



Six Month Report 2018

1 Jan-30 Jun 2018

Afghan Journalists Safety Committee

Introduction

As the media has become the center of the war in Afghanistan, increasing insecurity and instability in the country has resulted in expanding threats and direct attacks against media and journalists. This state of affairs has not only expanded the scope of threats against journalists and the media in an unprecedented way, but it has also obliged media and journalists to exercise extra caution to maintain neutrality amongst the different parties of the conflict. Additionally, the presence of terrorist groups and a lack of precise information and knowledge concerning the identity and goals of the groups that have recently emerged, such as is the case with ISIS, complicates the landscape of threats against journalists and the media.

The terrorist attack on the journalists on April 30th that killed 9 journalists signals a paradigm shift in the nature of threats against journalists. Moreover, it has created severe impediments to the effectiveness of security measures for journalists. This attack and its consequences for the journalists and the media have raised serious concerns in regards to the security of journalists and the safety procedures currently in place.

This report, which is the 11th report presented by the Afghan Journalists Safety Committee (AJSC), will discuss the safety situation of journalists and the media in the first 6 months of 2018. A number of other main issues concerning reporting and freedom of expression that have come up during this period will also be presented in this report.

Violence against journalists in the first six months of 2018

The first six months of 2018 was the bloodiest period for journalists and the media community in Afghanistan. In these six months, 89 cases of violence against journalists and media workers were recorded, eleven of which involved the killing of journalists. The figures of this period show a 22% increase compared to the first six months of 2017 in which AJSC recorded a total of 73 cases. All of the journalists who were killed in this period were deliberately targeted or directly attacked. 9 were killed in a suicide attack in Kabul for which ISIS took responsibility. 2 others were killed in deliberate attacks in Kandahar and Khost provinces respectively. No group has taken responsibility for the latter two attacks. Besides incidents involving the killing of journalists, AJSC has recorded 19 cases involving humiliation and mistreatment of journalists, 14 instances of physical beatings, 11 instances of inflicting bodily injury, 28 instances of intimidation, 5 instances of detention and summoning, and 1 instance of unlawful termination. The intensity and scale of violence and threat have been unprecedented in 2018.

