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Still no justice for Pakistan's murdered journalists

On the four-year anniversary of the murder of Asia Times Correspondent, Saleem Shahzad, Amnesty International calls on the Pakistan government to fulfil its pledges to protect journalists in Pakistan.

Saleem Shahzad's body was found dumped in the outskirts of Mandibaha-ud-Din village in Punjab province several kilometres from his home. A post-mortem revealed that he died of injuries caused by "severe torture and beating." Just days earlier, Shahzad had published a report on alleged al-Qa'ida infiltration of the Pakistani military, which he was going to discuss on television that evening. He had also previously complained of threats from the Pakistan's powerful intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence.

Despite public outrage over his murder and a public inquiry into his case, there has been little progress in securing justice for Shahzad's murder and those of other journalists killed at the hands of the state and a wide range of other actors.

One year ago, Amnesty International issued its report, *A Bullet Has Been Chosen For You: Attacks On Journalists in Pakistan*, extensively detailing killings, harassment and abuse of journalists in Pakistan. Yet despite government promises to improve the dire situation for journalists in the country, Pakistan remains one of the most dangerous countries in the world for reporting.

An estimated 40 journalists have been killed as a likely consequence of their work since democratic rule was restored in 2008, eight of them in 2014, according to Amnesty International's research.

Journalists continue to operate in a climate of fear, facing attacks and threats from all sides. Those responsible include the military, state intelligence officers, criminal gangs, political parties, the Taliban and other armed groups. In the overwhelming number of cases, the authorities rarely adequately investigate threats or attacks or bring those responsible to justice.

The aftermath of assassination attempts against other high-profile journalists Raza Rumi and Hamid Mir clearly demonstrate an enduring challenge to justice for attacks on journalists. On 28 March 2014, Express anchor and human rights defender Raza Rumi narrowly escaped death while returning home from work in Lahore when his car was sprayed with bullets; his driver Mohammad Mustafa was killed in the hail of bullets. Rumi suffered minor injuries but his security guard Anwar Hussain, hired as protection after Rumi's name appeared on a Taliban hit list, received serious gunshot wounds and was paralysed.

The following month, on 19 April, the well-known TV anchor Hamid Mir narrowly escaped an assassination attempt that his relatives blamed on the ISI, Pakistan's intelligence service. Mir was shot at in Karachi city; six bullets entered his body and two still remain embedded in his abdomen and right thigh. The ISI denied any involvement.

Like Shahzad, both Mir and Rumi covered politically-controversial subjects in their TV shows, ranging from exposing military abuses in Balochistan, to violence by religious extremists in Pakistan.

Over a year later, justice remains as elusive as ever. Six men were arrested in connection with the

attack on Rumi, but to date, no one has been tried for either attempted murder, or the killing of Rumi's driver Mohammad Mustafa. A commission of inquiry was held shortly after the attack on Mir; the commission was due to release its report within three weeks, but one year on, it has yet to be published. A similar commission of inquiry into the killing of Asia Times Correspondent, Saleem Shahzad, whose body was found dumped in the outskirts of Mandibaha-ud-Din village in Punjab province on 31 May 2011, has proved equally ineffectual, and the government has failed to re-open the criminal investigation into his case, as promised by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

The month Mir was attacked the Prime Minister made a number of pledges to address the dire situation for journalists, including the creation of a prosecutor's office at the federal and provincial level tasked with investigating attacks on journalists. But the government has not made good on these promises and has failed to implement any meaningful practical measures to protect Pakistan's media community.

With these and other attacks the space for media freedom has shrunk even further in the country. Several journalists have told Amnesty International that they self-censor and cannot freely report as much as they would like, fearing reprisals from powerful groups or individuals whom they criticise. In an interview with the media rights organisation, Committee to Protect Journalists, Hamid Mir stated that even a large broadcaster like GEO TV has become more circumspect in the subject matter it broadcasts, no longer covering sensitive political topics as frequently as it used to.

Declan Walsh, the New York Times reporter, who was expelled from the country in May 2013 remains barred from entering, despite promises by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to look into the matter on at least three occasions. His expulsion is another example of the price reporters pay when they cross "red lines". According to Walsh, the military was angered by his reporting on a range of sensitive political and human rights topics, including the military's alleged role in the enforced disappearances and extrajudicial executions of Baloch separatists, its relationship with the CIA, and the workings of the US drone programme.

Amnesty International reiterates its call on the government to step up efforts and investigate all cases of threats and attacks against journalists to determine culpability and bring those responsible to justice. As a crucial first step, the government should investigate its own military and intelligence agencies and ensure that those responsible for human rights violations against journalists are brought to justice. This will send a powerful signal to those who target journalists that they can no longer have free rein.

The government should also fully implement its March 2014 pledges to improve protection of journalists, including the creation of an office of the public prosecutor at the federal and provincial levels tasked with investigating attacks against journalists.

Media enterprises, whether Pakistani or international, must show greater responsibility for the safety of their staff. Media owners, along with their editorial management teams, must demonstrate due diligence and provide adequate insurance, training, protection and resources, to all their reporters, whether contractor or stringer, to prevent and mitigate the risks they face.

As part of a free and independent press, journalists play a vital role in promoting the right to freedom of expression. Ensuring that journalists are able to undertake their activity free from harassment and attack is also an essential cornerstone in the promotion of human rights in Pakistan.

It is an appalling indictment of successive governments that in the last two decades, in only two cases of killings of journalists have there been any prosecutions where suspected perpetrators have been brought to trial: Wall Street Journal journalist Daniel Pearl in 2002 and Wali Khan Babar in 2014. The failure to bring attackers to justice allows attacks against journalists to continue unabated and effectively sends a signal that any individual or group with the means and intent can literally get away with murder.

The case of Shahzad and all other journalists slain as a result of their reporting must be addressed. Amnesty International and other human rights organisations have been consistently calling for zero-tolerance to impunity for attacks on the media. We call on the Sharif government to ensure that all suspected perpetrators are brought to justice in fair trials - without recourse to the death penalty - regardless of whether they are linked to powerful actors like the military, police or intelligence officials, armed groups or political parties.