

Reporters Without Borders

<http://www.rsf.org/pakistan-intelligence-agency-choking-under-17-02-2012,41902.html>

Asia - Pakistan

Shameful statement

Intelligence agency choking under heaps of blame in murder of journalist Saleem Shahzad

17 February 2012

Reporters Without Borders is outraged by the comments by Inter-Services Public Relations, the media relations service of the Pakistani military, attacking Human Rights Watch over its response to the report of a commission that investigated the murder of the journalist **Syed Saleem Shahzad** last May.

The criticism was contained in a [press statement](#) issued yesterday by the ISPR against the backdrop of a long-term deterioration in the climate for media workers in Pakistan, who find themselves caught between the Taliban and the security forces.

"It is unacceptable that such a respected organization is the target of attacks by the main suspect in the murder of Saleem Shahzad," the press freedom organization said.

"These comments, which constitute an outright denial of justice by the ISI, deserve to be refuted point by point. They show that the intelligence service has no intention of taking the inquiry commission's recommendations into consideration, and also takes to task the media as a whole as well as the organisations that defend it.

"The Inter Service Intelligence is not the only threat to the media in Pakistan, but it is known to have been implicated in many cases of unauthorized detention and threats against journalists.

"In the light of information gathered by the commission, the Islamabad government must take meaningful steps to limit the disastrous impact the government agency has on freedom of the press and freedom of information."

Shahzad's body was [found in his car](#) on May 31 last year. The *Asia Times* investigative reporter, who wrote about extremism and al Qaeda, had been missing for two days.

Pakistani journalists and several non-governmental organizations quickly suspected the ISI. Some sources close to the journalist said he had previously reported receiving warnings from security agencies because of his reports.

On 10 January this year, the inquiry commission set up to shed light on the journalist's kidnapping and murder submitted its report to the government.

Reporters Without Borders responds to the ISPR press statement point-by-point:

1)

ISPR: "Some relevant reference can be found in the statement of Saleem Shehzad's very close friend Mr **Zafar Mehmood Sheikh** on pages 30 to 35"

Reporters Without Borders: The statement by the journalist Zafar Mehmood Sheikh, a friend of Shahzad's, refers to comments by another journalist, **Hamid Mir**, that according to "some

circumstantial evidence and information”, he believed Shahzad to have been kidnapped and killed by a government security agency, from which he himself had also [received threats](#).

The journalist mentioned the possible involvement of a foreign backer, a reference to the United States which was reported to have used “local operatives” to kill al Qaeda member Ilyas Kashmiri. The operatives were supposed to have identified Shahzad as the only source, or at least the one in the best position, who could provide information about Kashmiri.

According to this theory, presented as a more credible scenario than the threats he reported and based on the supposition that Shahzad had crucial information for the operation that led to Kashmiri’s death, the operatives would have had to torture the journalist to obtain it.

This scenario directly contradicts the comments of the journalist **Naseem Zehra**, who said Shahzad’s contacts included American diplomats.

2)

ISPR: “Judicial Commission’s remarks about ISI’s compliance and detailed testimony on pages 58, 59 and 66” ;

Commission report, page 59 (ISI statement): “He (Shahzad) had falsely quoted an unnamed senior intelligence officer” ;

page 60 (ISI statement): “ISI is operating under a tense environment and is engaged in multiple complex challenges, both internal and external and it is in order to keep the ISI from meeting these challenges that the ISI is often dragged into these controversies.” ;

page 63 (ISI statement): “allegations against the armed forces of Pakistan and the ISI are part of a bigger game which is aimed at destabilizing the Pakistani state.” ;

page 65 (ISI statement): “Though I do not have any concrete evidence” ;

page 65 (Commission report on ISIS statement): “no explanation was given for this” ;

page 65 (Commission report on ISIS statement): “I do not remember the exact date of this meeting” ;

page 68 (statement by Admiral Adnan Nazir): “I cannot make comment about the writings of Saleem Shahzad about Ilyas Kashmiri, but I have [a] feeling and perception” ;

page 68 (Commission report on statement by Admiral Adnan Nazir): “As this witness was not able to give any plausible explanation... the witness was re-called” ;

page 103 (Commission report on statement by Admiral Adnan Nazir): “But as mentioned earlier, the gentleman though given chances twice has not come out with satisfactory explanation.”

Reporters Without Borders: Besides the fact that the ISI was represented for the most part by a lower-ranking officer than would be expected for a matter of such importance, several of the ISI’s statements were described as vague or inadequate by the commission, reflecting a reluctance to cooperate on the part of the intelligence service.

3)

ISPR : “regarding none of the witnesses / documents being able to ‘point a finger towards anyone’ on page 86” ;

Commission report, page 85: “DIRECT EVIDENCE: ‘A’ saw ‘B’ committing the murder of ‘C’, the testimony of ‘A’ about this incident is direct evidence.” ;

Page 98: “About the security check point, nothing can be held with certainty, as to how, when (what time) and which of such points were evaded as it is not known when and wherefrom the culprits passed by taking Saleem and his car out of Islamabad”

Reporters Without Borders: The statement on page 86 of the report is really about eyewitnesses to the kidnapping of Shahzad. Those who spoke to the commission are incorrectly described as “witnesses” since it has been established that no one saw the abduction.

It is completely wrong to affirm that none of those who were interviewed was able to point the finger at those behind Shahzad's murder. Those interviewed by the commission expressed certainty on several occasions that the ISI was involved.

As the journalist Naseem Zehra points out on page 34, the complete lack of CCTV footage, even from security checkpoints, is disturbing, which suggests a sophisticated strategy to avoid video surveillance, not how terrorist and extremist groups operate. Such organizations usually claim responsibility for their attacks, either explicitly or, as a deterrent, by a trademark sign in the way they carry out their operations.

4)

ISPR: "about the unsubstantiated accusations of heavy handedness against journalists and the Commission's remarks on page 89." ;

Commission report, page 89: "But the question is how many of such persons have been eliminated by the ISI and what is the proof in this behalf."

Reporters Without Borders: As the commission points out, the fact that no journalists testified is a clear sign of media workers' reluctance to expose the activities of the ISI.

Since the commission encouraged personal accounts of ISI involvement, whether backed up by material evidence or not, what reason other than the fear of reprisals would explain their unwillingness to testify?

Reporters Without Borders recalls that, even in the absence of conclusive evidence to the inquiry, the organization has for many years been aware of the violence attributed to the ISI.

Between 1999 and 2006, the organization recorded [21 cases of kidnapping](#) by the intelligence agency. Between March and June 2006, *Geo TV* correspondent **Mukesh Rupeta** and assistant cameraman **Sanjay Kumar** spent more than three months in secret detention after being abducted by the security services. On their release, both showed signs of having been tortured.

In view of the above comments and information gathered by Reporters Without Borders, the organization declares:

- The suspicions against the ISI, far from being groundless, are shared by many Pakistani journalists and national and international organizations that protect them and campaign for human rights.
- The ISI has failed to show any willingness to co-operate with the inquiry commission.
- Reporters Without Borders is an independent organization which does not take part in smear campaigns via the media.
- The recommendations of the commission's report must be put into practice by the Pakistani government, which must do all it can to call a halt to attacks on media workers and end the impunity enjoyed by those behind them.

Pakistan is ranked 151st out of 179 countries in the world [press freedom index](#) compiled by Reporters Without Borders.
