

## **WAN Board, Agenda Item 2 – I**

### **Press Freedom, World Review, November 2007 – June 2008**

*Attacks on the media remain commonplace in Latin America, where local gangs and corrupt government officials do not hesitate to use deadly violence to silence critical voices. Four journalists were killed in the past six months and a number of media professionals were attacked, threatened and harassed. The region is distinguished by a general lack of respect for journalists.*

*In the Middle East and North Africa, the past six months have been marked by a number of setbacks in the area of press freedom, mainly due to autocratic regimes that do not hesitate to take drastic measures to prevent independent voices from making themselves heard. Bloggers throughout the region continue their relentless battle to spread news and information ignored or censored by the mainstream media.*

*In sub-Saharan Africa, reporting on rebellions and conflict zones has proved more and more dangerous, as governments resort to charges of sedition and “endangering national security” to intimidate and sanction independent and opposition media. Challenging or criticizing the President, government members and the army also lands many African journalists in prison. Election times have exacerbated tensions and made accurate and timely reporting even more difficult and risky.*

*Freedom of the press continues to be challenged in various parts of Europe and Central Asia, either in a subtle or blatant manner. Death threats against or prosecution of journalists reporting on conflict zones, war crimes, organised crime or against those mocking state officials, national or religious symbols remain disturbingly common.*

*Throughout Asia, independent media continue to face an array of obstacles mainly in the form of hostile governments and internal conflicts. In Afghanistan and Pakistan, journalists continue their struggle for the right to freedom of expression. Dictatorships such as Burma, North Korea and Laos allow no independent media to operate within their borders.*

### **AMERICAS**

Journalists killed = Brazil (1), Bolivia (1), Honduras (1), Mexico (1)  
TOTAL = 4

*Attacks on the media remain commonplace in Latin America, where local gangs and corrupt government officials do not hesitate to use deadly violence to silence critical voices. Four journalists were killed in the past six months and a number of media professionals were attacked, threatened and harassed. The region is distinguished by a general lack of respect for journalists.*

Al-Jazeera cameraman Sami Al-Haj was released on 1<sup>st</sup> May 2008 from the **U.S. Naval Base in Guantanamo Bay**, Cuba, where he was held for six years without charge or trial. Al-Haj had been arrested at the Pakistan/Afghanistan border in December 2001, while covering the U.S.-led fight to oust the Taliban, and sent to Guantanamo in June 2002. The U.S. alleged

that he worked as a financial courier for Chechen rebels and that he assisted al-Qaeda and extremist figures.

In the **United States**, *The Oakland Post* publisher Paul Cobb was given police protection in January 2008 after being told a contract had been put out for his murder. The editor of the same weekly, Chauncey Bailey, was gunned down in August 2007 as he walked to work. Bailey was working on a story about the financial status of a bakery, Your Black Muslim Bakery, which had filed bankruptcy in October 2006. Bailey had also reported on alleged statutory rape accusations against Yusuf Bey, the founder of the bakery. A 19-year-old handyman at a local bakery initially confessed to the murder, explaining he was angered by Bailey's negative coverage of the bakery and its staff. He later retracted.

U.S. President George W. Bush signed into law amendments to the Freedom of Information Act on 31 December 2007 that will improve public access to information about federal government activity. The amendments come just weeks after it emerged that the CIA destroyed videos of terrorism suspects being interrogated that had been requested as evidence in court.

No improvements have been seen in freedom of expression since Raul Castro took over as president of **Cuba** in February 2008. More than 20 journalists continue to serve lengthy prison sentences in appalling conditions and press freedom groups have intensified their condemnations of these imprisonments in the past months, hoping to establish a dialogue with the new president.

The brutal January killing of José Fernando Gonzáles, owner of Radio Mega in **Honduras**, was yet another evidence of murder being too easy an option to muzzle journalists in this part of the world. Two unidentified men entered the radio station saying they wanted to buy advertising time and shot Gonzáles when he came to attend to them. Murders and death threats are part of the daily lives of media professionals in Latin American countries such as **El Salvador**, **Guatemala** and **Bolivia**, where radio journalist Carlos Quispe was killed when a group opposing the mayor in the city of Pucarani first attacked the municipal building of the city and then the municipal radio station where Quispe worked. He was badly beaten and later died in hospital.

