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## **Afghanistan: Freedom of expression faces increasing threats**

Freedom of expression in Afghanistan faces increasing threats from the government as well as anti-government forces, Amnesty International warned today.

“The Afghan government should show that it can and will protect and support journalists, especially with presidential and parliamentary elections coming up in the next few months,” said Sam Zarifi, Amnesty International’s Asia-Pacific director.

Journalists and media workers in Afghanistan are now vulnerable to violence and intimidation by state and non-state actors.

Journalist Jawed “Jojo” Ahmed was shot while he was driving in the southern city of Kandahar. Ahmed, who worked extensively with international media, had been detained by US forces in Bagram Air Force Base for just under a year on October 2007. Nobody had claimed responsibility for the assassination although the Taliban’s spokesperson denied the group’s involvement.

Amnesty International learnt on Monday that the Supreme Court, on 11 February 2009, secretly upheld the 20-year prison sentence handed down to student and journalist Perwiz Kambakhsh on blasphemy charges.

Kambakhsh’s lawyer, Mr Mohammad Afzal Nooristani, Kambakhsh’s attorney was not present at the Supreme Court hearing.

President Karzai condemned Ahmed’s killing as “barbaric” and blamed it on the Taliban , but said it “cannot sabotage the move toward democracy and freedom of press in Afghanistan.”

“If President Karzai is serious about defending free expression in Afghanistan, he should immediately and unconditionally pardon Kambakhsh,” said Zarifi. “The Afghan government should show its commitment to maintaining law and order and extending the rule of law by prosecuting people facing credible allegations of serious human rights abuses and engaging in criminal enterprises, including those holding high positions in the government.”

Kambakhsh’s lawyer, Mr Nooristani told Amnesty International that he had learnt by chance that the Supreme Court had already ruled on the case when he went to the Supreme Court on Saturday 7 March to deliver his defence statement. A court official refused him permission to enter the Court or speak with the judges. He was told that the case was closed and that the Court of Appeal’s judgment of 21 October 2008 had been upheld.

Kambakhsh was sentenced to death for blasphemy in January 2008. He was convicted of downloading

material from the internet that questioned the condition of women in Islam, adding some commentary and distributing it at Balkh University. He denies all this, saying that he had been coerced into making a "confession". The death sentence was quashed on 21 October 2008 by a Court of Appeal in Kabul and replaced with a 20-year prison term. The case was then referred to the Supreme Court.

“Human rights and putting an end to repressive policies under the Taleban were often touted as the justification for international intervention. Foreign governments who provide military assistance and aid to Afghanistan therefore should help ensure that human rights of Afghan people are upheld,” said Sam Zarifi.