



Fact-finding visit by Reporters Without Borders to Swat “valley of fear”

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Reporters Without Borders - Asia Desk
47, rue Vivienne - 75002 Paris
Tel : (33) 1 44 83 84 84 - Fax : (33) 1 45 23 11 51
E-mail : asia@rsf.org
Web : www.rsf.org

Reporters Without Borders is alarmed about the impact that the imposition of the Sharia (Islamic law) in Pakistan’s northern Swat valley is having on press freedom. Following a fact-finding visit, the press freedom organisation urges both the authorities – federal and provincial – and Taliban leaders to guarantee the freedom and safety of journalists in the region.

“The growing use of violence that culminated in reporter Mosa Khankhel’s murder in February is now compounded by a climate of fear and self-censorship that has turned the Swat valley into one of the world’s most dangerous places for journalists,” Reporters Without Borders said. “It would be deplorable if Taliban groups used enforcement of the Sharia to restrict the freedom of expression of its inhabitants, including journalists, even more.”

The fear imposed by the Taliban, including Maulana (religious leader) Qazi Fazlullah and his illegal radio broadcasts, is directly affecting free expression. The terror has increased the tendency of journalists to censor themselves. Women’s rights and abuses committed by Maulana Fazlullah’s followers are being covered less and less by the local press.

Maulana Sufi Muhammad, the founder of the Tehreek Nifaz-e-Shariah Muhammadi (Movement for the Enforcement of the Prophet Muhammad’s Sharia – TNSM), told Reporters Without Borders that he believed in press freedom. He nonetheless also claimed that the Sharia forbids discussing past events, including the actions of Taliban activists.

The Taliban are imposing their law in the region, forbidding women to go out unaccompanied and unveiled, and have destroyed more than 100 schools for girls. They also forbid any criticism of Islam and punish those who listen to music or sell DVDs.

The 16 February accord allowing Islamic courts and enforcement of the Sharia in the Swat valley in return for an end to fighting by the militants has restored a semblance of stability but has already had a negative impact on press freedom. “Independent journalism is going to be more and more difficult,” a TV

reporter said. “Who is going to protect me from the Taliban militants operating openly in the towns and villages? We are no longer going to be able to do independent reporting on the activities of the Taliban.”



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Demonstration by Khyber Union of Journalists

The media have been badly scarred by the two years of fighting, in which journalists have been caught in the crossfire between the army and the Taliban. Both sides have prevented the press from talking about the atrocities that have been committed in the name of enforcement of the Sharia or the fight against terrorism.

Sharia against press freedom?

Local journalists have been voicing concern for their freedom and safety since last month’s pact. While most of them welcome the end of the fighting, they are aware of their vulnerability. “It will be hard for independent journalism to survive under Islamic laws,” said the president of the local press club. “For example, will cases of defamation be tried? The coming period is likely to be much more dangerous for professional journalists.”

The editor of the local newspaper *Chand* said: “We will have to censor ourselves to survive. Both sides have already warned us to avoid sensationalism in order not to jeopardise the peace accord.”

Onset of armed clashes two years ago ended calm in Swat valley

An independent principality until 1969, the Swat valley is a mountainous region in North-West Frontier Province, north of Peshawar. It

often used to be called the “Switzerland of Pakistan” because of its natural beauty. With about 1.2 million inhabitants, it is a special area that comes under the Provincially Administrated Tribal Areas (PATA).



Swat regional newspapers

The Swat valley has six regional newspapers: *Chand*, *Shamal*, *Salam*, *Khabarkar*, *Azadi* and *Awaz-e-Swat*. National dailies are also distributed there. The head of a distribution company told Reporters Without Borders that newspaper sales were much higher than in all the neighbouring districts. The daily *Shamal* has a print run of 8,000 copies. *Azadi* prints at least 5,000 copies a day. Thanks to past investment, the rates of literacy and access to health are quite high.

Cable television is also very popular in Swat. The main city, Mingora, had three cable TV operators offering many Pakistani and international stations.

The dynamism of the press explains the existence of a press club that has been very active since 1985. Thanks to government help, a building constructed in 2000 offers members telecommunication services and a modern conference room.



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Maulana Sufi Muhammad

The outlawed TNSM, the fundamentalist movement led by Maulana Muhammad that has been calling for enforcement of the Sharia in the valley for decades, turned to armed struggle in 1994. Benazir Bhutto's government had already agreed to adoption

of the Sharia in the neighbouring Malakand region.

The TNSM used the US presence in Afghanistan to relaunch its calls for jihad and managed to mobilise about 10,000 combatants to go and fight against the “infidels.” Maulana Muhammad was arrested on the Afghan border in December 2001 while pulling back into Pakistan.

