

Six Month Report

Jul-Dec 2017



Afghan Journalists Safety Committee

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Introduction

The increase in insecurity and instability in Afghanistan has had a direct impact on media and reporting. An unprecedented increase in threats and violence against journalists has created serious concern about the survival of freedoms of expression and press. Because freedom of expression, freedom of press, and media pluralism are among the country's most important achievements in the past 16 years, the threat to media is considered a threat to the country's overall progress. On the other hand, increased violence and an increase in the number of terrorist groups have made the work of journalists more complicated.

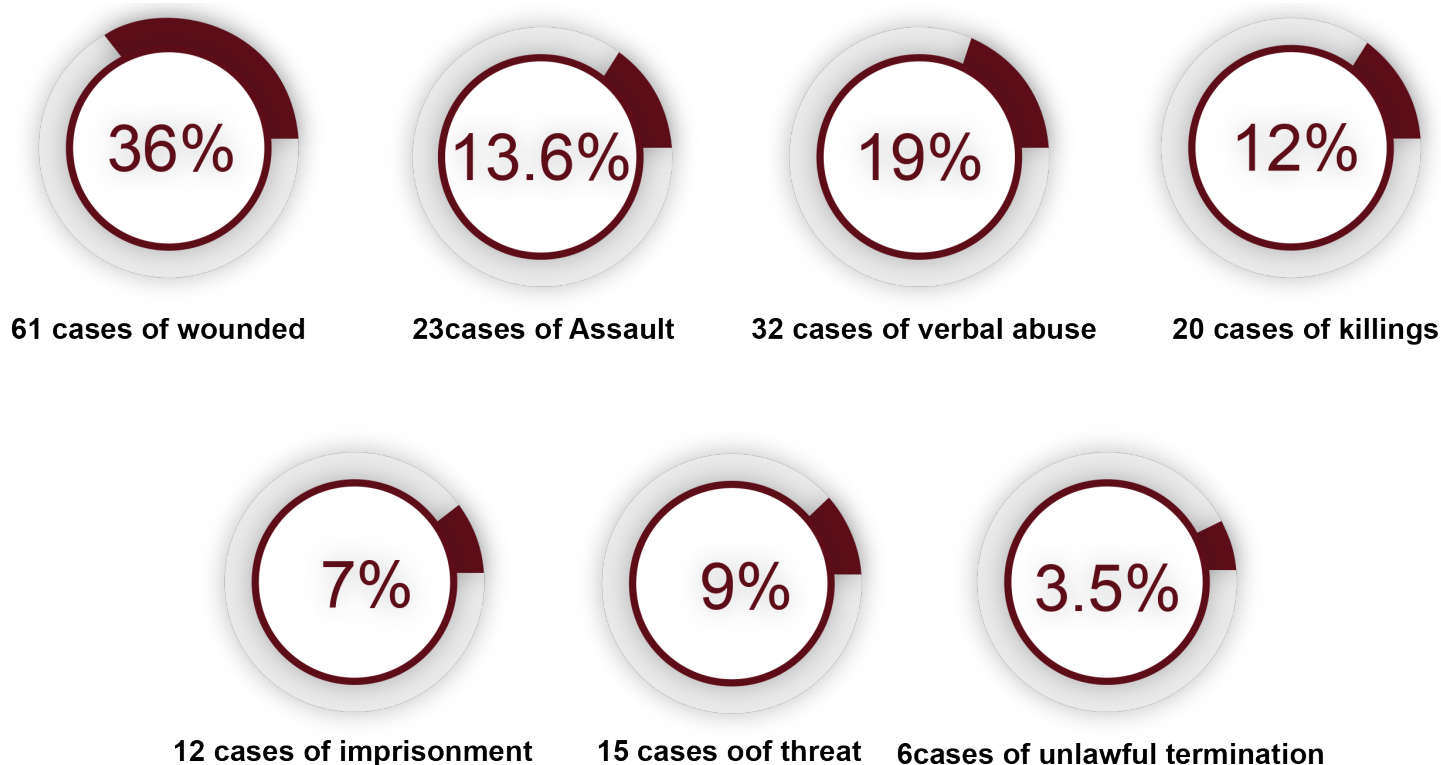
In such an environment, journalists and media must operate more cautiously than ever before, so as not to be exploited by the propaganda arms of various warring groups. Increased threats from DAESH to media and journalists have created a new wave of concerns about the security of journalists and media. What is seriously worrying is the group's direct attacks against media, which in 2017 is responsible for the vast majority of journalists' deaths.

