

AJSC

AFGHAN JOURNALISTS SAFETY COMMITTEE

کمیته مصونیت خبرنگاران افغان
د افغان خبريالانو د خونديتوب کمیته



AJSC Six Month Report 2019

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Afghan Journalist Safety Committee

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Summary

During the first six months of 2019, AJSC has recorded 45 cases of violence against journalists and media workers, which includes 3 cases of murder, 6 cases of injury, 5 cases of physical assault, 19 cases of verbal abuse, 9 cases of intimidation and one case of illegal expulsion from duty. Individuals affiliated with the government are responsible for majority of the cases of violence, namely 18 cases. Terrorist groups (Taliban and ISIS) come second, as they are responsible for 7 cases. Unidentified individuals rank third, as they are responsible for 16 cases, and media managers being responsible for 3 cases rank last.

During the reporting period, majority of the cases of violence, which constitute 15 cases, took place in southeastern provinces of the country.

Although the number of incidences of violence and threat against journalists show 50% decline during the first six months of 2019 compared to that of last year, it does not indicate a significant alleviation of the overall state of threat against journalists and media, as the perpetrators still manifest a great amount of intimidation against media outlets and journalists. For instance, in June 2019, in a press statement, the Taliban presented a harsh threat ordering media outlets to refrain from airing advertisements related to the Afghan government, security forces and those ads that highlight the atrocities of this group.

The reduction of violence against journalists could be attributed to improved safety measures by journalists and media outlets, peace talks, provision of safety gear for journalists by AJSC, operative degradation of ISIS militants and consistent advocacy by media support organizations which has compelled the government to expand their efforts towards safety of journalists and media outlets.

The latest threat of the Taliban against media has exacerbated self-censorship among media outlets. Many media organizations refrain from airing atrocities of the Taliban because of the fear of retribution by the Taliban. Since the threat has coerced many media outlets to stop airing government and international community sponsored ads, it has further aggravated the financial challenges that media outlets already faced.

Based on AJSC's observation, journalists still go to terrorist sites without necessary safety equipment and safety preparations. This is despite the fact that AJSC has distributed more than 200 pairs of armored vests and helmets to journalists and media outlets. Journalists and media outlets need to incorporate safety precautions in their daily activities.

The lack of mentioning of press freedom and journalist safety in the resolution released after the meeting between the Taliban and Afghanistan representatives in Doha is a matter of concern. This is particularly of importance considering the ideological opposition of the Taliban to press freedom and their continued hostility with media and journalists.

Preface

The first six months of the year 2019 witnessed significant threats and violence against journalists. However, the scale of violence was remarkably lower compared to the first six months of the year 2018. Although instability and violence has increased in Afghanistan, the decline in the level of violence against journalists could be attributed to the effectiveness of the measures taken by journalist protection organizations, media outlets and journalists themselves.

Afghan Journalist Safety Committee (AJSC hereafter), as Afghanistan's leading entity advocating for press freedom and journalist safety, prepares annual and semi-annual reports on safety of journalists and state of press freedom in Afghanistan. The reports cover countrywide incidences of violence and threats against journalists and depicts major happenings vis-a-vis freedoms of press and expression.

This six-month report covers the incidences of violence and state of press freedom in the first six months of 2019. Additionally, it offers analysis with regards to the trends of violence as well as progress and setback in the realm of media and reporting. The report also compares incidences of violence compared to the first six months of the year 2018 to provide better illustration of the trends of violence against media. The goal of AJSC's semi-annual and annual reports are to inform the stakeholders about the circumstances of journalist safety and press freedom so that it assists them with taking informed decision and formulating effective policies to protect and promote journalist safety and press freedom.