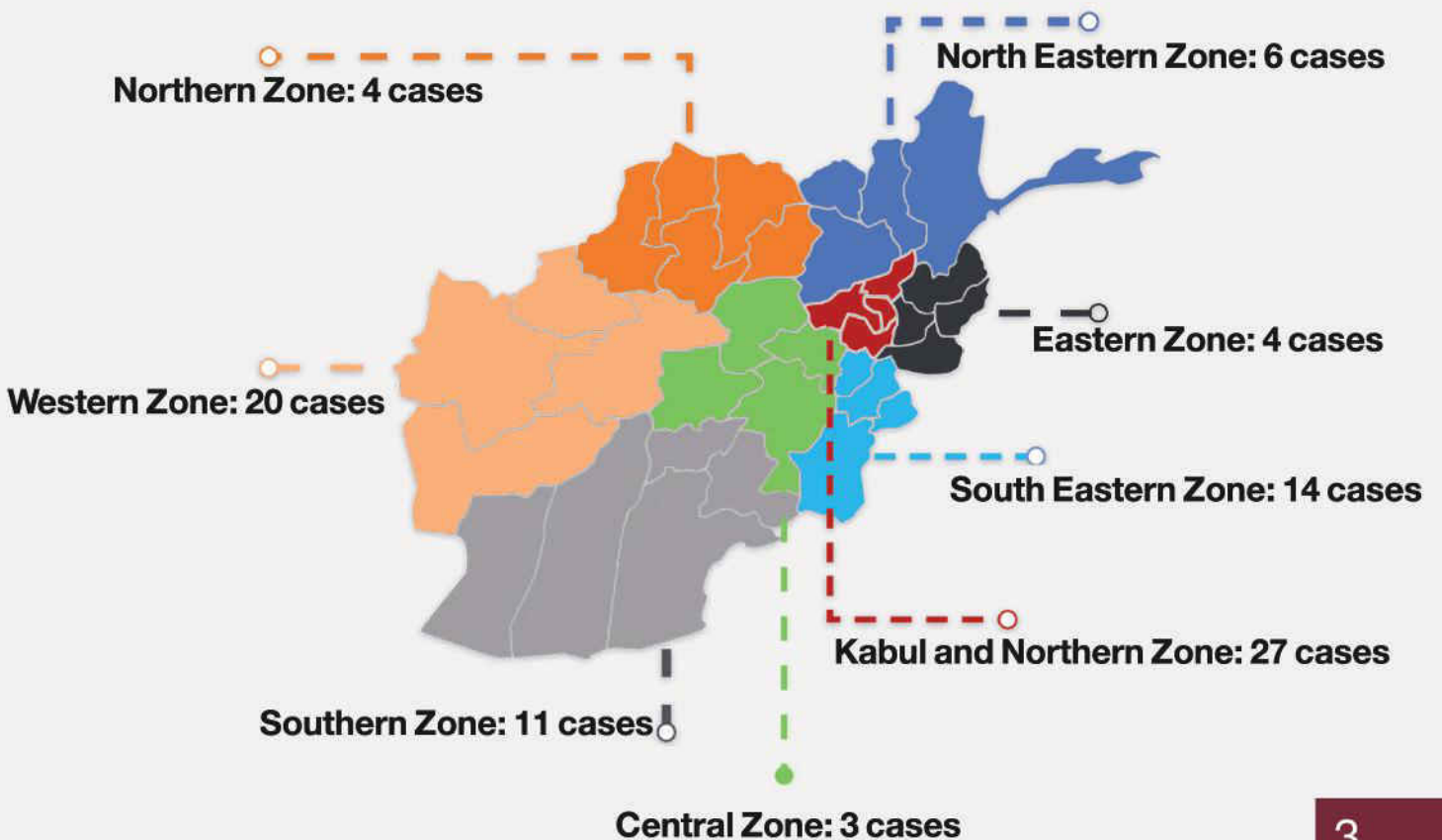
ISIS and the Taliban have been responsible for 37 incidents, which form the majority of cases of violence and intimidation. Individuals loyal to the government and security forces come in second responsible for 36 cases of violence and threats. Unidentified individuals come in third responsible for 14 cases. Owners and managers of media organizations are reported to be behind 2 cases of mistreating journalists and media workers. Of incidents involving violence, 27 have taken place in Kabul zone that cover Kabul and its northern provinces. 14 incidents have taken place in the Southeast zone, 11 in the South zone, 6 in the Northeast zone, 4 in the North zone, 4 in the East zone, and 3 cases have been reported from the Central zone.

