

Journalists Decry Growing Danger To Press In Northwest Pakistan

Several prominent journalists in northwest Pakistan have told RFE/RL's Radio Mashaal about what they say is a growing danger to the press in their region.

Journalist unions say that over the last six years, 30 journalists have been killed or wounded in Pakistan's northwest Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province and tribal areas.

Behroz Khan is a Peshawar-based journalist and the former president of the Khyber Union of Journalists.

"Our colleagues are being killed, tortured, harassed, and kidnapped," Khan told Radio Mashaal. "Both the militants and the authorities threaten us if we report [against] their interests."

Aneela Shaheen, the secretary-general of the Peshawar Press Club, described how the worsening security situation has driven women away from the profession. "If there were 10 female journalists [in the past], now only five are left," Shaheen said.

"We receive threats from both the security agencies and terrorist organizations," she said. "Our life is under constant threat."

The issue of journalists' safety was highlighted on June 16 in Peshawar, when a group of journalists gathered to observe the fourth anniversary of the death of journalist Hayatullah Khan. In circumstances that are still not clear, Khan's handcuffed body was found in June 2006.

The gathering in memory of Khan was organized by the Khyber Union of Journalists and the Tribal Union of Journalists. They demanded the government make public the high court investigation into Khan's case and bring people to account for his murder.

One particularly dangerous place for journalists has been the picturesque Swat Valley, where Pakistan launched a military operation against the Taliban in May 2008.

Journalists there say they have faced repeated threats from security forces and Taliban militants. The conflict displaced over 250 journalists from Swat and the surrounding districts.

Fayaz Zafar, chairman of Swat Press Club, says that four journalists have been killed in Swat alone since the launch of the military operation.

"One journalist was killed by security forces for allegedly violating a curfew, while the remaining three were killed in attacks carried out by the Taliban," he said.

Zafar added that the government has yet to provide support to the families of the slain journalists, or even carry out a comprehensive probe into their killings.

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