This is the tenth report of the Afghan Journalists Safety Committee (AJSC), which provides statistics registered by AJSC on violence against journalists in 2017. The report, in addition to safety of journalists, briefly outlines major issues facing journalism and press in 2017. It is worth noting that the filing of cases has been carried out in accordance with AJSC's policy on violence against journalists and media, which means only cases that are directly related to journalistic works or those that have taken place on the job, have been registered.

2017 was the bloodiest year for journalists and media workers in Afghanistan's history. In 2017, not only violence against journalists increased significantly but the number of journalists killed and targeted attacks against media also increased unprecedentedly. In 2017, there were a total of 169 cases of violence and threats against journalists. Of these, there were 20 cases of killing of journalists and media workers. From among 169 incidents, 12 have been inflicted against female journalists, which makes up 7% of the incidents.

The figures of 2017 shows a 67% increase compared to the number of incidents of violence inflicted against journalists and media workers in 2016. In 2016, AJSC recorded a total number of 101 cases. The incidences of killing of journalists has also increased by 54%, as the total number of murders AJSC recorded in 2016 was 13. The increase in the incidences of killing of journalists has raised serious concerns about safety of journalists. Terrorist groups such as ISIS and the Taliban are responsible for all cases of the killing of journalists. ISIS is responsible for killing of 18 journalists and Taliban for 2. In 2017, terrorist groups are responsible for the bulk of the cases of violence 51% against journalists and media workers. Government workers rank second as they are responsible for the 34% of violence and intimidation against journalists.