Methodology:

AJSC has been producing reports on the state of journalist safety and press freedom since 2013. AJSC exercises rigorous guidelines in terms of identification and collection of cases of violence against journalists from Afghanistan's 34 provinces. AJSC maintains a representative or focal point throughout the country who document the cases based on the policies and procedures provided to them by the organization's headquarter in Kabul. Based on the policies we use to collect data, there is a clear definition for journalists and media workers as well as cases of violence against journalists. We use clear guidelines as to what constitutes a case of threat or violence against journalists. This means AJSC does not document those cases of threat and violence that are not related to the professional work of journalists. The collected cases go through a second layer of verification by the Kabul office and then inserted into the organization's database. The reports are produced in three languages of English, Dari and Pashto and distributed to media community and other stakeholders during a press conference.

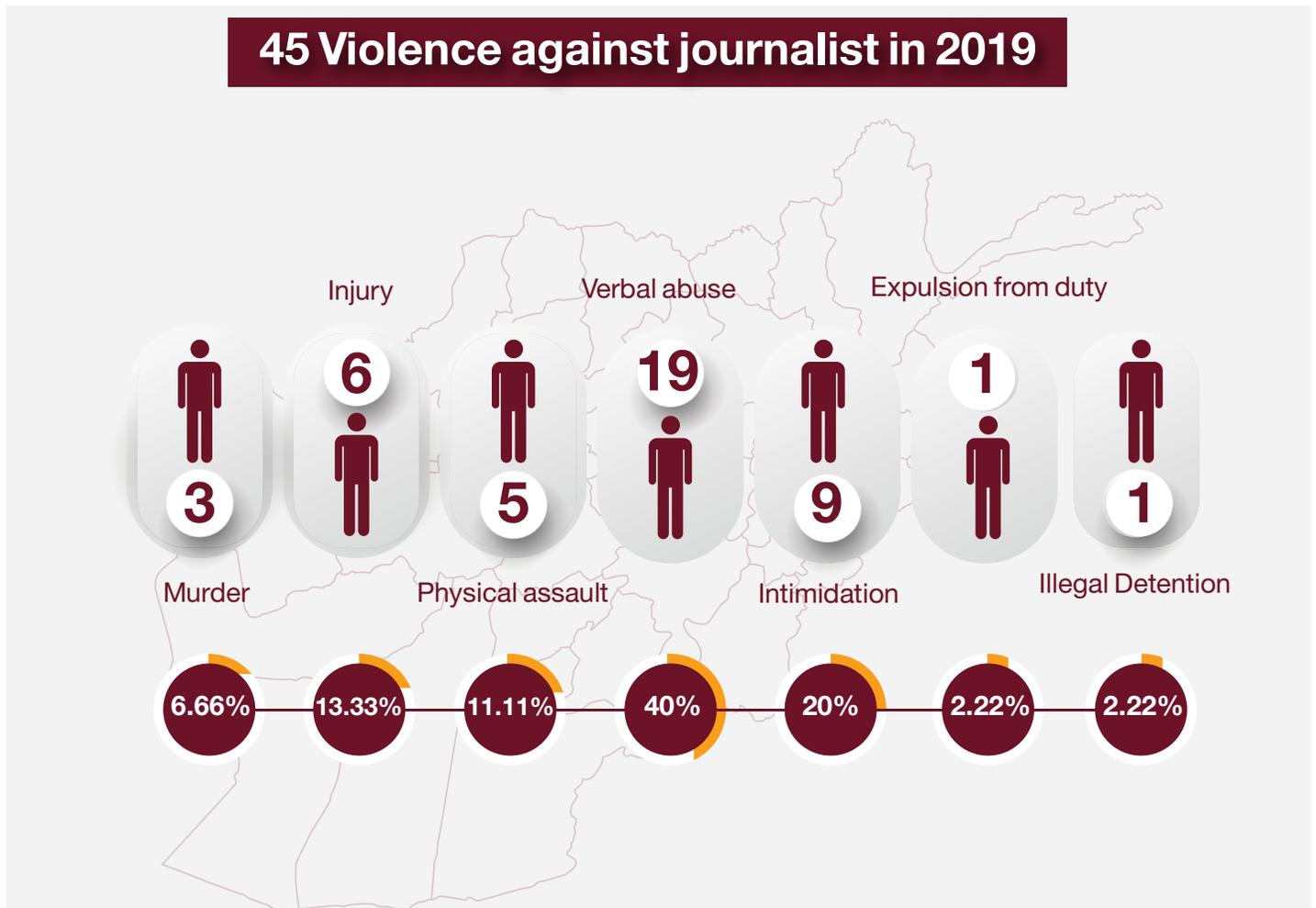
Situation of Journalists during the first half of the year