89 Cases of Violence in the First Six Months of 2018

Type of Violence



Violence in Provincial Zones

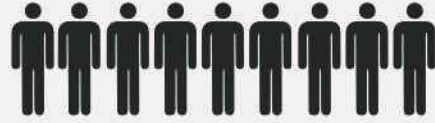


Statistics of Violence by Gender

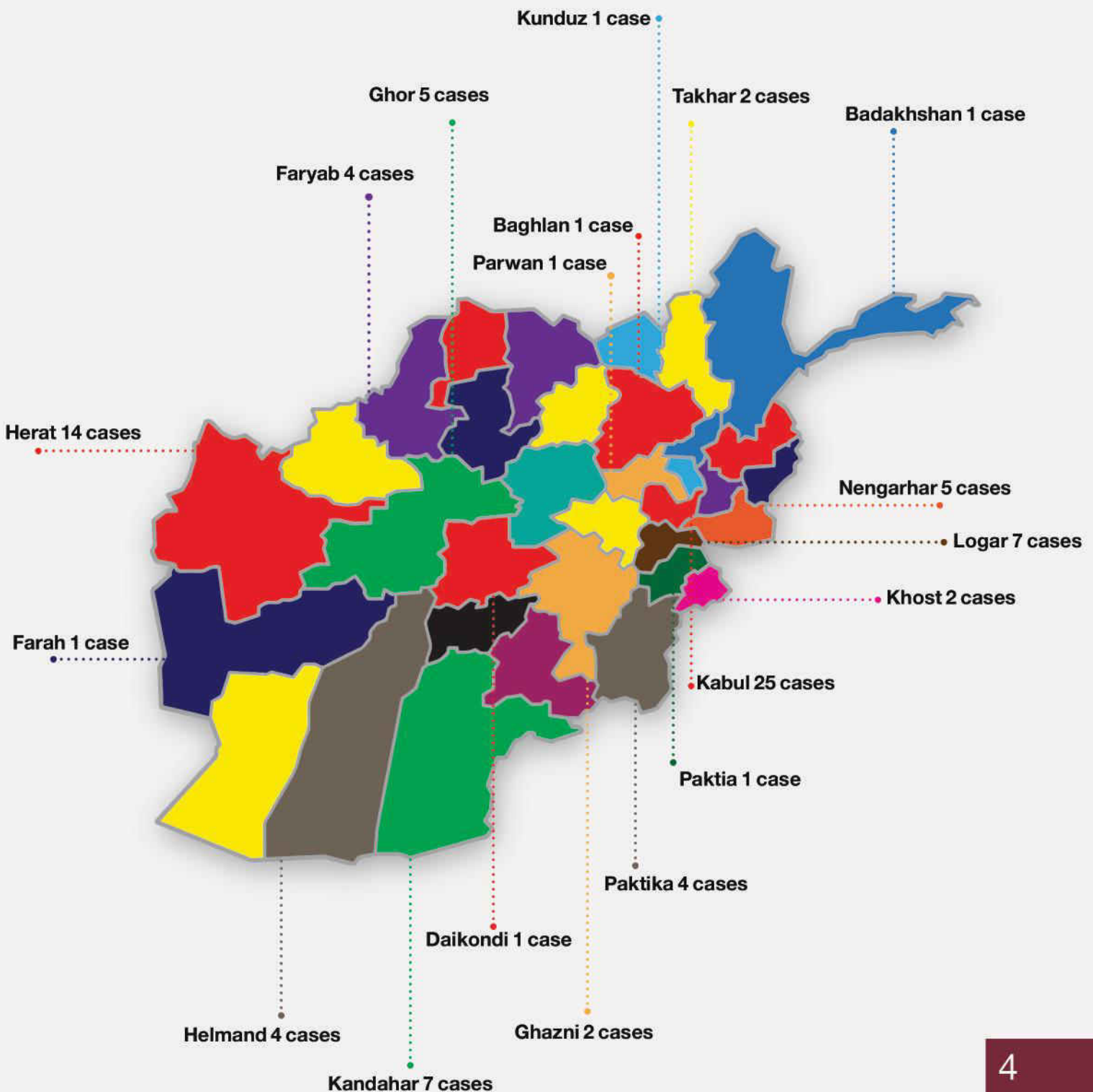
6 Women



83 Men



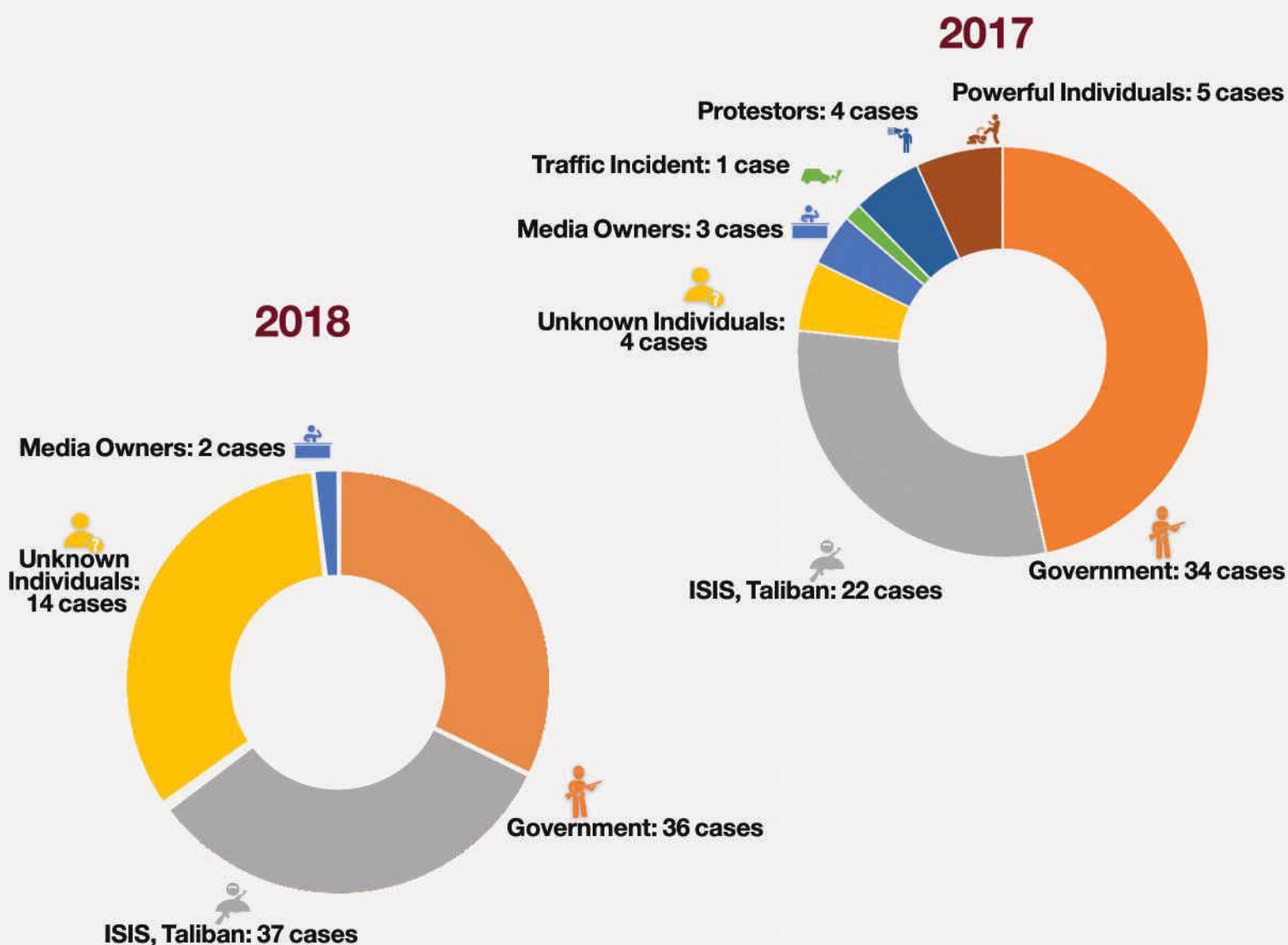
Breakdown of Violence in the Provinces of Afghanistan



Comparison of cases between 2017 and 2018

	2017	2018		
All Cases	73	89	22%	↑
Killed	10	11	10%	↑
wounded	12	11	8%	↓
Beaten	19	14	26%	↓
Verbally Abused	18	19	5%	↑
Threatened	6	28	4.5 times	↑
Unlawful Termination	3	1	Double	↓
Imprisoned	5	5		

Perpetrators of Violence



Based on the analysis of AJSC, the main factors behind the increasing incidents of violence and threats against journalists by terrorist groups are as follows:

1-The asymmetrical nature of the war in Afghanistan: in asymmetrical warfare, because one side is more powerful than the other in terms of military prowess, the weaker side attempts to create balance of power by trying to control and influence the media's agenda. This is, in a nutshell, the strategic goal of the Taliban and ISIS. Through the cultivation of fear, they aim to ensure that media publications and broadcasts follow their narrative and interests. This helps them to spread fear among the people, but also create a public perception of proportionality of force.