Type of violence



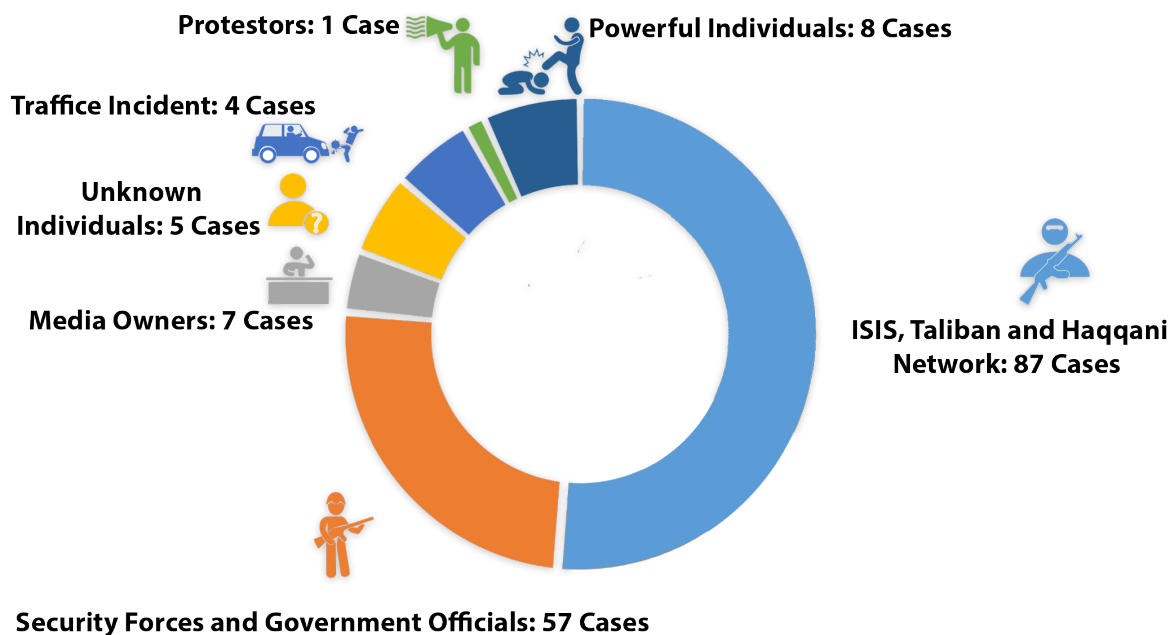
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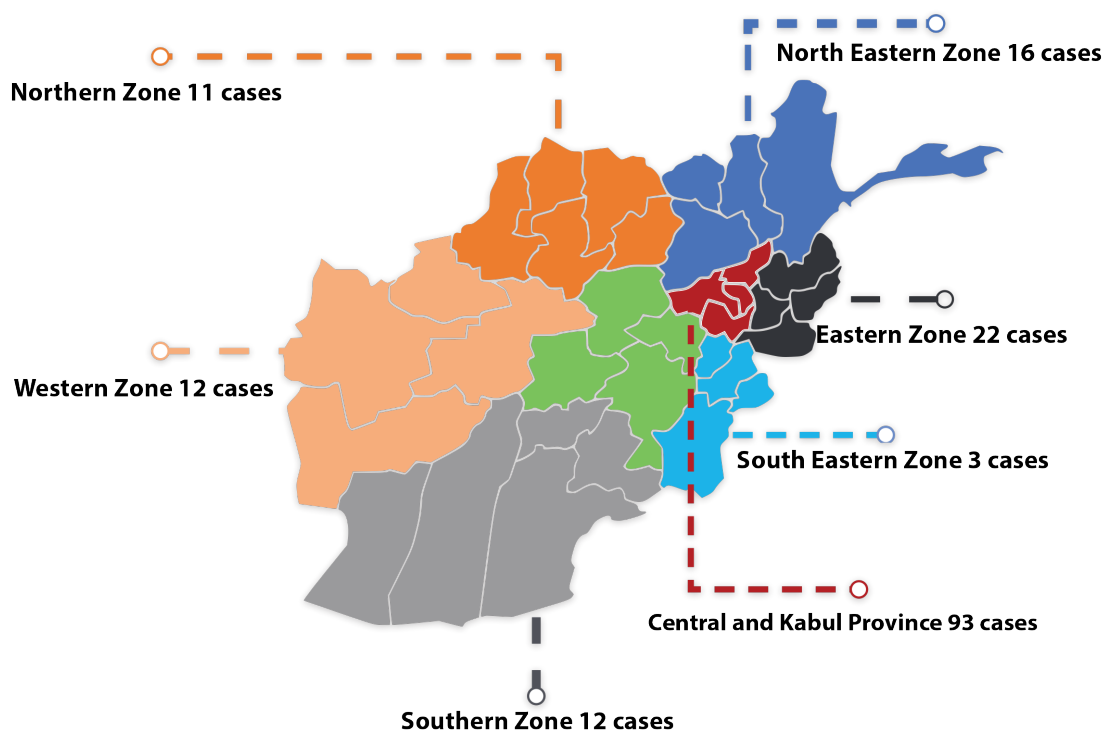
**157
man**



Perpetrators of violence



Violence in provincial zone



The level of violence perpetrated by terrorist groups has increased by 28% compared to last year. In 2016, terrorist groups (Taliban and ISIS) were responsible for 23% of violence and intimidation against journalists, while they are responsible for 51% of the cases of violence in 2017. In 2017, most of the incidents of violence took place in Kabul and its northern provinces (Parwan, Kapisa and Panjsher) and the least amount of violence took place in southeastern provinces.

These figures demonstrate that the safety of journalists and media outlets has continued worsening. An increase in the number of direct terrorist attacks on media agencies remains a concern, while a lack of protection by the government for journalists and media agencies only heighten such concerns

Causes of increased violence against journalists

Major causes of increased violence against journalists can be studied by examining three basic factors: first, perpetuation of impunity; second, targeted attacks by terrorist groups against media workers and outlets; and, third, increased general insecurity and instability in the country. As in previous years, in 2017, more violence was committed by terrorist groups and individuals linked to the government, mostly high ranking government officials. However, terrorist groups bear more responsibility for the killing and wounding of journalists, while threats, beatings and detentions can be attributed to the government officials.

