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Afghanistan: Attack on Tolo TV media workers is a chilling assault on media freedom

Amnesty International strongly condemns the suicide attack on a shuttle bus carrying over 30 media workers associated with Tolo TV, killing seven and injuring 27 people, including 26 staff members.

The Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack, claiming in a statement today that it had come "good on its promise of targeting Tolo TV" stating that the attack was because its "workers were anti-Jihad and anti-Islam elements trained by foreign intelligence toiling for the Americans for the past many years."

Last October the Taliban threatened Tolo TV, along with 1 TV, stating that "all the reporters and associates of these channels will be deemed enemy personnel, all of their centers, offices and dispatched teams will be considered military objectives which will be directly eliminated."

Journalists not taking part in hostilities are defined as civilians under international humanitarian law, also known as the "laws of war". Intentionally targeting civilians or civilian objects for attack violates international law, and can be a war crime. The Taliban and other armed groups must immediately cease targeting civilians, including media workers.

The latest attack on journalists represents a chilling assault on media freedom in the country. Freedom of expression, which flourished after the fall of the Taleban in 2001, has steadily eroded in the country following a string of violent attacks and intimidation against journalists, including killings, by state and non-state actors, along with efforts by the Ulema Council and the authorities to clamp down on media freedom.

Nai, a media freedom watchdog in Afghanistan, reported 73 cases of attacks against journalists and media workers in 2015, with the majority being committed by state actors.

Afghan journalists face threats, harassment and violence for reporting on important issues of public concern such as women's rights, corruption, warlordism, and extremism. Several journalists have told Amnesty International that they practise self-censorship and hold

back from criticising or reporting about sensitive issues for fear of reprisals from state and non-state actors.

Amnesty International urges the Afghan government to take effective steps to stem the tide of violence against journalists, and in particular calls on the authorities to conduct thorough, prompt, impartial and transparent investigations into this and other violent attacks. Where there is sufficient evidence, authorities should prosecute those suspected of responsibility for violent attacks on journalists, human rights defenders and activists exercising their right to freedom of expression.

In addition, the authorities must also address the security needs of journalists and human rights defenders and provide adequate protection so that they can carry out their work without fear of intimidation and harassment and violent attack.

Media enterprises in Afghanistan should also ensure they provide adequate training, support and assistance to journalists, as an important, practical step towards addressing the risk of threats, harassment and violence against them in connection with their work.