2- The media plays a very important role in raising public awareness and in the evolution of the democratic process within the country. Over the past 15 years, thanks to Afghan media's relentless efforts, public awareness and understanding of the situation in Afghanistan and the world has gone up. Parallel to this increased awareness, people's expectations from the government concerning improvement of standard of living and access to services has also increased. This is a phenomenon that runs against the interests of terrorist groups as these groups can only recruit from communities immersed in ignorance and ripe for use in their political and military agendas.

3- By creating fear among journalists and the media, terrorist groups try to prevent the media from exposing their crimes. Following every terrorist attack in which the majority of the those killed and wounded are civilians, the Taliban and other terrorist groups announce that the casualties were military or foreign forces to contradict the facts reported and revealed by the media on the ground. The tactics employed by terrorist groups have been successful to a certain extent in insecure provinces of the country where the Taliban exercise more influence and control. For example, in provinces like Helmand, Ghazni, Kandahar and Khost, journalists tend to cover the crimes of the Taliban group with much caution, and at times even refrain from covering them. This has placed tremendous challenges ahead of the very principles of free journalism.

The main factor behind the increased incidents of violence involving government officials is the persistent culture of impunity. Government strongmen, despite repeated emphasis and decrees by the President concerning the safety of journalists, still enjoy immunity from prosecution, and this explains the continuance of threats and violence committed by government officials against journalists.

After the incident on April 30th, in which nine journalists were killed, concerns regarding the safety of journalists have increased. These concerns are not necessarily just about the fact that nine journalists were killed in the incident, but also about the manner in which the attack was conducted. Journalists, as civilians carrying the obligation to report incidents, are particularly vulnerable to attacks from terrorist groups. Journalists cannot carry weapons or have bodyguards with them. Nor have the security forces shown the necessary professionalism in ensuring the safety of journalists, especially during coverage of terrorist incidents. This state of affair has disrupted coverage of big incidents where journalists report in large groups. Moreover, journalists are increasingly concerned about their own security and experience intense mental stress while performing their work as reporters. This attack has extensively disrupted the practice of free reporting in Afghanistan and reduced the effectiveness of journalism. Despite lingering threats, the courage of journalists in Afghanistan in continuing their professional work is appreciated and should be noted.

2018 marked the first time a group of journalists in Kabul was targeted by a suicide attack en-masse that led to the killing of nine journalists and the wounding of seven others. The responsibility for these attacks was later taken by ISIS. It is worth noting here that the responsibility for the suicide attack that targeted the transport vehicle of Moby Group, which took place in January 2016, and led to the killing of 8 employees of this media organization, was taken by the Taliban. This shows that the Taliban too does not spare journalists or media personnel.

These groups also regularly engage in psychological warfare in addition to direct violence. ISIS, via the only media they operate in Nangarhar Province, constantly intimidate journalists, and they even go as far as mentioning their names and the addresses of their houses. Likewise, the Taliban, by sending messages and posting press releases on their website, threaten the media in general and promise severe punishment for those who refuse to comply. This is a kind of psychological warfare aims to bring compliance by spreading fear.

In another instance, following the shelling of Radio Voice of Shariat, the Taliban's radio station in Ghazni province in June 2018 by the security forces, the group issued a press release threatening to retaliate against other media in the country. The Taliban called the attack on Radio Voice of Shariat as an attack on Freedom of Expression, and warned that if the group's media is treated as such in the future, they will target the media that are 'funded by the foreigners' according to their claims.

Moreover, it has been observed mostly in the provinces that the Taliban have attempted to coerce journalists into acting as tools in their propaganda. This has posed further challenges to journalists' work, yet most journalists have employed methods to deflect danger to their lives, and at the same time carry on their reporting work. For example, they have said to the Taliban that they only report incidents; it is not within their authority how the news is published and the decision falls on their editors. Or In some parts of their reports, they include quotes or claims of the spokespersons of these armed groups to avert the threat against them.

Limited access to information

Accessing information is the right of every citizen of this country. It is not just the prerogative of journalists. Government officials do not have the right to refuse providing information to the citizens of Afghanistan.


The complaint of journalists against the government is that those in-charge do not provide the necessary information at the right time and in a way, that is appropriate. Not only does the government refuse to supply information, but also, in some cases, they treat journalists in a very harsh and inappropriate manner.

