

International Day to End Impunity for Crimes Against Journalists

Why you need a free media



DO you know that only 13 percent of the world population enjoys a free press? According to Freedom House Report of Press

Freedom, in 2016 the safety of journalists was guaranteed in just 13 percent of the world's population. Forty-one percent has a partly free press and 46 percent live in not free media environment. Impunity for crimes against journalists is becoming the biggest threat to media freedom. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) recently claimed that Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh and India are among the 13 most dangerous countries for the journalists. Other dangerous countries for journalists are Somalia, Iraq, Syria, Philippines, South Sudan, Mexico, Brazil, Russia and Nigeria. CPJ's 2016 Global Impunity Index spotlights countries where journalists are slain and their killers go free.

November 2 is observed as the international day to end this

impunity. This year UNESCO and many media organisations, including Free Press Unlimited, IFJ, CPJ, and RSF, are organising special events to raise their voice against impunity for crimes against journalists.

Growing extremism and intolerance of some democratic regimes has created a lot of threats for media freedom in South Asia, Middle East, Africa and Latin America. In some countries, security agencies are trying to silence the voice of journalists in the name of national interest. A recent case in point is Turkey where a democratic regime is silencing the voice of media in the name of "protecting democracy". Unfortunately, media is losing its freedom very quickly in many Muslim countries; however, Europe is no longer an exception either. The massive influx of migrants to Europe indirectly resulted in a variety of limitations on media freedom. One example is Hungary, where police attacked several journalists who were reporting violent clashes between riot officers and migrants arriving at the country's southern border. A series of attacks on journalists were reported in Germany by far-right groups who were opposing Chancellor Angela Merkel's

welcoming policies towards refugees.

I live in South Asia and that's why I am more concerned about growing threats to media freedom in my part of the world. There is democracy in Pakistan, Bangladesh and India, but why have these three South Asian countries become so dangerous for media? Extremism is not the only reason. Reporting against criminals and corrupt mafias is also becoming difficult. Sometimes people sitting in power corridors don't like voices of dissent and they try to silence journalists by declaring them to be "anti-national". I believe that freedom of expression plays a very crucial role in good governance, transparency and accountability. South Asian economies cannot achieve the goals of sustainable development without good governance and it is not possible if the media is not allowed to raise some fair questions. Many journalists and bloggers were killed in Pakistan, Bangladesh and India but their killers have not been arrested. More than 100 journalists and media workers lost their lives in Pakistan since 2005. Almost one journalist is killed every month, but only two cases have been resolved as of yet. One Pakistani journalist, Hafiz

Husnain Raza from Okara, Punjab, was arrested in April 2016 under terrorism charges because he wrote about peasants fighting for their lands occupied by security agencies. Pakistani media is losing its freedom very quickly. It's unfortunate that the Pakistani government sacked its Information Minister Senator Pervez Rashid just because he failed to censor

have been murdered in India since 1990, and very few cases have been resolved. For example, journalist Jagendra Singh was allegedly set on fire by Uttar Pradesh police in 2015 because he posted a Facebook status accusing a local minister of corruption. No one has been prosecuted in this case. A few weeks ago, the daily Kashmir Reader based in Srinagar was shut down by

According to the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) 2016 report on impunity, only one out of ten deaths of journalists is investigated. IFJ's #endimpunity 2016 campaign aims at holding all governments accountable for the impunity of crimes against journalists, but it has specifically emphasised on four countries - Mexico, Pakistan, India and Yemen. Pakistan and India are going through some very tense relations these days but they appear united in one approach. Security establishments and the political elite in both countries don't seem to like free media. They always try to use "tamed" media against each other. If they change their approach and give adequate freedom to the media then journalists on both sides could play a positive role in minimising the tension between the two countries. Only a fear free media can bring durable peace in this world. The first step for creating a fear free media is to end impunity. Let's together raise our voice against impunity for crimes against journalists.

