

## **Asia: Freedom of expression at risk**

*Journalists across the world are being targeted by governments for carrying out their legitimate investigative reporting work, Amnesty International said today, ahead of World Press Freedom Day (May 3).*

*"Journalists have been harassed, tortured, and even killed for reporting the news, and their work is often censored. Democracies and authoritarian regimes have neglected to protect the right to freedom of expression," the organization said.*

*Across the Asia Pacific region, Amnesty International has recorded dozens of cases of human rights abuses against journalists in recent years.*

*In Myanmar, the media is strictly controlled by the military authorities, and the law imposes draconian restrictions on the right to freedom of expression. Journalists, writers and editors are among the more than 1800 political prisoners currently held in the country's prisons.*

*Seventy-one year old journalist U Win Tin is serving a 20 year sentence in Insein Prison, Yangon. Initially arrested during the military authorities' 1989 crackdown for allegedly urging the opposition party, the National League for Democracy to adopt a civil disobedience campaign, he has been behind bars since then, and is in failing health.*

*In 1996, U Win Tin was accused of passing on information about prison conditions to the United Nations. Together with a group of other men, he was held in tiny military dog cells, made to sleep on cold concrete floors and denied visits from his family. U Win Tin is suffering*

from a heart condition and spondylitis (inflammation of the vertebrae). Amnesty International is calling for his immediate release.

In countries where there is armed conflict journalists are often on the frontline, and risk being caught in the crossfire, or being targeted for their reporting, captured, tortured and "disappeared".

During the years of armed conflict in Sri Lanka, journalists have been subjected not only to censorship from the government, but to attacks from both the security forces, and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Mylvaganam Nimalrajan, a correspondent for several newspapers and international agencies, was killed in his home in Jaffna on 20 October 2000 allegedly by members of the Eelam People's Democratic Party, allied to the security forces. Before he was killed, he had reported allegations of vote-rigging and threats during the October elections.

In the state of Jammu and Kashmir, India, journalist Surinder Oberoi was one of the first on the scene at a bomb attack near his office in Srinagar in January 2001. When Special Operations Group Police arrived, they accused him of being there quickly because "journalists are hand in glove with the militants". The Superintendent of Police allegedly threatened to kill Mr Oberoi, and joined three other police beating him with rifles. He has since been asked by these same policemen to withdraw his official complaint of ill-treatment.

The rise of "new media" through the use of Internet technology and the opportunities this presents to journalists to disseminate information to a global audience is seen as a threat by repressive governments.

In China, Huang Qi founded a website in June 1999. Postings on the site increasingly drew attention to alleged corruption and human

rights violations. A year after he set up the site, Huang Qi was detained on charges of subversion. At the opening hearing of his trial in February 2001, Huang Qi fainted, and the proceedings were postponed. Huang Qi's wife claims he has been beaten in detention, has lost a tooth, has a scar on his head and suffers from pain in his testicles. Huang's wife is denied permission to see him and his lawyer has difficulty visiting him.

On the eve of World Press Freedom Day, Amnesty International is calling on governments across the Asia-Pacific region to make a public commitment to upholding the right to freedom of expression, and to guarantee protection for journalists.

"Journalism is a profession, not a criminal offence," Amnesty International said. "Governments must face up to their responsibilities and protect the right to freedom of expression."

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