**Mexico** has a record number of unsolved journalist murders, and a new one was added to the long list of tragedies for the country's media profession when Gerardo Israel García Pimentel, a journalist with the *La Opinión de Michoacán* newspaper, was gunned down in early December by unidentified individuals in the state of Michoacán, where drug cartels play an important role and murder is frequent.

The government of **Argentina** came under sharp criticism in May, when the Inter American Press Association (IAPA) called on it to be less confrontational towards news media and individual journalists as a measure to prevent an escalation of violence "which jeopardizes press freedom in the country." According to IAPA, journalists and media outlets have been the target of a campaign by the president's office with the aim of discrediting them, much along the same lines as the ongoing government campaign in **Venezuela** against media critical of President Hugo Chavez' regime. In the past months Venezuelan journalists have been the victims of police violence and threats by government officials, which in its turn has led to ordinary citizens attacking journalists and media outlets when dissatisfied with their reporting.

A more positive development took place in **Brazil** in February, when the Supreme Court of Brazil granted a provisional decision suspending the application of 20 articles of the Press Law adopted in 1967 by the military regime, because of their “incompatibility with the democratic values and press freedom standards of the 1988 constitution”. One murder occurred in Brazil in the past six months. TV cameraman Walter Lessa de Oliveira was shot to death in early January, probably by a drug trafficker that he had previously filmed for a documentary.

### ***MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA***

Journalists killed: Iraq (9), Palestinian Territories (1)  
TOTAL = 10

*The past six months in this region have been marked by a number of setbacks in the area of press freedom, mainly due to autocratic regimes that do not hesitate to take drastic measures to prevent independent voices from making themselves heard. Bloggers throughout the region continue their relentless battle to spread news and information ignored or censored by the mainstream media.*

Despite a sharp decline in journalist killings in **Iraq** since the beginning of the year, the figures are still high with nine journalists killed since November 2007. In Iraqi Kurdistan, where press freedom is known to be greater than in the rest of the country, the working conditions of the independent media have deteriorated over the past months. Several journalists have been arrested and prosecuted, while others have been attacked by what is believed to be government security forces. A controversial new media bill was passed by the parliament in December 2007, imposing harsh restrictions on the media and allowing for the government to close newspapers, but it was vetoed by the President of the Kurdistan Regional Government, Masoud Barzani. A new version of the bill will soon be debated in parliament.

In **Saudi Arabia**, the December 2007 arrest of blogger Fouad Al-Farhan for "violating regulations" sparked worldwide protests which seem to have contributed to his release in April 2008. An attempt to freedom of expression in the tightly controlled kingdom was curbed in February, when the government banned live broadcasts on public Saudi TV channels after viewers had criticised government officials on the Al-Ikhbariya TV channel. The director of the channel was fired following the broadcast.

Freedom of expression came under attack in **Yemen** in late 2007 when the government closed down a number of websites in an attempt to limit the free flow of information on controversial issues related to the rebel fighting in the north of Yemen and the growing discontent and separatist calls in the south. The government has refused to give any explanation to the blocking of the websites. In March, the *Al-Sabah* and the *Abwab* newspapers were banned from distribution by the government, and in April the license of the *Al-Wasat* weekly was cancelled, a decision that was overturned by a court order in early May. It seems clear that after a period of greater openness, the Yemeni government has decided to again tighten its grip on the media.

During the fierce clashes in **Lebanon** in early May, the media became the targets of unprecedented attacks, which according to local sources were even more aggressive than any

media violations during the civil war between 1975 and 1990. Media outlets owned by the son of murdered Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri were attacked and set on fire and several journalists were harassed, manhandled and temporarily held by unknown assailants as well as detained by police. Two newspaper photographers needed hospital care after they had been attacked. At least six media outlets were temporarily forced to close or prevented from publication.

Media in the **Palestinian Territories** continue to be victims of the internal conflict between the Islamist party Hamas, controlling the Gaza Strip, and President Mahmoud Abbas' party, Fatah, in the West Bank. In addition to that, media workers are permanently at risk when covering the ongoing conflict with Israel. 23-year old Reuters cameraman Fadel Shana was killed while covering an apparently unprovoked Israeli military strike. There are claims that Shana was deliberately targeted by the Israeli forces.

In North Africa, newspapers in both **Algeria, Morocco and Egypt** have come under new attacks by the authorities in the past months. In order to exercise pressure on media deemed too critical, the governments in these three countries do not hesitate to hand massive fines which compromise the whole existence of the targeted media enterprises, or simply ban them.

