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In the line of fire: The young Afghans reporting on corruption, crime and drug trafficking

By Terri Judd

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In a spartan office in central Helmand, a group of young men sits hunched over keyboards. Despite their courteous demeanour and bookish appearance, they have one of the most dangerous jobs in the world.

The Lashkar Gah Press Club may have none of the trappings of a modern newsroom – just a few computer screens on old desks – but the dedication of its occupants is inspiring.

"We step forward and we take the risk. We are aware of the threat but that is what happens when you are a journalist. You must go forward and be strong," insists Rohullah Elham, 25. Since the demise of the Taliban government 10 years ago, a plethora of newspapers, websites, TV and radio stations have sprung up across Afghanistan. But life for its journalists is perilous. They are the frontline foot soldiers, often for larger UK and international organisations, particularly in the war-torn southern provinces such as Helmand, the British military area of operations.

This new breed of reporters treads a difficult path of confronting corruption, powerful officials and unscrupulous drug barons. They are often targets of death threats and kidnappings while under constant pressure from both government and insurgent sources, who question their partiality from both sides.

According to the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), 24 media workers have been killed since 2001 including foreign reporters. Local journalists believe the figure is higher with cases where it is impossible to prove the murder was connected to their work.

The committee rates Afghanistan as the 10th most deadly country for the press while it ranks the country sixth in its impunity index – a yearly spotlight on states where the killers of journalists go free because thegovernment is either unwilling or unable to prosecute the murderers.

"Afghan journalists are one of the most important pieces in building any form of democracy in their country," insists Bob Dietz, CPJ's Asia program co-ordinator. "Their commitment has always amazed me. They report in the face of constant hostility from most parts of the government and many of the actors in the stories they are covering. Threats and abductions generate a constant undercurrent that they have to navigate as they ply their craft. There are plenty of reasons to fear for the future of Afghan media, but the level of commitment on the part of media workers supplies the best justification for optimism."

In his office in Lashkar Gah, Zainullah Stanikzai, head of the Helmand Journalists' Association, explains how he lost yet another friend three weeks ago (28 July) when the BBC stringer Ahmed Omed Khpulwak, 25, was among 19 people killed in suicide attacks on a radio and television station in Uruzgan. His last text message to his family was: "Pray for me if I die".

Initially the blame fell on the Taliban, but as reports emerged that he may have been killed by Afghan or Nato-led International Security Assistance Force (Isaf) forces in the ensuing battle, the BBC has called for an urgent inquiry.

"He was funny, used to make a lot of jokes but he was also loyal and honest and he tried very hard to do his job in the best way he could," says Stanikzai, a fellow reporter with the Pajhwok Afghan news agency. The father of a two-month-old daughter, Khpulwak had challenged government officials and corruption fearlessly, his colleague explains: "He never stopped, he worked very hard. He was a very good friend. When I heard about his death, I was very shocked and sad."

Yet the conflict is only one of the threats journalists face as they recall the death of Abdul Samad Rohani, the BBC World Service reporter who disappeared in Lashkar Gah three years ago and turned up the following day, shot in the face and chest. Just as lethal are the drugs barons, warlords and corrupt officials the journalists challenge. To date, no one has been tried for his death and his remains one of many unresolved cases.

"He had been reporting on corruption and drugs and he disappeared in the city. The Taliban don't come into the city," says Stanikzai, adding:"We get a lot of threats, usually by telephone. We have been threatened many times. But because it is our responsibility, we carry on and do our work. That is what the people expect."

While international focus is on the daily conflict in the war-torn southern province, the local reporters are most passionate about defeating corruption and the narcotics trade, convinced that such lawlessness only breeds insecurity.

In June they brought down the mayor of Lashkar Gah after an investigation uncovered a host of allegations – including that he was selling government land for profit, dealing with drug traffickers, and was accused of being involved in the deaths of two men. While he was not prosecuted, he was relieved of office. "Every day there are explosions and fighting but what interests me is investigating corruption," Mr Stanikzai explains.

"My priority is fighting corruption," agrees Elham, a radio journalist working for Deutsche Welle, who was inspired to become a reporter by listening to BBC broadcasts while growing up. "If the people go to government and they are disappointed, then that is why they turn to the Taliban."

Educated and often liberal by nature, the new media must also be constantly aware of the ever-present perils of a deeply conservative society. In 2007, the young journalist and student Sayed Pervez Kambaksh was arrested as he tried to promote women's rights. The 24-year-old was accused of blasphemy by distributing writings that criticised the treatment of women under Islamic law. He was sentenced to death but, after an international outcry, was granted a pardon by President Hamid Karzai.

The association in Lashkar Gah is now 50 strong – 20 stringers for international media and 30 local reporters. In Helmand, there are eight publications, with circulations of a few hundred to a couple of thousand, and half a dozen commercial radio stations, along with Helmand Radio Television Afghanistan which broadcasts local news for three hours a day. There are also a host of publications, websites and television channels run from Kabul.

In times of conflict and danger, the emphasis among them is co-operation rather than commercial competition. They also know they have a key role in educating a population that has been cut off by war and poverty and the journalists are a willing conduit for health or safety messages that emerge from the provincial council or Isaf forces.

British Army Major Alastair Macartney, a Pashto speaker who has spent the past three months working alongside the journalists as part of the Helmand Provincial Reconstruction Team, recalls the bravery with which they ventured into Washir, a previously uncharted Taliban stronghold just days after it was cleared by the Afghan National Army.

"Despite the continued IED [improvised explosive device] risk, they insisted on travelling there, walking the ground and speaking to the locals, the District Governor Dawood Noorzai, and the shopkeepers," says Major Macartney. "Their reporting, from an area that no journalist had been able to travel to for some considerable time was accurate and honest. Their interest was in reality; the reality that they could only see and hear first-hand."

It is an opportunity frequently beyond the grasp of foreign journalists in the conflict-torn areas and, like Iraq, large news organisations often rely on local stringers to search out the truth. Their studious impartiality, Major Macartney insists, is vital to the future of Afghanistan.

"The Helmand journalists are a courageous and brave group," he says. "Their interest in developing their own, independent, media capability is a passionate one. They stand up

decisively not just to intimidation, but, when required, to the governmental and Isaf media machines, striving only to report what is the truth."

In many ways the greatest challenge the journalists face is the illiteracy of their audience – only 14 per cent of the Helmand populace can read and very few have access to television or the internet. For an audience far more used to swapping news in the bazaars, radio has proved the most effective method of communicating news.

Whatever the hurdles they face, these reporters maintain a refreshing passion for investigation and championing the rights of the readership they serve. They are rewarded with a reverence and respect when they turn up at village shuras (council gatherings) to speak out against dishonesty.

It is a universe away from the triviality that fills so many British papers and Stanikzai smiles as he explains how he finds UK news somewhat baffling.

"Last year when I was in London I saw a report on a dog," he recalls. "It was interesting for me. When I told the others, everybody was laughing about it. Of course, when you have no corruption and no explosions, there is nothing else to report. It is very good. The people in England are lucky to live their lives happily."

In Lashkar Gah, they can only dream of a day when they have the dubious luxury of reporting on trivia or celebrity gossip.

In the words of Ahmed Omed Khpulwak, not long before he died: "I don't know when peace will come to Afghanistan – this country has a lot of problems."