Although the government's leadership has made many commitments to protect journalists and collaborate with the media, issuing numerous decrees for protecting journalists, these official measures have failed to deliver the desired results in reducing violence against journalists. The main reason for this is a lack of consistent law enforcement and follow-up by relevant government institutions, based on the decrees and other relevant laws. Even through in 2017 a number of steps by the government of Afghanistan, in particular by the Ministry of the Interior, were taken to investigate cases of violence against journalists and a number of cases were followed up, government officials continued to be influenced by a culture of impunity and failed to punish those found guilty. Reducing violence against journalists requires serious follow-up of cases and punishment of perpetrators.

An increase in direct attacks against journalists and the media, especially attacks by DAESH, is one of the main reasons for the violence spike against journalists. Within the past two months, DAESH has attacked two media outlets and a cultural center, killing eight journalists and media workers. According to AJSC's analysis, terrorists attack media for several reasons.

First, when the media reject illegitimate demands by terrorist groups to broadcast their ideological and war messages, terrorists target the media. One example is the DAESH attack on Kilid Radio in Nangarhar in October 2015. Daesh repeatedly asked Radio Kilid to broadcast the news the group delivered. When they witnessed incompliance of the station, they attacked the station with explosives. Another reason is that the contents of broadcasts and print press do not serve the strategic intentions of terrorist groups. For example, Taliban and DAESH have forced the media in insecure provinces such as Ghazni, Logar and Pakitia to avoid broadcasting and printing contents that include female songs, music, promotional ads of security forces and ads related to the peace process.

Moreover, journalists and the media face threats from terrorist groups because of effectiveness of the media in informing the public about the evil acts terrorist groups commit. Terrorists may have concluded that public opinion cannot be twisted in their favor, when the objectivity and impartiality of media expose their evil acts and the systematic propaganda they engage in.

However, terrorist groups' propaganda may be effective in those remote villages and districts, which lack the presence of free and impartial press, from which people can obtain accurate and non-biased information.

Although terrorists know better than ever that journalists and the media are impartial in news reporting, they consider this very impartiality as harming their nefarious agenda. For example, they wage a suicide attack on civilians in a major city and then claim that the attack killed dozens of foreign and Afghan soldiers. But when reporters impartially cover the attack, they find out that only civilians have been killed in the suicide attack and that no Afghan or international forces have been killed. This factual news-reporting upsets terrorist and provokes them to target journalists and media outlets.

The basic needs of journalists and the measures to be taken by the government

Given the unprecedented increase in threats and violence against journalists and the media, the government needs to take steps to protect compounds of media outlets. Security institutions and media agencies must establish coordination mechanisms to share information on threats against media. Such information should be made available to media outlets as soon as there are credible threats, while they should be informed of how to ensure the security of their staffers and take necessary measures based on clear security recommendations and guidelines. The intelligence community should take note of prominent journalists at risk and help ensure that they are protected against possible attacks. If possible, even the routes, which at-risk journalists and media crew often use, should be evaluated against possible threats. At the same time, they should be briefed on effective ways to ensure self-protection against possible targeting. In sum, security measures can have a major impact on improving safety of media and journalists.

Responsibility of media outlets with regards to their staff and journalists

Media organizations are most responsible for protecting their employees, including journalists. This is not only their moral and administrative responsibility but also their legal responsibility. The Statute on the Establishment and Operation of the Private Media Outlets obliges media to take all necessary measures for protecting their employees. For example, ensuring the security of buildings where press employees work constitutes one of the key responsibilities of media agencies. The government should also provide them with necessary guidelines to protect the buildings and to save the lives of media employees.

Sending reporters to insecure areas or front-lines should be done with the full consent of journalists and their families, as well as providing them with all possible protection facilities. If media agencies send their press staff to war zones, they should be trained on safety skills and introduced to AJSC for regular safety and first-aid training workshops. Journalists traveling to insecure and conflict areas should have a clearer picture of the situation there and the probability of life-threatening dangers in conflict zones.

The security guards, which media organizations employ, should be skillful on safety and protection issues. At the same time, the consulting services of security organizations, public and private, should be utilized to enhance safety of media workers against possible attacks and threats. Moreover, most journalists lack life or medical insurance plans, which media agencies should provide to help their employees and their families in case of medical emergencies and possible deaths that result from terrorist attacks in line of duty.

