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Reuters

Besieged Afghan media appeals to Karzai for protection

By Amie Ferris-Rotman and Mirwais Harooni

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Afghanistan's media representatives are appealing to the government to protect the rights of journalists who are facing a growing number of violent threats in what they see as an undeclared campaign against media freedom.

War and an atmosphere of impunity make Afghanistan one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a journalist. The Taliban often regard reporters as their enemies and many officials are suspicious of a prying press.

Despite media freedom being protected by the constitution, the relatively large, often Western-backed press corps can face intimidation, abduction or even death for reporting on issues such as corruption and other government failings.

"Day by day, it is getting worse. No one is here to support reporters," Sediq Zaique, head of investigative reporting at national daily "8 a.m.", told Reuters on Friday.

Zaique said he had received several threatening phone calls from unidentified men in what he believes was a response to his articles revealing corruption and drug-running by officials.

Many Afghans view the government as deeply corrupt.

Some media hold back from publishing stories they know will attract the government's ire.

Reporters at Afghan news agency Pajhwok are resorting to self-censorship to avoid the fate of colleagues who have been beaten and detained. Three have been killed over the last decade, its editor-in-chief Danish Karokhil told Reuters, adding that the government had to act to protect the media.

Some government officials acknowledge that authorities are not doing enough.

"The Afghan government simply needs to do more to protect media freedoms," Deputy Minister of Information and Culture Deen Mohammad Mubarez Rashidi told an awards ceremony on Thursday honouring slain radio journalist Sadim Khan Bhadurzoy, who was kidnapped and beheaded in eastern Paktika province in February.

New York-based watchdog Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) said last month in its annual report that while Afghanistan has experienced a slowdown in targeted killings, it had made no progress in prosecuting the killers of journalists.

Afghanistan ranks seventh on the CPJ's "Impunity Index", a listing of countries where journalists are killed regularly and governments fail to solve the crimes.

No one has been arrested in connection with the murder of Bhadurzoy. The Taliban denied involvement, though the Islamist militants have targeted journalists in their southern and eastern strongholds in the past.

"MAJOR ACHIEVEMENT"

Increased insecurity in the face of intensifying violence as most Western combat troops prepare to leave by 2014 has also led to greater impunity surrounding threats against reporters, said Abdul Mujeeb Khalvatgar, executive director of the Afghan media development group Nai.

Khalvatgar even suggested the government could be cracking down on the press in order to send a signal to the Taliban, that it was serious about reconciliation talks and was willing to restrict the meddlesome media to prove it.

"The government is reaching out to the Taliban as peace talks continue. Press freedom is sacrificed along the way," he said.

Nai, which tracks media infringements, says there were 77 recorded cases of brutality and threats against Afghanistan's fledgling media between May 2011 and May 2012.

But President Hamid Karzai defended the state of Afghan media on Thursday, telling reporters: "Freedom of the press is one of the Afghan government's major achievements. We will firmly support it and respect it".

Karzai also said he would look into the case of television reporter Nasto Naderi, who is serving a short jail term for drinking alcohol – banned in Muslim Afghanistan – and was charged with making false accusations against officials.

Amnesty International launched a campaign this week for his release, saying Naderi is at risk of torture or death in detention for his programmes which reveal corruption and criminality, often implicating officials.

In February, a government request that female television presenters wear headscarves and avoid heavy make-up angered journalists who said it was proof authorities expected the Taliban to regain a share of power.