Although the number of incidences of violence and threat against journalists during the first six months of 2019 show 50% decline compared to that of last year, it does not indicate significant alleviation of the overall state of threat against journalists and media, as the perpetrators, particularly the Taliban, still manifest a great amount of intimidation against the media community. For instance, in June 2019, in a press statement, the Taliban presented a harsh threat ordering media outlets to refrain from airing advertisements related to the Afghan government, security forces and those ads that highlight the atrocities of this group.

During the reporting period, AJSC has recorded 45 cases of violence against journalists and media workers, which includes 3 cases of murder, 6 cases of injury, 5 cases of physical assault, 19 cases of verbal abuse, 10 cases of intimidation, one case of illegal detention and one case of illegal expulsion from duty.

In this reporting period, individuals affiliated with the government are responsible for majority of the cases of violence, namely 20 cases. Terrorist groups (Taliban and ISIS) come second, as they are responsible for 8 cases. Unidentified individuals rank third, as they are responsible for 8 cases, influential people are responsible for 6 cases rank fourth and media managers being responsible for 3 cases rank last.

Majority of the cases of violence, which constitute 15 cases, took place in southeastern provinces of the country (Paktia, Paktika, Khost, Logar), while southern provinces of the country (Helmand and Kandahar) have the lowest number of cases of incidents, namely 2 cases.

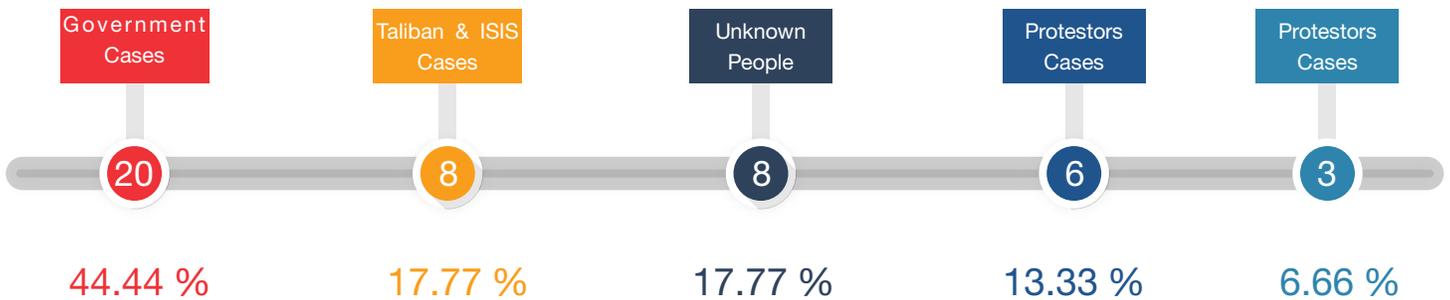


2018

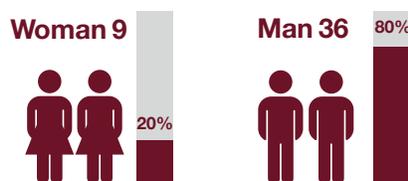
2019

Total cases	89	45	Percentage of Difference	
Murder	11	3	73 %	Decrease
Injury	11	6	46 %	Decrease
Physical assault	19	19	%	No change
Verbal abuse	14	5	64.3 %	Decrease
Intimidation	28	10	64.3 %	Decrease
Expulsion from duty	1	1	%	No change
Illegal Detention	5	1	80 %	Decrease

Perpetrators of Violence 2019



Statistics of Violence by Gender



Examples of violence and threat against journalists



Anchor of social programs of Zheman TV in Khost Province was shot dead by ISIS militants on 15/3/2019. Khost Police Headquarters has arrested three people in this regard.