In **Algeria**, newspapers find themselves before the courts on a weekly basis on charges of defamation and libel. In March, Omar Belhouchet, publisher of the French-language *El Watan* daily, and Chawki Amari, a columnist with the same paper, were sentenced to two months in prison and ordered to pay one million dinars (10,000 euros) in damages for comments made in a column published in *El Watan* in June 2006. They have now appealed the sentence. In another case, Yasser Abdelhai a journalist with the *Echourouk El Youmi* daily was sentenced to pay four million dinars (40,000 euros) in damages for four defamation cases. Abdelhai has had 26 cases brought against him since 2002.

An article published by the Arabic-language *Al Massae* daily in **Morocco** led to a strong division of the country's press in early 2008. The article reported on a supposed homosexual marriage ceremony, which resulted in attacks on the people that allegedly participated in the ceremony. The more liberal French-language press protested vigorously against *Al Massae*, accusing the paper of hate speech. The controversy exposed the difficulties of Moroccan media to cover sexual, cultural, political and ideological diversities and also the country's division over political and ideological issues. In the end, jail sentences were handed to the people present at the supposed marriage on charges of 'sexual perversion' but also to Rachid Ninni, director of the *Al Massae* press group, for libel. He received a record-high fine of six million dirhams (524,000 euros), which jeopardizes the entire operations of the newspaper group. Another worrying development in Morocco is the recent attacks on media workers. Five journalists were attacked on different occasions by unknown assailants in the first months of 2008, and in April four journalists were beaten by police officers while covering demonstrations.

In **Egypt**, the government has continued its crackdown on the media through a number of actions in recent months. In January, a journalist of the pan-Arab TV network Al-Jazeera was briefly detained following a six-month prison sentence she received over a film exposing torture in Egyptian police stations. Egyptian blogger Abbas Wael, who has gained international recognition for his reporting on human rights issues, lives under constant pressure and harassment from government officials. The authorities have also banned or

restricted a number of media outlets in an effort to curb the reporting on the mounting discontent in Egyptian society. On a positive note, the Administrative Judicial Court in December rejected a request of Judge Abdul Fattah Murad who sought to ban 51 Egyptian websites on 29 December 2007. In its ruling, the court emphasised the importance of freedom of expression.

Under President Ben Ali, **Tunisia** continues to be one of the most repressive countries in the Arab region, with no independent media and ruthless punishments of journalists and press freedom advocates. Sihem Bensedrine, an internationally renowned editor, and her husband Omar Mestiri, a publisher, were violently attacked by police and detained upon their arrival in Tunisia in March. Journalist Slim Boukhdir is serving a one-year sentence for "insulting behaviour towards an official in the exercise of his duty," "violating decency" and "refusing to produce identity papers". In early May he started a hunger strike, protesting against the fact that he has not been allowed to take a shower for the past six weeks, which has given him scabies. French President Nicolas Sarkozy received wide criticism from human rights groups in late April, when he during a trip to Tunisia stated that "today, the sphere of liberties is progressing" in the country.

### ***SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA***

Journalists killed: Somalia (1)

TOTAL = 1

*Reporting on rebellions and conflict zones has proved more and more dangerous, as governments resort to charges of sedition and "endangering national security" to intimidate and sanction independent and opposition media. Challenging or criticizing the President, government members and the army also lands many African journalists in prison. Election times have exacerbated tensions and made accurate and timely reporting even more difficult and risky.*

After a period of relative freedom following a military coup in 2005, the independent press in **Mauritania** has again become the target of government pressure. The government, which came to power in March 2007, has limited its contact with the media, dealing only with certain editors and strengthening ties with them while effectively cutting off their less compliant counterparts by denying them subsidies and other financial support or even restricting access to information.

The National Communications Council of **Guinea** banned the publications *La Vérité*, *L'Observateur* and *La Nouvelle* for extended periods earlier this year in retaliation for separate articles critical of the presidential administration, the government and the army.

After spending four months in prison for "endangering state security" in **Niger**, the director of the bimonthly *Air Info* was released in February. His arrest was part of the government crackdown on media coverage of a rebellion of nomadic Tuaregs in the north of the country that also landed two French broadcast journalists in jail for one month. One month later, the managing editor of an independent bi-weekly publication, *L'Eveil Plus*, was sentenced in February to one month in prison following a complaint filed by the State Prosecutor of the Niamey Court. The charge stemmed from an opinion piece critical of the judiciary's contrasted handling of two high-profile corruption cases.