Objections concerning the spokespersons of the government on supplying incorrect information

While war was going on in Farah province in the month of May 2018, the spokespersons of the Ministry of Interior, Deputy Spokesperson of the Office of the President and the Deputy Spokesperson of the Ministry of Defense were accused of releasing images of the war in Farah that had been taken during the previous years, and as such faking information.

The government was heavily criticized for failing to provide accurate and timely information of the war in Farah province. The government spokespersons released photographs purportedly showing weapons and ammunitions that had been captured from the armed opposition and other photos showing that the Special Forces Units had entered the city of Farah with many Taliban having been detained while wearing women's clothing.

Later, it became evident that the photos had been circulating on social media a year before their release by the government. The government spokespersons were criticized for supplying fake news and incorrect information, and thus, preventing access to correct information.



According to a report by Tolonews broadcast on 01/04/2018, President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani ordered the information on registered voters not to be made public. According to this report, the heads of the election commissions in the provinces did not provide any information on registered voters to journalists saying that the leadership of the Independent Elections Commission as well as the President had ordered them in a video conference not to share the information concerning registered voters with any entity.


The government provided very little information to the journalists concerning how the attack on the Intercontinental Hotel took place. Journalists were not allowed to enter the Intercontinental Hotel for some time at first. They were granted access on the fourth day after the incident, but they weren't permitted to visit the rooms or the main scene of the incident.

The attack on the Intercontinental Hotel was carried out on the evening of Saturday January 20, 2018. On Thursday, January 25, 6 days after the event, AJSC spoke with a number of media personnel. Journalists say that very little information was provided on this incident and government agencies would not cooperate.

Tolonews correspondent, Sharif Amir, who was reporting from the scene from the first day of the attack, said that government agencies were passing the responsibility onto one another. Nobody was ready to give information or answer journalists' questions. "We are not allowed to visit the scene of the incident either," he said.

The Deputy Spokesperson of the Ministry of Interior, Nasrat Rahimi, said to AJSC that journalists are not permitted to visit the scene due to concerns about the remnants of explosive devices on the fourth and fifth floors of the hotel. He said that fact finding teams were busy investigating the issue and whenever these teams deemed it safe, journalists would be allowed to enter the building.

But Deputy and Acting Spokesperson of the Office of the President, Shah Hussein Murtazawi, told AJSC that information had been released concerning the private security company and the security of the hotel. He also said that the reason the journalists were not allowed to take photos and visit the scene of the incident was the presence of explosive devices on the upper floors of the hotel. He stressed that on the fifth day of the incident, the President requested a cabinet meeting ordering the results of the investigations be made available to the public and media as soon as possible.



At the end of the day, the spokesperson of the Ministry of Interiors held a press conference, and announced that 18 individuals had been killed and 10 others had been wounded. He reported that fourteen foreigners were among those killed, some of whom worked with Kam Air airlines.

This was the latest information that the Ministry of Interior officially released and there was no update afterward. The following day a member of the media, quoting the Ministry of Interior, reported the casualties to be up to 20. Yet, a number of sources from inside the government said that the number of casualties would amount to more than forty, clearly contradicting the official figures that the Ministry of Interior had earlier released. Although the Ministry of Interior was supposed to share the details of the incident a week after the attack on the Intercontinental Hotel, to date no information has been shared with the public by the government.

In the Provinces

The problem of accessing information remains as unresolved as ever before. Still, local authorities see themselves as owners of information, and many are not ready to provide the minimum level of cooperation with journalists in this regard. In many cases, heads of departments, directorates, and managerial units come up with excuses for the journalists. The excuse often used is that they have received instructions from Kabul that they do not have the right to speak with the media and that the journalists should contact the relevant ministry's spokesperson for even the most minor issues. One of the first laws that the President had passed at the beginning of his term was a law on access to information. Even though there were reservations regarding certain articles of this law, eventually the amendment was approved by the cabinet meeting on March 03, 2018.