The anchor of the social programs of a local TV station in Kabul presented her resignation to the manager of the station three times, which was repeatedly rejected. The manager would threaten her of facing prosecution if she joined another TV station. With AJSC's interference, on 4/2/2019, the case was resolved and she received clearance from the station.



In May 2019, the presenter of Sabawoon TV Station was injured while en route to office when his car was the target of a magnetic bomb. AJSC delivered the necessary assistance for his treatment. No one claimed responsibility for this incident.

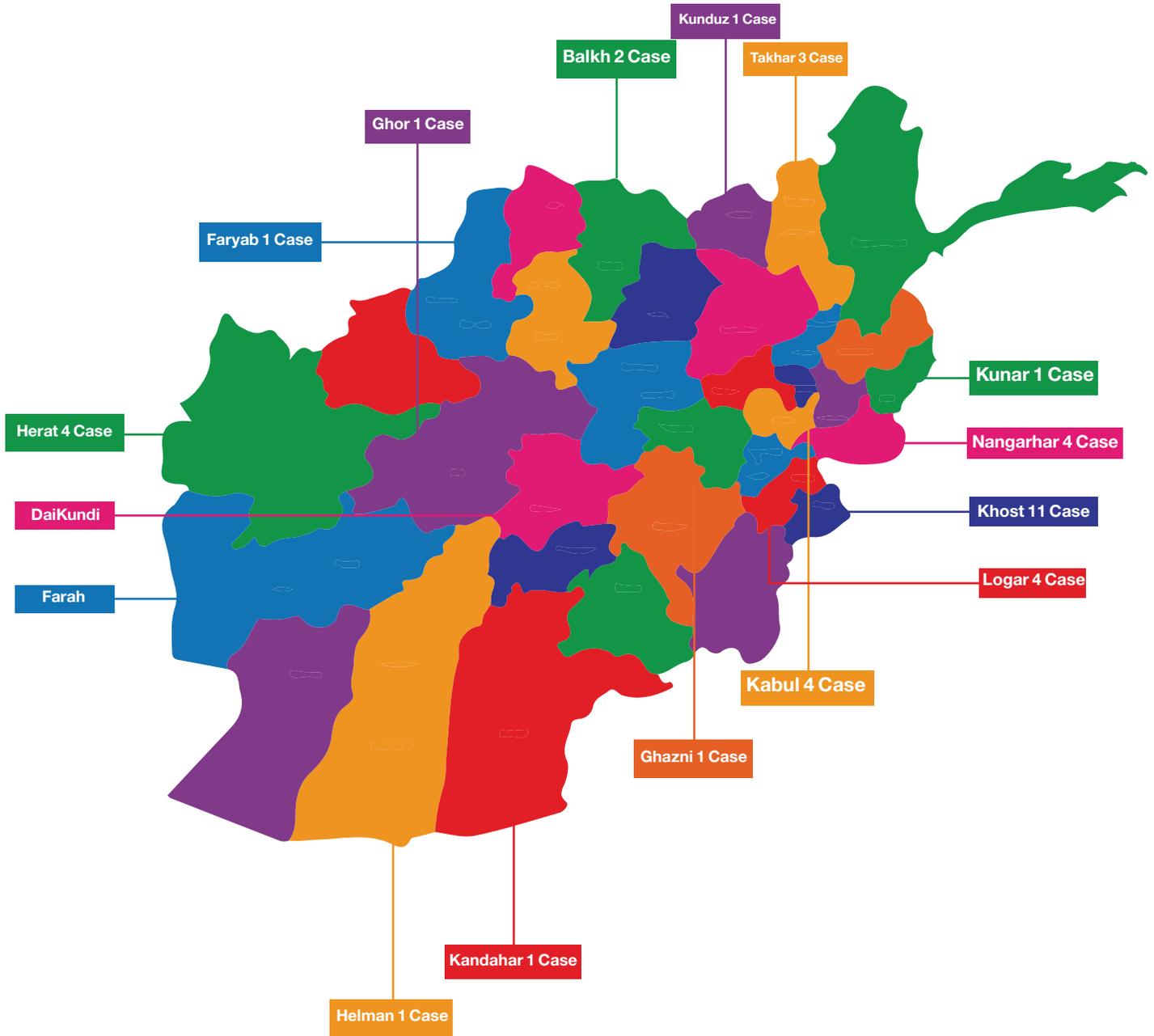


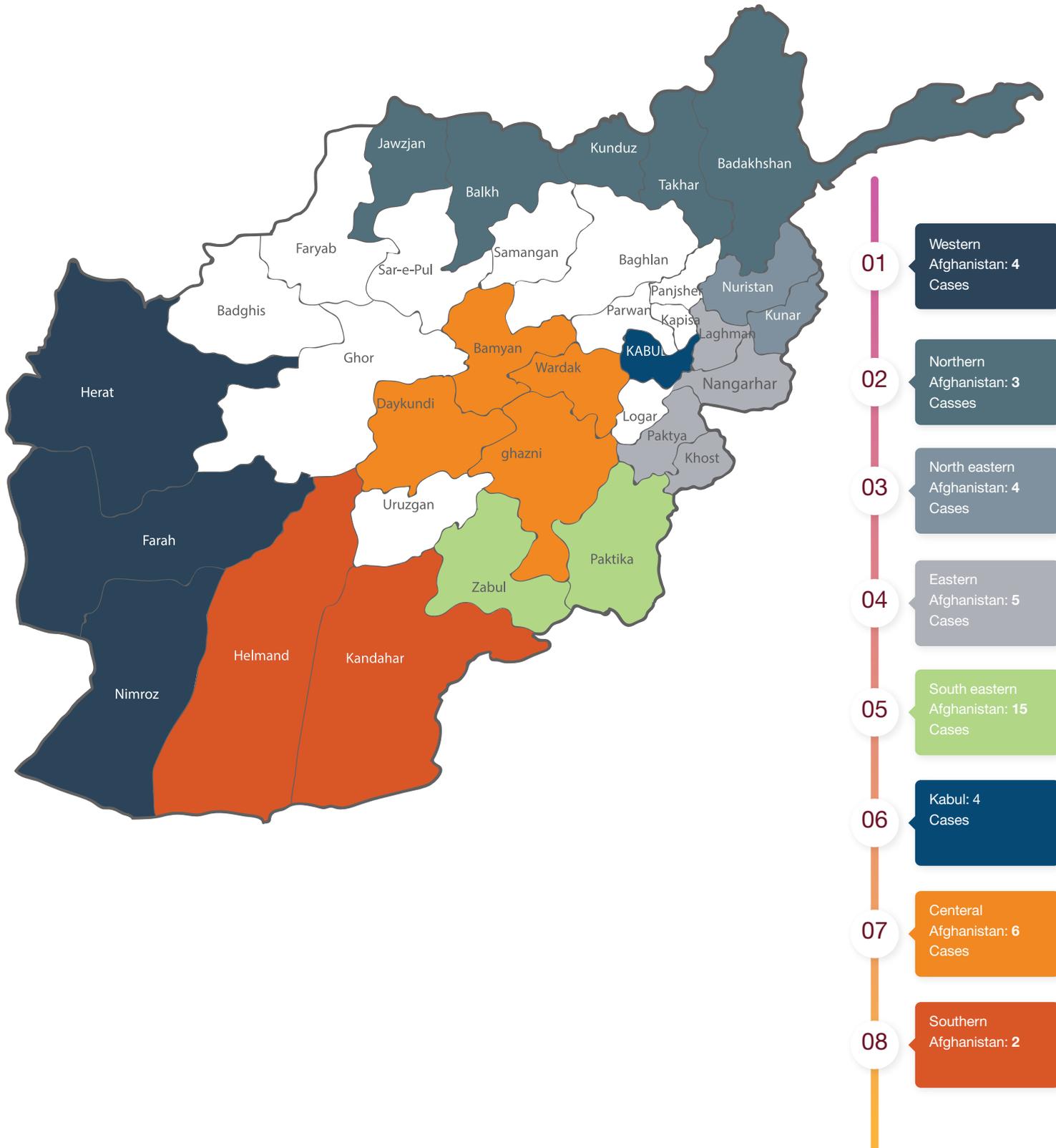
In April 2019, the presenter of Radio Mazal was shot while he was leaving his office for home. AJSC delivered the necessary assistance for his treatment. No one claimed responsibility for this incident.