High expectations from organizations that support the media and journalists

Advocacy and pressure groups that support journalists and the media operate in accordance with the laws of the country. They focus on specific issues and cases that support journalists and the media, defending their constitutional rights. Although it is true that not all these organizations are effective in their work, most have done their best and helped ensure freedoms of press and expression. In some cases, journalists and other critics expect that advocacy organizations should immediately address any problems facing journalists. But they should know that these organizations lack executive and law enforcement powers of the government to do so.

Litigation, provision of facilities, training and defense of journalists, and protection of freedom of expression are the core tasks of these institutions, which has had many achievements in these areas. For example, modifying the media law, launching a discussion with the government at the leadership level to improve the status of reporters, and protecting freedom of expression based on the Afghan constitution are some of their major gains. At present, some 15 media organizations have gathered to form the Federation of Journalists and Media in Afghanistan, through which they work together to protect the rights of journalists and the media.

A few examples of the threats and violence that occurred in 2017

- On November 7, 2017, one media worker was killed and 25 others were wounded in an armed attack by DAESH on the Shamshad TV. Two suicide bombers attacked the network, but failed to get inside the building. AJSC assisted in the transfer of the wounded to the hospital and also held a psychotherapy session for the staff of the station.
- A female staff of one of the local TV stations dedicated to women was verbally abused by her employer, after she demanded her salary as she wasn't paid on time. The employee filed a complaint to AJSC. As a result, AJSC addressed the dispute and the employee was paid.
- One of the journalists of Afghanistan Newspaper was detained and beaten up by the security guards of an Afghan member of parliament, because the reporter had taken video of a public alley illegally blocked by the said MP. Upon learning about the incident, AJSC informed relevant authorities, who helped release the detained reporter. The issue is still under investigation.
- A Shamshad TV reporter was insulted by the provincial Director of Public Health while interviewing him for an alleged case of corruption. The reporter had hard evidence with him on the Directorate's corrupt activities, which he discussed with the Director, who upon being challenged, got upset and threatened the reporter. AJSC was informed of the incident, and its representative in southern Afghanistan held two meetings with both sides and addressed the problem in favor of the reporter, from whom the Director apologized.
- A Gharaghash Radio reporter in Khost Province was threatened by a member of the Khost Provincial Council in September 2017. He had written an accusatory post on his Facebook page about the Provincial Council member. The Provincial Council wanted to sue him. But the case was resolved by AJSC representative in Khost without further charges against Mr. Zazai.
- A Rah-Farda TV reporter was injured in November 2017, in a suicide attack on a gathering in support of Balkh Governor Atta Mohammad Noor. AJSC's representative helped transfer and hospitalize him in the military hospital. AJSC also assisted with the expenditures of his treatment.



Joint Committee for Journalists Safety

In 2015 and 2016, threats and violence, especially attacks by terrorist groups, dramatically rose against journalists and the media. This gave rise to the need for creation of a joint committee of government and media community for protection of journalists and media outlets. The fall of Kunduz province twice and the fatalities of some journalists in Helmand province created the need for serious safety measures for adoption. In order to do so, a draft plan for ensuring journalists' security was prepared by the Federation of Journalists, media institutions, and the Afghan cabinet. Subsequently, a Joint Committee of Journalists was established in 2017.

The Joint Committee consists of six members of the Federation of Journalists, the representative of the Afghan Journalists Safety Committee, and high representatives of the security institutions, Attorney General, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kabul Governorate, and the National Security Council, including Second Vice President Mohammad Sarwar Danesh.

Two other structures were also developed: the Coordination Committee was established within the framework of the Ministry of Interior and the Committee for the Support of Journalists and the Media in the framework of the National Directorate of Security. The two structures report to the Joint Committee with provincial committees headed by a deputy governor in each province.

The work of the Joint Committee can be summarized in two dimensions:

1. Achievements
2. Challenges

Achievements

The Joint Committee has been able to do much in one year, but more work needs to be done. The Committee has sought to investigate cases of violence against journalists, which remain unaddressed for more than ten years. The cases, which number 700, were examined by a working committee composed of media representatives and law enforcement and other government officials created by the Joint Committee. The working committee consisted of two representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and representatives of the Attorney General Office, the National Directorate of Security and members of Journalists Federation.