The writer is a Pakistani journalist. Twitter: @HamidMirGeo

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the story published in Dawn about alleged differences between civilian and military leaders. The writer of the story Cyril Almeida left the country because many politicians demanded to initiate a treason case against him.

India is the largest democracy in the world with a strong judiciary and vibrant media. Ninety-five journalists

Indian authorities in the state of Jammu and Kashmir because the paper refused to take dictation from security forces. Many liberal and secular Bangladeshi journalists face criminal and treason cases just because they pose some valid questions and powerful people within the government fail to answer the questions.

Isn't it time we stop shooting the messenger?



RECENTLY, a video of two television journalists being attacked by staff of a popular private hospital in Dhaka has been doing the

rounds of social media. The reporters were covering an allegation of sexual harassment against a female patient by a staff of the hospital, and were apparently interviewing someone in the management when a group of hospital employees stormed into the room, questioning the presence of the reporters in the hospital, forcefully demanding that the cameraman shut off his camera, before finally resorting to manhandling them. When they protested that they were journalists who were only doing their job and didn't have any intention to defame the hospital, one of the employees thundered, "Faizlami paisen? Kisher journalist?" [Are you kidding? What journalist?] Reporter Ahmed Saleheen and cameraman Shafiqul Islam, both from Shomoy TV, further claimed that they were verbally abused by the hospital staff; in fact, Shafiqul was also confined in a room for a while where they allegedly beat him up.

When you find the hospital staff abusing journalists for trying to uncover the details behind an incredibly gross incident, it leaves you concerned, not only because it exemplifies the prevalent culture of shooting the messenger to hide the crime, but also because through their actions they prove that the reputation and image of their hospital is far more important than a patient's allegations of sexual harassment.

While the hospital management has promised exemplary punishment for their staff 'if they were found complicit in the abuse of the journalists, it goes without saying that impunity for any kind of crime against journalists - be it verbal or physical abuse or even murder - has more or less been a mainstay in global culture for quite a while now. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) states that out of 110 journalists killed around the world in 2015, while many died in war zones, the majority were killed in countries supposedly at peace.

CRIMES AGAINST JOURNALISTS AND THE ISSUE OF IMPUNITY

DEADLIEST COUNTRIES IN 2016:

SYR Kills: 10	YEM Kills: 5	IRQ Kills: 5	LBY Kills: 3
IND Kills: 2	AFG Kills: 2	MEX Kills: 2	TUR Kills: 2

FATES OF JOURNALISTS OVER THE YEARS:

1195 journalists have been killed since 1992...
 ...out of whom **67%** were targeted for murder...
 ...but only **13%** of cases have been prosecuted.
 At least **88%** were murdered in their own country.

KILLED FOR COVERING...

CORRUPTION 20%	HUMAN RIGHTS 18%	POLITICAL ISSUES 44%
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SOME OF THE HIGHEST RATES OF IMPUNITY IN THE MURDERS OF JOURNALISTS CAN BE ATTRIBUTED TO KILLINGS BY ISLAMIST MILITANT GROUPS, WHICH SPOTLIGHTS COUNTRIES WHERE JOURNALISTS ARE MURDERED AND THEIR KILLERS GO FREE.

WHAT HAPPENED TO PRESS FREEDOM?

110 journalists were killed in 2015
2/3 were killed in "countries at peace"
27 citizen journalists and **7** media workers were also killed

EUROPE (WITH 19.8 POINTS) HAS THE FREEST MEDIA, FOLLOWED BY AFRICA (36.9), THE AMERICAS (37.1), ASIA (43.8), AND EASTERN EUROPE / CENTRAL ASIA (48.4), WHILE NORTH AFRICA / MIDDLE EAST (50.8) IS STILL THE REGION WHERE JOURNALISTS ARE MOST SUBJECTED TO CONSTRAINTS OF EVERY KIND.