In June 2019, a journalist working for one of the Kabul-based news agencies was arrested by the Prosecutor's Office of Faryab Province after he published a report on the escape of a drug dealer from the appellate court of Faryab. Afterwards, The Prosecutor's Office sent an inquiry to the telecom operator and illegally demanded a 10-hour talk history of the journalist. AJSC provincial coordinator in Northern provinces intervened and resolved the case.

Breakdown of Violence in the Provinces of Afghanistan





Although it is difficult to authoritatively attribute exact reasons for the reduction of violence against journalists, as it is a complex subject with correlations to a wide range of factors, the following are most likely the reasons behind the reduction of violence against journalists in the first six months.

Peace Talks

Although the level of violence in Afghanistan is as pervasive as the previous years, based on AJSC's observation and analysis, peace talks between the Taliban and the US has prompted the Taliban to attempt to portray themselves as more of a political group. Because of the heavy political cost of attacks on journalists, this might have encouraged them to refrain from large scale attacks on journalists and media.

Advocacy by Media Support Organizations

Consistent advocacy by media support organizations, such as Afghan Journalists Safety Committee, Afghanistan Journalists Federation, etc in terms of job security and physical safety of journalists, especially development of safety policies and guidelines by AJSC, have assisted media and journalists to take more precautions while covering hostile situations. We believe this is an important factor that has decreased vulnerabilities of journalists and media, resulting in decrease in cases of journalists casualties.

Provision of Safety Gear for Journalists

Additionally, in the past several months, AJSC has distributed more than 200 pairs of armored vests and helmets to war journalists all across the country. This has allowed journalists and media workers to go to covering battlefield and terrorist incidents with the necessary gear for their protection. The equipment has proven vital in many incidents safeguarding the lives of journalists and media workers.

Operative Degradation of ISIS militants

In the first half of 2019, Afghanistan based ISIS militants witnessed major setback. The operations carried out by the Afghan forces led to the clearance of vast swaths of areas from them and weakened their operative capabilities. As ISIS was responsible for a significant amount of violence against journalists, their setback has reduced threats against journalists.

Challenges Ahead of Journalist Safety

Despite consistent attempts by AJSC in Kabul and provinces, many media outlets have not implemented the safety guidelines AJSC provided to media houses. This is because of the recklessness of some media outlets as well as the financial challenges they face. In the safety guidelines, AJSC has made specific recommendations for upgrading physical safety of the media houses as well as procedures for establishing efficient security protocols for the premises and staff of the media stations. The government has also failed to compel media houses to implement the guidelines so there is still a significant amount of vulnerability that media outlets and journalists face. Additionally, in the light of the latest threat of the Taliban against media, security organizations have not been efficient enough to offer support. Therefore, a large number of media outlets either face serious vulnerability or they have had to stop airing the ads that Taliban have warned them to not air. Media outlets' inability to air the ads will further increase the financial challenges that many media already face.

Covering Terrorist Incidents Without Necessary Safety Measures

Despite pervasive attempts by AJSC to convince media outlets and journalists to refrain from attending sites of terrorist attacks without essential safety gear and safety preparations journalists and media outlets have not manifested compliance. The Taliban attack on Counterpart International in May 2018 in Kabul proved that journalists still do not maintain vigilance in terms of implementing safety procedures. A large number of journalists who rushed to the scene after the attack did not have armored vests and Helmets. This is extremely important because last year, Afghanistan lost 9 journalists in one attack. The attack targeted journalists following the first suicide bombing which targeted security forces.

