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Pakistan: authorities must tackle threats to journalists

Authorities in Pakistan must ensure journalists and media workers are given adequate protection to carry out their jobs without fearing for their lives, Amnesty International said today after a reporter was shot dead in Balochistan province on Sunday and the kidnapping of another in North Waziristan tribal agency last Thursday.

Many journalists and media workers face threats and attacks in Pakistan, particularly when reporting on violence involving the country's security forces, political groups or insurgents. At least six journalists have been killed since January 2011. In May investigative reporter Saleem Shahzad was found dead in a remote part of Punjab province, his body showing signs of torture, only days after disappearing from outside his Islamabad house. Last year Shahzad notified colleagues that he feared for his life because of reports he filed alleging Al Qaeda infiltration of Pakistan's armed forces.

Amnesty International has been encouraged by the government-established commission into the Shahzad killing which has received testimony from several media professionals as well as military and civilian intelligence agents. However, it remains to be seen if authorities will thoroughly investigate Pakistan's powerful and largely unaccountable intelligence agencies.

On Sunday, August 14, journalist Munir Ahmed Shakir was shot dead by unknown assailants in Khuzdar, Balochistan, a region of the country where allegations of human rights violations, like enforced disappearance and extra-judicial execution, are regularly received by Amnesty International. Colleagues of Mr Shakir claim his killing was aimed at discouraging journalists from reporting on the dire human rights situation in the area.

Last Thursday, August 11, journalist Rehmatullah Dawar was abducted by unknown men as he shopped for groceries in his home town of Miran Shah in North Waziristan. An experienced journalist with a reputation for fair and balanced coverage, Dawar was one of the few to report on the ongoing conflict between the Taliban and international forces in North Waziristan tribal agency.

No one has claimed responsibility for Dawar's abduction and his whereabouts remains unknown. But it is feared he may have been abducted by Pakistan security forces or local Taliban who have been implicated in abductions and extra-judicial executions during military operations in the country's north-west.

Journalists from the Tribal Union of Journalists, of which Dawar was Vice President, say they are scared for their future and feel helpless because they cannot protest the kidnap of their colleague out of fear of reprisal from the military and the Taliban.

Amnesty International calls upon Pakistan authorities to ensure a prompt and thorough investigation into the circumstances around the killing or abuse of journalists, and bring those responsible to justice in fair trials that are consistent with internationally recognised standards of human rights. At a time when ordinary Pakistanis are increasingly concerned with the law and order situation in their country, Pakistan's political parties and authorities must send the message that perpetrators of human rights violations are not above the law.