The use of sedition charges has intensified in **Nigeria** to intimidate and sanction journalists who report on alleged cases of high-level corruption and mismanagement. Another highly sensitive field of reporting is the Niger Delta region, where the Nigerian army is fighting several armed groups. In this context, four American documentary filmmakers and a Nigerian citizen were arrested and held for five days in state security custody in Abuja, in April.

Following a new nationwide state of emergency decreed in **Chad** on 14 February, new severe restrictions have been placed on reporting the armed rebellion and any information “endangering national unity.” Moreover, a 20 February presidential decree amended the press law to effectively criminalize critical coverage of sensitive topics, including government affairs, the armed rebellion and ethnic relations. The decree also imposes new requirements to launch newspapers. Newsrooms have been raided, pre-publication censorship reigns and many independent journalists were forced into hiding.

In neighbouring **Sudan**, the government in February reestablished censorship for the privately owned media following press reports that the government had provided support to a Chadian rebel offensive against the N'Djamena government. In this context, journalists were repeatedly questioned and copies of newspapers seized.

Fourteen journalists, including Dawit Isaac, founder of the now-banned weekly *Setit*, remain behind bars in **Eritrea**, usually held incommunicado in secret jails. Eritrea is among Africa’s most repressive regimes toward the media and the largest journalist jailer.

Somali National News Agency reporter Hassan Kafi was killed on 28 January by a remote-controlled landmine on his way to a press conference. In 2007, eight Somali journalists were killed because of their work, the second highest toll after Iraq. In March, Government security forces in **Somalia** raided the premises of Horn Afrik, Radio Shabelle, and Radio Simba and seized equipment in an effort to prevent the stations from reporting on a deadly fighting between soldiers and insurgents in the centre of Mogadishu. The government claimed it did not order the raids.

A high level of economic and political pressure continues to endanger independent media outlets in **Gabon**. The National Communications Council is instrumental in the government’s arsenal to silence critical reporting. Among the latest sanctions was a three-month ban imposed in March on the private publication *Tendance Gabon* after it republished *Le Monde*’s article on French investigations into the private luxury Parisian residences acquired by five leaders of oil-rich African nations, including President Omar Bongo.

In the **Democratic Republic of Congo**, press freedom violations continue unabated. Investigative reporter Maurice Kayombo, of the private monthly publication *Les Grands Enjeux*, was detained for 34 days over a still unpublished article looking into a high-profile corruption case.

In **Kenya**, the media did not exacerbate the political crisis that followed a highly disputed presidential election in December, nor did it incite violence. Rather newspaper headlines and broadcasts that managed to seep through the media ban, which was put in place by President Kibaki's government between 30 December 2007 and 4 February 2008, were more messages of peace. Some observers, however, consider that in doing so Kenyan media

failed in their duty to report the facts and to inform the public.

In **Uganda**, the bimonthly independent publication *The Independent* has been in the government's spotlight since April following investigations the paper led into illegal detention centers in the suburbs of Kampala. Police raided the paper's premises, seized equipment and arrested staff on charges of "possessing seditious materials" and "publishing inflammatory materials."

Ahead of the presidential and parliamentary elections held on 29 March, the **Zimbabwean** government again used its journalist accreditation law—known as the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act—to prevent most major international media as well as local journalists from covering the country's elections. *The New York Times* journalist Barry Bearak and British freelance journalist Steve Bevan were held in Harare Central Prison for five days on charges of reporting without accreditation before being tried and released. More recently, *The Standard* editor, Davison Maruziva, was charged with "publishing false statements prejudicial to the state and contempt of court" for publishing an editorial by opposition leader Arthur Mutambara that was critical of President Robert Mugabe's regime.

## ***EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA***

Journalists killed: Russia (2)

TOTAL = 2

*Freedom of the press continues to be challenged in various parts of Europe and Central Asia, either in a subtle or blatant manner. Death threats against or prosecution of journalists reporting on conflict zones, war crimes, organised crime or against those mocking state officials, national or religious symbols remain disturbingly common.*

Several newspapers in **Denmark** decided in February to republish the controversial cartoon drawn by *Jyllands-Posten* cartoonist Kurt Westergaard in response to the discovery of a plot to kill him. Westergaard now lives under the protection of the Danish secret services.

