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Pakistan: still no justice a year on from journalist's killing

A year on from the abduction and assassination of reporter Saleem Shahzad, Pakistan must take urgent steps to bring his killers to justice and properly investigate claims of intimidation against journalists including by intelligence services, Amnesty International said.

“Shahzad’s killing last year highlighted the perils faced by journalists in Pakistan,” said Polly Truscott, South Asia director at Amnesty International.

“Pakistan remains one of the most dangerous countries for media workers with at least three journalists killed in the past five months. Last year at least six lost their lives.”

Just two days prior to his abduction in Islamabad on 29 May 2011, Shahzad published an article about an attack at a Pakistan Naval base.

He alleged Navy personnel sympathetic to al-Qaida had facilitated the attack. On 31 May, his body was found several kilometres outside Islamabad showing signs of torture.

In October 2010, Shahzad had told colleagues that in a meeting with Inter-Services Intelligence agency’s (ISI) media wing, he felt he had been threatened, because of his reporting on al-Qaida infiltration into Pakistan’s armed forces.

The ISI is the premier intelligence service of Pakistan’s armed forces.

In its report published in January this year, a government inquiry into Shahzad’s murder said it was unable to identify his killers. It speculated that any of a number of state, non-state or foreign actors, including al-Qaida or the Taliban, could have been responsible.

Some journalists testified to receiving threats from the ISI, including the same ISI officials implicated by Shahzad.

The inquiry also revealed a trail of missing evidence that could have helped identify the perpetrators, including Shahzad’s mobile phone log, the vehicle he had been abducted from, and footage from the security cameras across Islamabad, including near his home.

Not a single witness to his abduction came forward, even though the route from Shahzad’s home to a TV station where he had been due to conduct an interview passed through several police checkpoints.

“There was a sophisticated, well-organised attempt by Shahzad’s killers to cover their tracks - all the more reason why Pakistan’s intelligence services, and especially the ISI, must be thoroughly investigated,” said Truscott.

The inquiry had criticised police for failing to question adequately the ISI about Shahzad. Though the

panel itself allowed the ISI representatives to submit prepared statements, and subjected them to limited questioning.

“No government official should be above the law and they should be subjected to proper scrutiny whether the allegation of corruption by civil authorities or abductions by the intelligence services,” said Truscott.

Amnesty International has documented attacks on journalists in Pakistan by the Taleban and al-Qaida, political parties, criminal gangs and security forces with the failure to prosecute fostering a climate of impunity.

“Pakistan must bring all perpetrators to justice in trials that meet international fair trial standards, without recourse to the death penalty,” Truscott added.

“Moreover Amnesty International has called on the authorities to uphold internationally recognised human rights protections such as such as the right to information, freedom of speech, and right to life that are also enshrined in the Pakistan Constitution.”