The situation deteriorated with the arrival on the scene of Maulana Fazlullah, Maulana Muhammad's son-in-law, in 2007. Using FM transmitters illegally installed in the valley, Fazlullah urged the population to adhere strictly to the Sharia. Growing in influence, his “Mullah Radio,” as it was dubbed by the press, won the support of both the Pakistani Taliban and foreign jihadists. In response to the growing violence, the army intervened in the Swat Valley in mid-2007. Hundreds of soldiers, Taliban and civilians, including three journalists, died in the ensuing fighting.



DR
Maulana Fazlullah

The accord signed by the provincial authorities and the TNSM on 16 February is supposed to restore peace in exchange for enforcement of the Sharia. Maulana Muhammad and the government negotiated the deal with a more moderate cleric acting as mediator, while Maulana Fazlullah agreed to a ceasefire.

Enforcement of the Sharia is having a negative impact on the free flow of information. Three cable TV operators have been forced to close as a result of an order issued by the Taliban in mid-2008. The insurgents had no qualms about bombing the offices of one of the operators, Ali Cable Network, in Kabal. “Now there is no longer any cable service available in the Swat valley,” said Naveed Cable Network owner Naveed Khan. As a result, the population has to make do with three state-owned terrestrial TV stations.

The Taliban have also banned the sale of satellite dishes, DVDs and CDs. “We have removed the TV set from the living room and we always keep the volume as low as possible, as

they can come and smash your set and insult your family if they hear the sound of a television,” a resident said, referring to the Taliban.

Des journalistes menacés de tous côtés

Both the army and the Taliban deny responsibility for attacks on the press, but the accounts provided by journalists in the Swat valley indicate that both sides have been guilty of serious press freedom violations.



Shamal editor
Ghulam Farooq

““We have been working in very difficult circumstances for two years,” said Ghulam Farooq, the editor of *Shamal*, the valley’s most widely read daily. “The Taliban commanders were furious at being described as rebels rather than mujahideen.

And the soldiers wanted the media on their side in the battle against the insurgents.”

Farooq said he has been threatened many times, and that each side tries to influence his choice of words. “The Taliban don’t like the term suicide bomber,” he said. “They prefer *fidayee*, which means sacrifice of one’s life in Urdu. But the military get angry if we use the word *fidayee*.”

The Taliban advance into Mingora has forced four newspapers – *Khabarkar*, *Azadi*, *Chand* and *Awaz-e-Swat* – to leave the city. *Chand*’s editor, Rashid Iqbal, moved his operation to Peshawar. “Unidentified individuals threatened us with reprisals if we did not close our offices by 9 pm,” he said. “It was impossible to put the paper to bed so early, so we had to leave.”

Covering the fighting has been particularly dangerous for local journalists. Shireen Zada of *Express News TV* said he came under fire at least 30 times during the two years of fighting. Nowadays he carries a pistol with him, while the TV station’s transmission truck has an armed guard.



An Express News TV crew

Violence and murders



Geo News reporter
Mosa Khankhel

Mosa Khankhel, a 28-year-old Swat valley reporter for the TV station *Geo News* and the newspaper *The News*, was killed on 18 February while reporting on the effects of the peace accord reached two days

earlier. He was found shot and with his throat cut a few hours after being kidnapped during a “peace march” by Maulana Muhammad’s followers. One of his colleagues told Reporters Without Borders his body was found near Matta, where the march took place. No group has claimed responsibility for his murder.

When interviewed by Reporters Without Borders, his brother, Essa Khan, called for an “independent investigation by international organisations” into the murder. Asked who might have killed him, Khan replied: “I cannot say who was responsible. You know why.”

Reporters Without Borders urges the Pakistani government to assign more personnel to the investigation into Khankhel’s murder. The organisation is astonished that the police have not yet asked his brother what information he has about it.

Qari Muhammad Shoab, a reporter with the newspaper *Khabarkar*, was shot dead by soldiers while driving home with a member of his family on 8 November. “We were fired on when we got to the Airport Road,” the relative said. “We were not given



Qari Muhammad Shoab

any signal to stop.” The army insisted that

Shoaib was given several orders to stop by the soldiers, who were patrolling the area because of a suicide bombing threat. In a statement, the army said: “Warning shots were fired but the vehicle did not stop so the security forces opened fire.” Senior army officers in Mingora expressed regret for the incident and promised to compensate the family.

Mingora-based journalists told Reporters Without Borders they were convinced that the soldiers deliberately shot Shoaib. “If they had wanted to stop the vehicle, they could have shot at the tyres,” one said.