In **France**, Guillaume Dasquié, a journalist specializing in intelligence issues, was detained for two days in December and pressured to reveal his sources for the 16 April 2007 article in *Le Monde* titled "September 11: the French had long known." Based on classified files, the article said French intelligence services had warned their American counterparts of a possible terrorist plot that involved the hijacking of planes and crashing them into buildings eight months before 9/11. Threatened with pretrial detention Dasquié did not reveal his main source, but he confirmed one name to avoid detention.

In February, President Nicolas Sarkozy filed a criminal lawsuit against the weekly *Le Nouvel Observateur* for publishing an article claiming Sarkozy had offered his former wife to cancel his forthcoming wedding if she would return. Sarkozy dropped the lawsuit after the article's author apologised to the President's new wife. In May, Sarkozy accused Agence France-Presse (AFP), *Le Parisien* and *L'Express* newspapers of bias, claiming they failed to duly report on a negative court verdict against his opponent in the 2007 presidential election Ségolène Royal.

Threats made against journalists who report on the mafia in **Italy** are increasing. About

a dozen journalists work under police protection, including Lirio Abbate, Palermo correspondent of the news agency Ansa.

In **Slovakia**, a controversial Press Act adopted in April grants a right of reply to any person or legal entity whose honour or dignity has been effected by a published “fact statement”, regardless of whether the statement were true. Replies must be placed in the same position in the newspaper as the original article, and must be equivalent in size to the original article. A failure to provide equal coverage for such a reply would subject newspapers to financial damages claims. It is feared that the law could open the floodgates to unfounded litigation that could threaten the very existence of newspaper publishing companies.

In **Croatia**, Drago Hedl, editor of the weekly *Feral Tribune* who has investigated war crimes against Serb civilians in the city of Osijek in 1991, received death threats in February. The weekly claims that its reporting on the case against Mr Glava, who has been charged with war crimes, has led to death threats being made against its journalists, including Hedl, and witnesses. In April, Ivo Pukanic, co-owner and director of *Nacional*, a Croatian weekly news magazine, barely escaped an attempted murder in front of his house when an unidentified assailant shot at him.

Threats against **Serbian** independent broadcaster B92 intensified and hundreds of demonstrators opposing Kosovo’s unilateral declaration of independence besieged B92 building on 21 February.

The Supreme Court of **Belarus** ruled in January that Aleksandr Sdvizhkov, an editor at the now defunct independent weekly *Zgoda* (Consensus), was guilty of inciting religious hatred for reprinting controversial cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed in 2006. Sdvizhkov was sentenced to three years in prison but was freed after he served a reduced three-month term. The newspaper had given coverage to an opposition candidate in the 2006 presidential election before being closed down.

In March, two journalists were arrested while covering a peaceful demonstration in Minsk. Both journalists were charged with offences related to organising and holding unauthorised mass events. Shortly after, the KGB launched a nationwide search of the offices and homes of independent media and journalists, accusing them of libelling President Lukashenko in cartoons published in 2005.

A policy to suppress independent reporting on sensitive issues appears to have gained ground in **Russia**. Amendments to the Law on Fighting Extremist Activity adopted in 2006 and 2007 already proved to be a weapon against media critical of the authorities. Ahead of the December parliamentary and March presidential elections, cases of harassment and violence against journalists multiplied and mainstream media showed a clear bias in favor of the ruling party candidates.

The State Duma adopted in April an amendment to the Federal Law on the Mass Media that adds "distribution of knowingly false information insulting the honour and dignity of other persons or denigrating their reputation" to a list of activities that constitute a "misuse of media freedom". This new offence would have provided grounds for the government to close a media outlet. However, on 19 May, Duma Speaker Boris Gryzlov, a senior leader of United Russia, announced that his party changed its position and that the Duma will not pass the bill.

In the **North Caucasus**, media still face a high level of political pressure, repressive laws, administrative harassment, abusive financial auditing, direct threats and defamation charges. Added to the economic hardship and the low professional level of local media, this results in distorted news reports on the conflicts of this region.

Ilyas Shurpayev, a Dagestan-born reporter who covered conflicts in the Northern Caucasus for Russia State-run Channel One, was found stabbed and strangled with a belt in his Moscow apartment on 21 March. Later the same day, in an unrelated case, gunmen shot dead Gadzhi Abashilov, the head of Dagestan's state-controlled television channel, in Dagestan's capital, Makhachkala.