The working committee worked for several months and presented its report at the seventh Joint Committee meeting. According to this committee's report, of the 700 cases of violence and intimidation between 2001 and 2015, 172 cases were prosecuted. Because some of the cases involved terrorists were dropped, the latest report from the committee indicates that out of a total of 172 cases, 33 cases have been completed and sent to the Attorney General of Afghanistan for prosecution.

According to the Attorney General's report, of the 33 cases, 23 cases, which include journalists' murder, have been completed and sent to the court for trial. The remaining 18 cases are under investigation at the Attorney General's Office. It is noteworthy that some of the documents relate to provinces where they should be handled by provincial prosecutors. That is why the investigation process is time-consuming. The Attorney General has ordered all provincial prosecutors to finalize pending cases and refer them to relevant courts as soon as possible.

According to the report by the Subcommittee on the Investigation of Violence against Journalists, 40 cases have been resolved by mediation. Of the 172 cases, 69 cases are linked to entities, which the Ministry of Interior is unable to act against. These include: a number of judges, prosecutors, members of the National Assembly, President's bodyguards, and international military personnel who served in Afghanistan—all of whom have been accused of violence against journalists.

Other achievements of the Joint Committee include receiving and acting upon the complaints about violence against journalists.

The physical security of some media executives has also been tightened, as well as the security of some notable media outlets, which have been attacked by terrorists. To prevent tensions between security officials and media outlets, another sub-committee has been set up to study terrorist and other incidents and prepare a thorough report for submission to the Joint Committee for further follow-up.

Meanwhile, due to a proposal by the Federation of Journalists in collaboration with the Joint Committee, the Afghan government lifted fines on unpaid media taxes, and scheduled the remainder of unpaid fines to be paid by media outlets in 7 years. This demonstrates significant support from the Afghan government for helping the media sustain their activities. Another working committee was set up to revise the tax law on public service media, allowing for waiving taxes levied on print media, news agencies, and local FM agencies.

In accordance with the journalists' safety and protection guidelines, a journalist support fund should be established. However, such a fund was set up seven years ago at the Ministry of Information and Culture, which needs to be operationalized. Four members of the Federation of Journalists are included in the fund's board and conducted a review of the fund, which has a budget of \$ 11,000 provided by foreign aid and external assistance. This amount could increase, once it is used to support journalists and help address their needs.

Challenges and problems

In the past year, the Joint Committee also experienced challenges alongside its achievements, which can be outlined as follows:

Slowness in the implementation of some of the decisions, which the Joint Committee took. This remains a major problem.

The Ministry of Interior's inability to follow up on 69 cases of violence against reporters, which involve domestic and foreign VIP individuals and institutions, as pointed out above.

Lack of seriousness to implement activities on the part of some provincial Joint Committees.

Journalists' lack of attention and care for the decisions of the Joint Committee

Failure or faltering by owners of media agencies to abide by media regulations continues to worry journalists about their job security in light of the decisions of the Joint Committee.

As noted above, there are 69 cases involving VIPs, which constitute almost half of the cases of violent incidents against journalists. These cases should be fully investigated and their perpetrators, regardless of their status, should be punished under law. In 2018, the Joint Committee should follow up on these cases and ensure that they are legally acted upon. Moreover, provincial committees should be encouraged to take their tasks seriously, as well as their members, most of whom are journalists themselves, who must process expeditiously any complaints they receive for follow-up and resolution.

Reasons for non-compliance with regulation on the establishment and functioning of the private media

The regulation on the establishment and operation of the private media, which was approved by the Afghan cabinet in August 2015 and enacted by the Afghan President, covers almost all issues related to the employment terms and conditions of the private mass media. This regulation has been established in accordance with the constitution of the country and the law governing the work of the mass media. Prior to the adoption of this regulation, all private media contracts were made unilaterally and more in favor of media businesses.

The regulation of the establishment and activity of the mass media includes all matters that relate to hiring and firing and clarifies other obligations by contracting parties (employee and employer). It was expected that by implementing this regulation, there would be no problem with regards to journalists' job security. But it can be seen that although this regulation has been in place for two years, it has hardly been enforced and implemented.