Peace talks and freedom of speech

Afghanistan's media community maintains serious concerns about press freedom and journalist safety remaining marginal in the peace talks with the Taliban. Although AJSC has repeatedly called on the US and the Afghan government to not compromise on Afghanistan's achievements in the realm of press freedom and draw journalist safety as a red line, the resolution that came out from the discussions of the Taliban with the Afghan representatives did not even mention press freedom. Freedoms of press and expression are among the most significant achievements of the post-2001 Afghanistan. Afghanistan is home to hundreds of media outlets and thousands of journalists from all parts of the country. Afghanistan's media represent extensive diversity. Only in 2018, two channels exclusive for women were established. Based on the 2019 global ranking of Reporters Sans Frontier (RSF), Afghanistan ranks 121 which is ahead of any other country in the region, including India which is deemed the world's largest democracy. AJSC's concern mainly emanates from the ideological opposition of the Taliban with the media and press freedom. Over the course of the last 18 years, the Taliban have consistently expressed hostility with the media. They are responsible for killing countless journalists and attacking many media outlets. The Taliban's latest threat against media outlets further compounds the concern. The media community's genuine fear about losing these achievements warrants firm standing of the Afghan government and international community in the negotiating table.

Conclusion

violence against journalists fell dramatically in the first six months of 2019 compared to the same period in 2018. The decline could be attributed to factors such as peace talks, improved safety measures by the media community and degradation of ISIS. Despite the reduction of violence, threats against journalists and media remains critical.

In the light of the latest threats from the Taliban, measures taken by the security forces to secure media outlets is not convincing. After the latest threats, many media outlets remain vulnerable to being attacked by the Taliban.

With the growing financial challenges the media face, the latest threat of the Taliban coercing media to not air ads related to ANDSF and the Afghan government, financial constraints of the media will further exacerbate.

Afghan media community remains deeply worried about the prospects of peace talks vis-a-vis freedoms of press and expression. Concerns have aggravated following the latest threat of the Taliban which was released in June.

The latest threat of the Taliban has also increased self-censorship among media outlets and journalists. Many media outlets, particularly those operating in the volatile provinces, refrain from airing atrocities of the Taliban because of the fear of being attacked by the group. To a significant extent, the Taliban dictate the agenda and content of such media outlets.

Recommendations

- The Afghan government, particularly security organizations, need to take serious preventive measures to bolster protection of media outlets and journalists. Liaison between these organizations and the media outlets needs to improve so threats could be nullified or shared with the concerned media ahead of any security incident. At the same time, security organizations should carry out security assessment of all media outlets and where deemed necessary, they should provide armed guards for media outlets. AJSC has coordinate the safety issues of media houses with security organization and is further committed to take on this responsibility.
- The Joint Committee for the Safety of Journalists and Media needs to create an efficient secretariat so that its decisions are diligently implemented and followed up. Based on AJSC's observations, decisions of the Committee are not effectively implemented, allowing the safety pitfalls to persist.
- The government needs to take action towards prosecution of government workers who are responsible for inflicting violence against journalists. While the government is legally and morally responsible for safeguarding journalist safety and press freedom, government workers being responsible for the bulk of the cases of violence against journalists is a serious matter of concern. Negligence of the government towards prosecution of those individuals who are behind violence and intimidation has caused impunity to perpetuate.
- Media outlets and journalists should diligently implement safety guidelines created by AJSC. Media outlets should have all necessary security arrangements before deploying their journalists to the battlefield or to cover terrorist incidents. Negligence towards holistic implementation of the articles of the guidelines will keep journalists and media outlets vulnerable towards the Taliban attack.
- Afghanistan's international partners and the Afghan government should safeguard press freedom and journalist safety during peace talks. Freedoms of press and expression are among the biggest achievements of the post-2001 Afghanistan, which make significant contribution towards good governance, consolidation of democracy and promotion of human rights. Compromise on these achievements will be a major setback to the achievements of the past 2 decades.