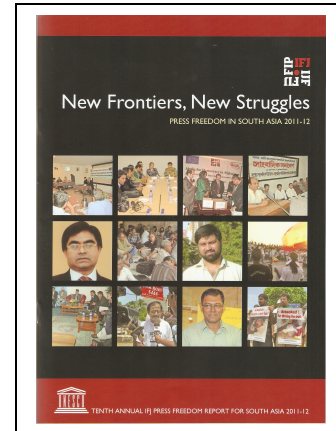


**New Frontiers, New Struggles: SAMSN Announces Report on Press
Freedom in South Asia, 2011-12**

The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) has this year, as in the past, collaborated with a range of partners in South Asia to produce a report which reviews developments in the region that have had a bearing on press freedom and quality journalism. Like the nine that have preceded, this year's report is part of the continuing effort of the South Asia Media Solidarity Network (SAMSN) to build foundations for united action across borders by the region's journalists.



World Press Freedom Day 2012 comes at a time of momentous challenges for journalism in South Asia. Journalists in the region have responded to these challenges by seeking a manner of professional engagement that reflects all South Asia's rich diversities.

Physical security remains an issue in most of South Asia. The relative improvement seen in several countries of the region may have been achieved by deliberate decisions cut the risks involved in reporting highly sensitive stories. And the sharp deterioration of an already bad situation in Pakistan far outweighed the slight improvements elsewhere.

Journalism was a hazardous pursuit through long years of internal conflict in Nepal and Sri Lanka. And now with conflict at an end and processes of political reconciliation underway, journalists are finding that several of the passions of the years of open warfare are yet to subside. Verbal aggression against journalists who dare to report all sides of a story and stand up for basic norms of fair treatment continues to be a threat. And if the record of the past is any indication, verbal aggression is normally a precursor to physical violence.

Important processes of accountability have been initiated in Nepal, to dispel the climate of impunity for attacks on journalists that hung heavy over the media all through the years of conflict.



Though all countries in South Asia have formal guarantees of a free press in their written constitutions, there is a persistence of formal and informal systems of censorship. In recent times, these threats have been manifest in the May 2011 advisory sent out to all media organisations in the North-Eastern Indian state of Manipur, warning against the publication or broadcast of material "directly or indirectly in support of the unlawful/illegal activities of various organisations". In Afghanistan, where the institutions of electoral democracy are yet to establish their authority in relation to customary mechanisms of social governance, a council of religious clerics has sought to directly influence media policy and content, though with only partial success.

India has, in its vastness, displayed diverse trends. There are parts of the country where journalism functions with few constraints and dangers apart from the constant pressure of commercialisation. In the conflict prone regions such as Kashmir, the North-Eastern states and the Maoist insurgency districts – where journalism that tells the full story could make a difference – tensions persist and dangers are ever present.

In Pakistan, the year that has just passed was one of serious hazard and trauma. Within this frontline state in a global conflict, the combatant parties are many and international humanitarian norms are disregarded by all. Journalists in Pakistan have to steer a perilous course between hostile elements. Sectarian conflict in the vast metropolis of Karachi and an insurgency in the sprawling but sparsely populated province of Balochistan, are additional elements of risk.

A transition towards a more liberal political regime in the Maldives was set back over the year. But in Bhutan, the people still retain faith in the movement towards a democratic political order under a constitutional monarchy. Professionalisation of journalism remains a challenge in both these, the two smallest nations of South Asia, where media ownership is all too often, closely tied to powerful business and political interests.

Bangladesh witnessed new stirrings of discord after some years when the customary acrimony between the country's main political parties was relatively subdued. The less than cordial environment of political contestation has had a severe impact on journalism, fuelling bitter partisanship within the media. And over the year just gone by, additional pressures have developed, that seek to enforce conformity in both the written and spoken word, with the decrees of a tribunal established to try war crimes committed during the country's 1971 war of liberation.



In Afghanistan, periodic outbursts of civil strife, the continuing threat of insurgency and the imminent prospect of a withdrawal of western military force, created an environment of serious uncertainty that has allowed little in the way of public-spirited journalism to take root or grow. Opaque structures of ownership and the direct stakes that the more powerful political players have acquired in the media, pose another dimension of problems for ethical journalism.

Together with all these difficulties, there has been a growing crisis of livelihoods within the profession. The wage board process in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, that determines wages and working conditions for journalists, is in a state of crisis. Media houses are increasingly able to find ways of evading its stipulations. In the absence of a regular appointment system under a wage board, or a working journalists' act, campaigns for decent work and ethical practices become risky endeavours. Nepal, which secured significant amendments to its Working Journalists' Act in 2006, in recognition of the constructive role played by the media in the restoration of democracy, is now finding that the crux of the matter really lies in the implementation.

The shift towards contract and casual employment has led to a weakening of professional commitment and the growing influence of commercial and advertising departments in the functioning of media houses.

At the same time, journalists and media have been facing increasing threats through the legal process. Often, the purpose of these actions is not to secure meaningful redress, but merely to impose a form of censorship through legal injunction.

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