The main reason for the non-implementation of this regulation is the ineffectiveness of the government in its implementation. On the other hand, the financial problems and the deadline for renewal of media work permit one year after enforcement of regulation can be considered as other reasons for failure to comply.

Conclusion

The year 2017 was the bloodiest year for media and media workers. Considering increased insecurity caused by frequent terrorist attacks, journalists and the media remain in need of protection. This necessitates that the level of coordination among relevant institutions improve to ensure safety of journalists and media outlets.

Increased threats against journalists and the media has created self-censorship among journalists and media in insecure parts of Afghanistan. This limits the scope of reporting to areas where relative security prevails. The fear among journalists and the media has increased and reporters are wary of covering terrorist cases. Unfortunately, media outlets do not care much about the security of their employees, especially journalists sent to war fronts for covering news, even though it is the administrative and ethical responsibility of media agencies to ensure the safety of their employees at all times.

At the same time, the persistence of increased threats against journalists has resulted in emergence of resilience among media workers. This is one of the most important factors that ensures continuity of journalistic work without much fear and stress. With the expansion of insecurity and instability, it is highly likely that threats increase in 2018. Another event that can heighten the level of threats against journalists and media in 2018 is the holding of parliamentary elections. Based on AJSC's findings, the elections will contribute to the spreading of threats and thus making journalists more vulnerable.

Although the establishment of the Joint Committee for the security and protection of journalists and the media is a major step, the work of the Committee has not yielded desired results, as expected. In the same vein, though the adoption of the regulation on the establishment and functioning of private mass media is commendable, slow or no implementation of this regulation by the Ministry of Information and Culture remains a major concern. This includes the concern of journalists about job security and reliable contract agreements with their employers.

Despite these challenges, however, 2017 saw the establishment of two women-run TV channels. This is a positive step forward for empowering women in media, which as a gain should be further consolidated in 2018.

Recommendations

Increased violence and threats against journalists have begun undermining freedoms of expression and press in Afghanistan. In this light, the Afghan government should comprehensively implement the recommendations of the Joint Committee for ensuring the safety of journalists across Afghanistan. However, the government should never use its support as a way to influence the work of media in its favor. Media have to enjoy complete independence as an integral part of Afghanistan's vibrant civil society.

Moreover, media outlets should take all necessary measures to improve safety of their offices and employees. They must create policies and procedures for personnel security and safety, including training programs on safety and first-aid for their employees. They should also ensure that journalists sent to the front-lines for war reporting stay in safe places, are insured against possible death and serious injuries, as well as psychosocial benefits and family support. AJSC possesses expertise and experience in all these areas, and should be approached by media outlets for guidance and support.

Physical safety should be a priority for all reporters. No news is worth more than journalists' own lives. Reporters should do their best for self-protection and AJSC encourages them to contact the organization for advice and assistance. Organizations that support media development and advocate for press freedom should request the Afghan government to extend all possible support to journalists and media outlets. Considering increased threats, more preventive measures are needed. Further coordination and collaboration among relevant institutions will help enhance the effectiveness of overall work done to protect journalists and media agencies.

Reporters in Afghanistan are still facing serious internal organizational problems. The recruitment and terminating media personnel is not in accordance with the labor law and the regulation that governs media entities and their operations. Some media outlets even lack proper human resources policies and procedures, leaving journalists and media workers at the mercy of their employers on such key issues as wages, health insurance, paid leave, and related issues. Hence, journalists are often laid off without a justification or their salaries are not paid before they are asked to quit. In sum, violation of the Labor Code and the Code of Conduct in media offices is commonplace, and journalists' rights are often violated.

The Ministry of Information and Culture should strive to provide effective means of regulating the establishment and functioning of private mass media. Failure to comply with this regulation has made it possible for journalists to remain vulnerable to exploitation for simply keeping his/her job. But the said Ministry can address this problem in collaboration with the Federation of Journalists.

At the same time, the international community should assist in the endeavor to ensure safety of journalists and safeguard media freedom in Afghanistan. They can do so by supporting the work of organizations like AJSC and others that advocate for laws and regulations that help institutionalize freedoms of press and expression. So far, many of Afghanistan's achievements in media development advancing freedom of expression stem from the generous financial, political and moral contributions of the international community. The international community should not allow this achievement to be undermined or eliminated.