Reporter Abdul Aziz, 33, of the newspaper *Azadi* was killed in August during an air-strike by government forces on a Taliban camp in Peochar where he was being held against his will. Aziz had gone there a few days earlier to talk to Taliban leaders although “his name was on the Taliban list of people to be killed because he was a brave journalist who criticised Islamist militants,” said Mumtaz Buneri of *Azadi*.

Express News TV reporter Shireen Zada’s sister was killed inside their home in Mingora last November by shots apparently fired by military personnel. The security forces denied any role in the incident but Zada is convinced his home was deliberately targeted. “The shots went straight through the front door and killed my sister,” he told Reporters Without Borders. “They could not have been stray bullets.”

Taliban impose terror



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Taliban website

The Taliban use extremely brutal methods to inspire fear in the civilian population, including journalists. As they advanced along the valley, they left a trail of bodies of “traitors” identifiable by the fact that their heads had been cut off or their throats slit. The list of people to be punished or killed for not respecting the Sharia were announced in the evening by the illegal FM radio stations, especially Maulana Fazlullah’s.



Preparing a newspaper issue in Mingora

The climate of terror induces the local press to publish the statements put out by the Taliban and their allies. “The local media gave prominent space to what the insurgents had to say for the obvious reason that they were terrorised,” a civil society representative in Mingora said. A Press Information Department official in Peshawar said: “At the height of the terror imposed by the Taliban, the local media fell under their influence because it became impossible to do balanced reporting. Unfortunately, the Taliban became victims in the eyes of the public.”

A local newspaper editor confirmed that orders received in writing from the Taliban, including orders not to refer to them as militants, forced journalists to change their terminology and to censor themselves.

Reporters Without Borders witnessed a case of self-censorship resulting from fear of the Taliban. The staff of a local newspaper were discussing an incident in a Mingora market on 8 March in which a bearded man, clearly a Taliban, went up to two women standing outside a clothes shop and asked: “Which of you two wants to be beheaded first?” For fear of reprisals, the newspaper decided not to mention it although, according to local journalists, it would have been a front-page story just a

few months earlier. “We censor ourselves much more than before, said Hameedullah Khan, the Mingora correspondent of the daily newspaper *Dawn*, whose home was destroyed.

Journalists also censor themselves to avoid being accused of sabotaging the peace process. “We would be accused of jeopardising peace if we reported incidents that were violations of the accord,” a *Dawn* correspondent said. “There are serious violations taking place but we have said nothing.”



Staff of a newspaper based in Mingora

The terror has also had serious financial consequences for the local media. The government withdrew advertising from newspapers that published the announcements of local civil servants saying they were resigning after being threatened with execution by the Taliban if they continued to work for the government. “The federal government ordered the suspension of state advertising in our newspapers because it was furious about these announcements,” said *Shamal's* editor.

The local media were above all hit by the loss of advertising resulting from the collapse of tourism and private sector investment. The press club is suffering a financial crisis for similar reasons. “Almost no one is renting our hall to hold press conferences any more, it is a disaster,” the club’s president, Salahuddin Khan, told Reporters Without Borders.

The terror is now targeting not only the press but also the judiciary, with the Taliban refusing to let regular judges hear cases in Swat’s courts.

Taliban media



Threatening message on journalist’s mobile phone

The use of clandestine FM radio stations has helped the Taliban not only to recruit followers but also to impose fear throughout the valley. The insurgents also use mobile phones and propaganda CDs to incite hatred of their opponents and the armed forces.

Maulana Fazlullah, who refuses to be photographed or filmed, addresses the population every week on his FM radio station. “Residents keep an ear glued to the transistor when he speaks not out of love but out of fear of what he will announce,” a Peshawar-based journalist said. The Taliban use their radio stations to issue decrees against individuals or organisations and summon people before their courts to answer for crimes under the Sharia. The bodies of several residents who failed to respond to a radio summons to appear before the Taliban were later found decapitated on the streets.

“Yes, I regularly listen to the Taliban radio stations in case a decree is issued against me,” said a businessman with a relative who was killed for failing to appear before an Islamic court.



Taliban cassette

After Maulana Fazlullah delivers his speeches on the radio, they are distributed in the form of audio cassettes or CDs in the valley’s markets. The Taliban also distribute DVDs showing bodies with the heads cut off or the throats slit, or air-force planes bombarding their positions. All this is accompanied by calls to jihad against the “infidels.”

People interviewed by Reporters Without Borders complained of the government’s failure to jam the illegal Taliban radio stations. “It has let terror be imposed,” a Swat resident said.