The structure and functions of the Access to Information Commission, the prohibitions on presentation of information, forms, and the process of requesting information have been included in the recent amendment of the law of access to information.

Conclusion

- The level of violence and number of threats against journalists and the media is going up. The main reasons for increases in violence are the growth of insecurity and instability, a persistent culture of impunity, and a failure to enforce laws and implement procedures and statutes pertaining to the safety of journalists.
- The first 6 months of 2018 marks the bloodiest period since AJSC began tracking incidents related to the safety of journalists in the country. With the killing of 11 journalists in direct and deliberate attacks, concerns about increasing violence against journalists and media have likewise increased.
- The method employed in the killing of 9 journalists on the 30th of April has not only become a serious cause for concern on the safety of journalists within the media community, but also it has disrupted coverage of terrorist incidents by journalists and the media as they are now concerned about the repetition of such attacks.
- The April 30th attack has further complicated the safety landscape for journalists and media workers. Considering the limited capacity of security agencies, it seems unlikely that the security forces or the media agencies themselves can come up with effective procedures and measures for providing safe conditions for journalists during the coverage of such incidents.
- The lingering of the challenge of lack of access to information and provision of incorrect information is a major impediment within the work of journalism. The current culture and perception of the government concerning presentation of information has not only added to the challenges faced by journalists, but also it has widened the gap between journalists and the government. As such, journalists refer to unofficial sources for gathering information. This issue has been detrimental to the government in terms of the ongoing war and the subsequent competition for legitimacy.
- Different challenges including increasing threats, lack of access to information as well as financial constraints faced by the media threaten the survival of the independent media and freedom of expression in a country where they are considered one of the most important achievements.

Recommendations

The safety of journalists and the media should be taken seriously. The April 30th attack that took the lives of 9 journalists and wounded and additional 7 others indicates the seriousness of the threat against journalists. In the event that the entities vested with the responsibility for the safety of journalists fail to take this matter seriously, the likelihood of a repetition of such an attack is very high.


Security organizations need to identify meaningful ways to ensure security of journalists, especially during coverage of terrorist attacks. They should expand cooperation with the media and journalists' advocacy organizations so that effective and practical procedures are identified that can prevent such lethal attacks against journalists and media. Any negligence in this area can have tragic consequences.

Media organizations are responsible for taking serious measures towards ensuring the safety of their employees and by coming up with effective policies and contingency plans in this regard. Additionally, the media is obliged to provide their reporters, particularly those assigned to cover terrorist incidents or battlefields, with necessary safety equipment. This is not only an ethical obligation of media organizations, but also it is their legal and administrative duty to do so.

In light of increasing threats, journalists are also obliged to take their own safety more seriously and refrain from engaging in compromising activities in exchange for obtaining a story. No report is more important than life, so journalists should not turn themselves into subjects of reports in order to produce a report. Those journalists who have still not taken the safety courses, can participate in AJSC safety training programs which are held on a regular basis.

Journalists' advocacy entities should coordinate better with the government and media owners about taking safety measures for journalists and commit to work together until such measures are effectively in place. These entities should continue to advocate for improvements in this area. Furthermore, advocacy entities should work together with journalists directly to update and review the safety skills of journalists in the field.

As Afghanistan's international partners have made significant contributions toward creating and assisting the media to become an important source of influence in Afghanistan, they should continue their assistance so that the media and freedom of expression do not slide into oblivion. The international community must also pressure the Afghan government to take all necessary measures towards the safety of journalists and media outlets.



Independent international institutions such as the United Nations should make a serious effort to condemn attacks on the media and journalists as both are non-combatants, and therefore, protected under international law. International condemnation from powerful organizations can create an environment in Afghanistan where such actions become completely unacceptable.

Because access to information remains a constant issue, the Afghan government must adopt a fresh approach—one that could effectively address this challenge. As much of the current war is a war of perceptions, it is paramount that the government take responsibility for delivering up-to-date and factual information in an efficient and timely manner, lest they give an opportunity to the Taliban and other terrorist groups to control the narrative of Afghanistan.