Amid growing hostility toward independent and opposition media in **Azerbaijan**, Eynulla Fatullayev, editor-in-chief of the independent *Realni Azerbaijan* and *Gundelik Azerbaijan* newspapers, was convicted of terrorism, inciting ethnic hatred and tax evasion, and sentenced to eight and a half years in jail. In March, Genimet Zakhidov, editor in chief of the newspaper *Azadlig* was given four years in jail for "hooliganism". His brother and co-worker, Sakit Zakhidov, is serving a three-year sentence on a heroin possession charge. Sakit said a police officer planted the drugs. Violence and the threat of violence against journalists have become frequent in Azerbaijan and further contributed to the deteriorating environment for freedom of expression.

The repression of **Uzbekistan's** independent and opposition media has intensified since the May 2005 massacre of civilians by Uzbek security forces in the city of Andijan. Independent journalists are harassed and threatened, while restrictions on foreign reporters and their local correspondents have increased. Five independent and opposition journalists are currently serving long prison sentences in retaliation for their reporting.

The controversial Article 301 of **Turkey's** Penal Code that makes it a crime to insult "Turkishness" was amended in April to replace the word "Turkishness" with the phrase "Turkish nation", to require permission of the Justice Minister for any prosecution and to reduce the maximum penalty from three years to two. Cases against journalists, publishers and activists under Article 301 rose from 29 in 2005 to 72 in 2006. Between July and September 2007 only, 22 charges were laid under Article 301, mostly against journalists. In 2006, Armenian-Turkish journalist and editor Hrant Dink was prosecuted under Article 301 for insulting "Turkishness" and received a six-month suspended sentence. Dink was murdered in January 2007 by radical nationalists.

## **ASIA**

Journalists killed: Afghanistan (1), India (1), Nepal (1), Pakistan (4), Philippines (1), Sri Lanka (3)  
TOTAL = 11

*Throughout this vast region, independent media continue to face an array of obstacles mainly in the form of hostile governments and internal conflicts. In the northern parts of Asia, journalists continue their struggle for the right to freedom of expression. Dictatorships such as Burma, North Korea and Laos allow no independent media to operate within their borders.*

The upcoming Olympic Games have sparked an international debate about freedom of expression in **China**, intensified by the banning of foreign media to cover the March riots in Tibet. Not only has China failed to live up to the press freedom commitments made as part of Beijing's preparation to be the host city of the 2008 Games but the authorities continue to arrest and sentence journalists to lengthy prison sentences. The latest case is that of journalist Qi Chonghuai, of the *China Legal News* in Shandong province, who was sentenced to four years in prison for fraud and extortion in mid-May. Freelance journalist He Yanjie was sentenced to two years in prison during the same trial. The two journalists had together with a friend, Ma Shiping, published an article on a foreign-based website accusing a local official of beating a woman for arriving late to work. They also posted photographs of a luxurious Tengzhou government building on the Xinhua news agency anti-corruption web forum. Ma is still awaiting his trial. Several other journalists have been arrested and sentenced to prison in the past six months.

In the aftermath of September 2007 uprising in **Burma**, the authorities have continued to impose harsh restrictions on the flow of information in an attempt to further isolate the country from the rest of the world. In January, the price for satellite dish licences increased from 6,000 to 1 million kyats (from 3 to 513 euros) in attempt to limit access to foreign news media. In February, the editors of 15 news publications received a warning from the authorities to not publish any materials on their web versions that had not been verified by censors. A few days later, the editor and the manager of the Myanmar Nation weekly were arrested and charged for possessing a report by Paulo Sergio Pinheiro, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar. Throughout the spring access to Internet has been limited and there has been difficulties phoning Burma from abroad. Despite this, Burmese citizens have continued to provide information to the outside world through the Internet, often risking their lives in doing so. When the Nargis cyclone hit Burma in early May, media outlets operated from abroad in collaboration with local journalists allowed for uncensored news to exit from the country. Foreign journalists were forced travel to the country on tourist visas, operating under pen names. Local journalists enjoyed greater freedom to travel around the country, but still experienced tight restrictions on their work. In January, Golden Pen of Freedom laureate U Win Tin, who has been imprisoned since July 1989, was taken hospital to undergo surgery because of a painful hernia.