SOURCE: COMMITTEE TO PROTECT JOURNALISTS (CPJ), REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS (RSF) INFOGRAPHIC: AMIYA HALDER

The rising numbers of crimes against journalists can be attributed to the neglect of state agencies around the world to bring the perpetrators to justice. In Bangladesh, placed 144th among 180 countries by RSF's World Press Freedom 2016 Index, crimes against journalists are seldom solved, emboldening perpetrators to continue attacking media workers with a strong sense of impunity. Lest you have forgotten, a journalist couple, Sagar Sarowar and Meherun Runi, were stabbed to death in their apartment in 2012. While the case received immense and intense media coverage and worldwide condemnation alongside a promise by then Home Minister Sahara Khatun, of apprehending the perpetrators within '48 hours', even after four years, the motive behind the murder remains unclear and the case remains unresolved.

The media watchdog group Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) recently posted a Global Impunity Index, listing 13 countries where the murder of journalists could be carried out with no consequence. The index included countries with more than five unsolved murders and measured how "judicial a country is in case of murders of journalists." Bangladesh placed 11th on the index - a slight improvement from last year - which calculated journalist murders from September 1, 2006 to August 31, 2016. The index showed that the murder of seven journalists remained unresolved and no convictions have been obtained in the country over the past decade. The RSF index also maintained that the government of Bangladesh "took little action in response to violence against media personnel and were sometimes directly involved in violations of their freedom."

Senior journalist and Editor of Bangla 71 Probrir Sikder's case is testimony to this allegation of RSF. Sikder was arrested in 2015 when, after receiving death threats following articles he had written about a local property dispute, he posted a statement on Facebook alleging that a minister amongst others should be held responsible if he were to be killed or harmed in any way. He also claimed that he was compelled to post the statement after the police refused

to take action over the death threats. Sikder further asserted that the police did not record his general diary but arrested him even before the case was filed (*The Daily Star*, August 20, 2015). While the said minister denied pressing the charges against the journalist in local media, he also claimed that Sikder should be put "behind bars" for writing against him. The charges against Sikder were framed under Section 57 of the ICT Act, which states that anyone convicted of tarnishing the image of a person or the state through writings or electronic means can face a minimum of seven years and a maximum of 14 years in prison. Leaving aside discussions on the validity of the Act, which activists condemn as a threat to freedom of expression, the fact that a defamation suit can lead to the arrest of a person in a democracy is not only a travesty of justice but also contradictory to the Constitution that our state apparatuses want to uphold at any cost.

Defamation seems to have become the new go to phrase that allows people to lodge complaints and demand the arrest of any person who is deemed to have hurt the sentiments of any individual, especially of those in power. In a case that received global attention, 83 defamation cases were filed against the editor of this newspaper, all of which were subsequently stayed by the country's High Court.

Concerted attacks against media are not uncommon in Bangladesh. Reporters and photojournalists have often been attacked by political party activists at different points when they tried to cover an election, by student politicians when they attempted to report violence in education institutes, by doctors when they sought explanation for a strike called by them. In short, they are the easy targets because they take the news to the public, making the invisible visible, and talking about the unspeakable. In 2015, ten journalists were assaulted by ruling party men during the city corporation elections; some reporters were even robbed of their mobile phones, handbags and cash. Allegedly, polling officers and law enforcers prevented reporters and photographers from entering the

polling centres. When a reporter of *The Daily Star* exited a booth where he snapped pictures of a polling agent illegally stuffing ballot boxes in the presence of an assistant presiding officer, he was asked by a man in plainclothes identifying himself as a policeman to delete the photos and leave the place (*The Daily Star*, April 29, 2015).

Interesting to note that when defamation (or any other) charges are brought against journalists, it doesn't take much time for the law enforcing agencies to bring them to book. Under the guise of sedition, defamation, and making statements that are offensive to such and such groups, journalists are repeatedly harassed and diligently scrutinised. The same diligence, unfortunately, does not seem to apply for the members of the journalist community when they are attacked. As stated by CPJ, in the last ten years the only notable progress in Bangladesh in terms of conviction of crimes against journalists was the court order that convicted eight people for the murder of blogger Ahmed Rajib Haider in 2013.

