



Media Release: South Asia

April 30, 2008

Press Freedom in the Balance in South Asia

IFJ Releases Sixth Annual Report

The sixth annual *South Asia Press Freedom Report*, produced by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) for the South Asia Media Solidarity Network (SAMSAN) and released today ahead of World Press Freedom Day on May 3, highlights the serious challenges that continue to confront the media in a region that is home to more than one-fifth of humanity.

The challenges range from political coercion and violence by State and non-State actors to commercial compulsions and advertiser pressure. All these factors can have a chilling effect on good journalistic practices, and impinge on the public's right to independent and critical information.

"The *South Asia Press Freedom Report 2007-08* highlights that many journalists and media workers continue to confront extreme dangers in the conduct of their work and many are restricted – often violently – in reporting in the interests of the public good and the accountability of power-holders," said IFJ Asia-Pacific Director Jacqueline Park.

The report notes that when governments do not act decisively against a culture of impunity for attacks against the media, journalists and media workers are often compelled to adopt a play-safe attitude. Even where there is no overt restraint on the right to free speech, a hostile environment can compel the media to engage in self-censorship rather than risk retribution.

In most countries in the region, the report adds, the regulatory environment remains ill-defined, especially for the rapidly growing electronic media. In several countries, rival political parties and other civil society actors observe few accepted standards regarding the right to free speech.

The year from May 2007 to April 2008 was one of delicate political transition in several countries. **Afghanistan** struggled with the problems of reconstruction, and its institutions of law and governance are still nascent. The Afghan media community campaigned successfully to inscribe strong clauses on the right to free speech in the Constitution. But getting State and civil society actors to honour these guarantees is a challenge, as typified by the death sentence passed on Sayed Parvez Kambakhsh, a young journalist, in January this year.

Nepal and **Pakistan** held firm to the course of democratisation. The media community in both countries played a significant role in the relative success with which political change was achieved. Journalists' organisations are utilising the transition period in both countries to argue for effective legal safeguards against the attacks on press freedom that have occurred in the recent past.

Nepali journalists succeeded in ensuring that a right to information law was enacted. They have also secured significant amendments to the Working Journalists' Act. But implementation remains a challenge.

Likewise for Pakistan, where the legal framework protecting journalists' rights to fair wages and working conditions has for long existed, implementation remains to be addressed.



The media in **Bangladesh** has been curbed under the “emergency” regime. Efforts to report accurately on matters of public importance, involving the student community and the farm sector, have drawn official expressions of displeasure. Yet the media has succeeded in making its voice heard. Its critical attitude is one factor impelling the regime to deliver on promises to create a more secure environment for democracy. A draft law on the right to information was introduced recently and a community radio policy has been unveiled. Although far from ideal in their conception, these drafts provide a reasonably sound basis for public debate.

The downward slide in **Sri Lanka** accelerated, and the media in that country continues to be a casualty of unrelenting war. The relationship between the State, civil society and the media has deteriorated rapidly. Weakening democratic commitments on the part of the authorities have encouraged an environment of impunity for corruption and human rights violations. Senior political figures and government officials have publicly questioned the patriotism of independent and critical-minded journalists. Restrictions on reporting from areas of conflict leave most of the public unaware of the means used to pursue a war being fought ostensibly for their security.

India continued to reflect diverse trends in its internal media dynamics. Regions such as the north-eastern states, Jammu and Kashmir and the central Indian plateau and plains, continued to suffer internal strife. The media in these parts was often caught between the demands of rival insurgent groups and State security agencies. In overall terms, the media registered a growth rate in excess of the rest of the economy. Yet there are concerns about media concentration. What appears to be a diversity of media sources may not really be so.

Serious ethical breaches by some broadcast and print organisations in India prompted a demand from governmental and judicial authorities for greater oversight of the media. India’s media industry is influential enough to withstand any challenge to its autonomy, but its credibility could be a casualty amid perceptions that it is motivated solely by profit.

“Despite the problems confronting the region, there is room for optimism,” said Ms Park. “However, press freedom cannot be achieved in isolation. It requires a united front among journalists and their organisations, media owners, political power-holders, community leaders and ordinary people. If we work together, press freedom can indeed be achieved and contribute to the consolidation of free, stable and secure societies across all of South Asia.”

The *South Asia Press Freedom Report 2007-08* presents trends in detail for each country, and lists the records prepared by IFJ affiliates and partners of direct attacks on journalists and media workers, noting media workers killed and incidents of physical harm and intimidation, and abductions and detentions.

For a copy of the report, go to <http://www.ifj-asia.org>

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