In **Vietnam**, the government has in recent months arrested a number of journalists and online writers, thus reversing a previously positive trend with regards to freedom of expression. In April, Nguyen Hoang Hai, a famous Vietnamese blogger was arrested following his participation in protests against the human rights and press freedom situation in China. In April, independent journalist Truong Minh Duc was sentenced to five years in prison and US journalist Le Hong Thien who had travelled to Vietnam to cover the Olympic torch relay had his passport confiscated and was placed under house arrest. In May, journalists Nguyen Van Hai and Nguyen Viet Chien were arrested and accused of "abuse of power" following their 2005 investigation into an important corruption case involving government officials. The corruption case, which was widely covered by the national press, resulted in the conviction of a dozen political figures, including the transport minister, and was at the time seen as an important sign of greater freedom granted to the country's media. Also in May, journalist Somsak Khunmi, a Thai citizen and contributor to Radio New Horizon received a nine-month prison sentence on terrorism charges. The only positive development in Vietnam was the unexpected January release of journalist and writer Tran Khai Thanh Thuy after a one-day trial that sentenced her to nine months and 10 days, or time served, on charges of "causing public disorder".

The press traditionally enjoys an important degree of press freedom in the **Philippines**, however, in January media groups massively protested an "advisory" issued by the Department of Justice (DOJ) warning journalists of "criminal liabilities" should they "disobey lawful orders from government officers and personnel" during "emergencies". The absence of any concrete terms allows for a broad interpretation, posing a threat to journalists when carrying out their work to inform the public. In February, media was prevented from covering a large protest rally against President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo from the air. The organisers evoked the security of the demonstrators as the reason for the ban, but media claimed they wanted to prevent them for reporting on how large the rally was. Fernando Linutan, a journalist with dxGO radio was killed on Christmas Eve.

The working conditions for the media in **Afghanistan** have further degraded as the country continues to face numerous obstacles in its efforts to establish democratic rule. In late March, gunmen destroyed Radio Zafar, an independent radio station outside of Kabul, and also in March, the Ministry of Information and Culture ordered Afghan TV stations to stop broadcasting "sensual" images, following TV programmes where men and women were dancing together. The February death sentence handed to Sayed Parwez Kambakhsh on charges of blasphemy and insulting Islam led to an international outcry and was also widely condemned by journalists in Afghanistan. It is believed the 23-year old Kambakhsh was in reality punished for articles written by his brother, prominent journalist Sayed Yaqub Ibrahimi, who has been vigorous in his criticism of local authorities and warlords. Kambakhsh is currently waiting for appeal in a Kabul prison. One journalist was killed in Afghanistan in the past six months. Norwegian journalist Carsten Thomassen of the *Dagbladet* newspaper died in a suicide attack on the Kabul hotel where he was staying in mid-January.

In neighbouring **Pakistan**, the independent press has been subject to tremendous pressure in the aftermath of the 28 December 2007 assassination of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto. Criminal cases have allegedly been brought against 78 journalists under the anti-terrorism and anti-riot acts. The journalists all claim that they are being targeted for their reporting. In addition to this, strict regulations were placed on media ahead of the February general elections. In May, media were put under pressure in their coverage of the judicial system in Pakistan. According to a court order journalists will have to reveal their sources and media should not publish any reports involving a judge without prior clearance by court officials. Four journalists were killed in Pakistan since November 2007. Zubair Ahmed Mujahid, a correspondent of the daily *Jang* newspaper was shot dead in November 2007, Chishti Mujahid, a journalist with the *Quetta* newspaper was shot to death outside his home in early February and Siraj Uddin, a reporter with *The Nation* newspaper, was killed in a suicide attack at a funeral of a murdered police officer at the end of February.

Journalist murders also occurred in **India** and **Nepal**. Ashok Sodhi, an Indian photojournalist for the *Daily Excelsior* newspaper was killed while he was covering a hostage situation during which security forces exchanged fire with suspected militants. Nepalese publisher Pushkar Bahadur Shresta of the *Highway Weekly* and *New Season* publications was shot to death in January by a man who claimed he was a journalist from the "wrong" region of the country.

The state of press freedom in **Sri Lanka** has remained critical over the past six months due to the armed conflict between government troops and Tamil separatists. Three media

employees, journalist Isaivizhi Chempiyan, and technicians Suresh Linbiyo and T. Tharmalingam of the Voice of Tigers radio station, were killed in deliberate attack by the Sri Lankan Air Force in late November 2007. In May, Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, Defence Secretary and brother of the president, called for a ban on independent media outlets which he blamed for publishing news stories detrimental to the security forces. International press freedom watchdogs have repeatedly expressed concern over the attacks on media and the lack of respect from government officials with regards to the country's independent media.