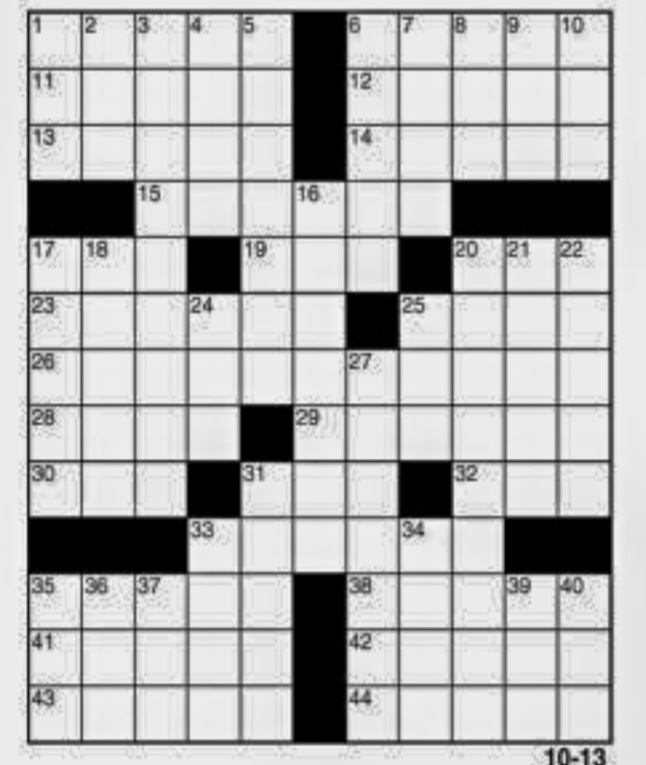
The fault also lies on the journalist community of the country which stands divided, unwilling to let go of individual self-interest in favour of a freer, more open and critical news media. Self-censorship is so prevalent in our community that the fear of 'conflict of interest' often overpowers our need to present facts without bias or favour. This polarisation is probably a main reason why as a community we have failed, and miserably so, to ensure justice for our brethren who were forced give up their lives in the line of duty or are continuously harassed by different agencies for attempting to do their job.

The situation of few convictions of crimes against journalists has become so endemic that we now have a day that calls to end impunity for such crimes! What the world in general needs to understand is that it is only through the implementation of a free and fearless news media that we can achieve the peace that we so desperately seek in these turbulent times.

The writer is a member of the Editorial Team, *The Daily Star*.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- Scarecrow fill
 - Wool cap
 - Diet snacks
 - TV's Trebek
 - Emperor Selassie
 - Tots
 - Roulette bet
 - Stream swimmer
 - Game leader
 - "Clumsy me!"
 - Made a choice
 - Place
 - Leon Uris novel
 - Wisdom bringer
 - Snap
 - Last letter, in London
 - Capture
 - Ten-sided figure
 - "Survivor" network
 - Particular
 - Shortly
 - Ridiculous
 - Worry
 - Shore diner staple
 - Maugham novel
 - 21 "Twilight" heroine
 - 22 Exorbitant
 - 23 Write hastily
 - 24 Put in stitches
 - 25 Four-term president's initials
 - 26 Maugham novel
 - 27 Wood of ilm
 - 28 Was aware
 - 29 Missay
 - 30 Agreeable answer
 - 31 Spy for laps
 - 32 Tilly-filled target
 - 33 Toy-filled target
 - 34 Like xenon
 - 35 Billiards shot
 - 36 Cut dramatically
 - 37 Tear
 - 38 Preferences
 - 39 Memorable period
 - 39 Accepted truth
 - 40 Sow site
 - 42 Like xenon
 - 43 Come back
 - 44 School paper
- DOWN**
- That woman



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

C O R E D C A R B
 O M E G A N A D I R
 B I S O N O P I N E
 A N T S S T O O G E
 L O O A R F S O D
 T U R N S O U T
 S E A T N I C K
 B U R N S O U T
 M A R D A Y R B I
 E M I N E M H O R N
 S I T I N T O N I C
 A G E N T E N A C T
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