watch of supporting Abdul Qudoos.

Media Watch believes that if there is evidence to prosecute Abdul Qudoos, the courts must take action quickly. Delawari, who heads the court, declined to address Media Watch's concerns on behalf of the detained reporter. Media Watch believes that this issue is not closed until Abdul Qudoos is released based on lack of evidence or given a fair trial.

The authorities must not sway under the influence of powerful politicians when making a case against an individual as the law states that everyone is equal before the law.

RTA embezzlement case to be closed

A case of embezzlement involving RTA in the amount of \$400,000 is about to be closed, according to Halim Samidi, who heads the investigative department of the Attorney General's office. The Attorney General's Office made the charges in early October. RTA chairman Najibullah Roshan, in an Oct. 7 press conference, vehemently rejected the accusations.

“The amount of money was \$88,000 which was transferred to the RTA account in the Microfinance Bank,” Roshan said. “Only 37 percent of the money was spent following instructions from the President for reconstruction and production of TV programs. According to a proposal by the Ministry of Culture and Youth Affairs, and through the approval of the cabinet, a special account was opened in the Microfinance Bank for RTA for program income and grants from foreign donors.”

The probe into RTA began after some of its employees approached parliament, seeking a review of its finances.

Presidential spokesman Karim Rahimi confirmed that the president ordered changes at RTA, including arrangement of required facilities and production of programs for RTA. If processed through the state bank account, the programming development would have delayed due to the bureaucracy in the state apparatus.

This issue created a media frenzy. In an interview with Tolo TV, Attorney Abdul Jabar Sabet said: “According to the administrative regulations, embezzlement has taken place, but the RTA chairman is not accused in the case. The administrative procedure was not properly followed.”

Meanwhile, Attorney General Spokesman Abdul Rab Chamili told Media Watch: “According to the order of the President, \$193,000 was approved for spending, but an investigation is ongoing in to the remaining funds.

When about whether the president has the authority to pardon persons accused of embezzlement, Chamili said: “The money was not embezzled but it was spent on RTA as authorized by the President. Regarding the rest of the money, the investigation is underway and as soon as it is proved that embezzlement has taken place, it will be processed judicially. Otherwise RTA officials will be found innocent. The main issue is the violation of administrative procedures, not embezzlement. Therefore, the order of the president is legal and applicable.”

Administrative regulations are very bureaucratic, which sometimes causes a slowdown in work. This has created criticisms and concerns among government officials.

Media Watch believes that the Attorney General's Office should not have made its accusations so hastily. Calling this a case of embezzlement has damaged Roshan's reputation. If he is not found guilty, Roshan will likely ask to be publicly vindicated.

Journalist unions express deep concerns about the situation of journalist in Afghanistan

In a gathering on Oct. 9 in celebration of international press freedoms entitled, “Two Years Towards Democracy,” journalists signaled growing concerns about the situation of journalists in the country. The event was held by the Foundation of Afghanistan’s Free Journalists, the Afghan Journalists Defense Committee, the Center for International Journalism, the International Federation of Journalists and the Open Media Fund for Afghanistan.

“Problems like killing, threats, beating and others are on the rise,” Rahimullah Samandar, head of the Free Journalists Foundation said in a speech. “Drastic measures to resolve these problems have not been put in place by the government.”

Based on the information provided by the Journalists Defense Committee, he added: “During the last three years, three journalists have been killed, five injured and three publications were burned down.”

In a letter sent to President Karzai, the International Federation of Journalist stated that, “the international community is seriously supporting journalists, and therefore, the Afghan government should also support them.”

Speaking on this occasion, Deen Mohammad Mubarez Rashedi, the deputy minister for culture and youth, emphasized that the government should implement its mantra that it is “moving towards democracy.”

“Freedom of speech does exist in Afghanistan, but it is not in a very good condition due to an unstable situation and restraints,” he said, asking the security departments to announce as soon as possible the results of investigations about journalists who are under threat.

Afghan journalists attended Open Society Seminar in Tajikistan

Afghan media experts Sayyid Aqa Hussain Fazel Sancharaki, head of the Afghanistan National Union of Journalists, and Tolo TV human rights reporter Mohammad Abdullah attended a one-week seminar hosted by the Open Society Institute of Tajikistan. The seminar assessed press laws of Middle Eastern and Central Asian countries. The seminar, held from Sept. 23-30 in Dushanbe, was funded by the Open Society Institute, the Soros Foundation and the Human Rights Commission of Tajikistan.

Seminar participants came from Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Russia, Australia, Italy and England, including Ms. Prina, the head of the Article 19 organization of Europe, according to Sancharaki.

“Mr. Abdullah and I spoke about the press law in Afghanistan and also described the mistakes that happen in journalism, which were eagerly followed by the participants,” he added. “Participants promised to come to Kabul and learn from the Afghan press.”

Media Watch believes that the Constitution and Media Law are the main reasons behind the success and prosperity of media in Afghanistan relative to the progress made in neighboring countries. Civil society groups and journalists unions, with the support of the international community, should try to maintain the press freedoms established by the law otherwise the achievements made by the interim government will be lost and the freedom of speech will be harmed.

For any queries or information please contact:

mediawatch@nai.org.af

Seddiqullah Tawhidi
Analyst and Reporter
Sidiqullahtauwhidia@internews.org
Mob: 009370279176

Or

Jawid Ahmad
Media Monitor
jawid.ahmad@nai.org.af
Mob: 0093799340831

To get an electronic copy of the report, please refer to the following address:
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 office of the United States Agency for International Development through Counterpart International Inc, under the terms of award No. 306-A-00-05-00511-00.

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 and Counterpart International”.