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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Written statement* submitted by Association Un Enfant Un Cartable Du Burkina Faso, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[30 January 2024]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



Press Freedom Under Attack in Pakistan

The Pakistan Press Foundation quotes a precept from a speech of the founder of Pakistan, Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah stating, “I believe that the press and media must be free of fear.” But unfortunately, the press in Pakistan, both print and electronic, remained unable to achieve this objective. It either faced political victimisation or has been used as a tool for political benefits. Under various civil and military governments, this practice continued which not only affected the neutrality of the press but also hindered its struggle towards achieving freedom in true sense. Furthermore, according to the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), Pakistan is the fifth most dangerous country for journalists to practise their profession.

Successive governments in Pakistan have inflicted the press with violence, threats and economic and social penalties as pressure tactics for their political gains. unofficial norms backed up by informal pressure restrict criticism of the Pakistan Army.

In August 2023, the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (Pemra) (Amendment) Bill, 2023 was approved. On the last day of its tenure on August 9, the Shehbaz Sharif-led government had managed to get the bill passed from both houses of Parliament after some last-minute changes. While it appears to be aimed at streamlining the procedures to register and monitor ratings of TV channels as well as elaborating on the definitions of disinformation and misinformation, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) as well as journalists’ bodies had expressed concerns that the law could be misused and “may allow powerful groups or individuals to stonewall journalists seeking both sides of a story”. The fact is that privately owned media — especially local media are dependent on state sector ads and legal announcements for their funding, resulting in information ministries at the provincial and national levels threatening to withdraw advertising in order to influence editorial policy.

According to the annual World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders (RSF) published on May 3, 2023 Pakistan now ranks 150 out of 180 countries. In its country profile, the RSF said “under the guise of protecting journalism, Pakistani law is used to censor any criticism” of the powers that be and that the regulator Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (Pemra) “is concerned less with regulating the media sector than with regulating the content it publishes.” It also mentioned that media houses, even privately owned, “are dependent on state sector ads and legal announcements for their funding, resulting in information ministries at the provincial and national levels threatening to withdraw advertising in order to influence editorial policy”.

In a similar analysis, the ‘Pakistan Press Freedom Report’ prepared by the Freedom Network, the media rights organisation that tracks press freedom violations around the year released its latest annual report on 01 May 2023. The report notes that the country’s media environment became riskier and more violent in recent months. The data shows that press freedom violations jumped to 140 in 2022-23 from 86 in 2021-22, indicating an annual increase of around 63 per cent. The report makes an alarming revelation; allegedly the biggest single-source threat actor targeting the media was political parties, which were suspected by victim journalists or their families in 21 per cent of the 140 cases. Equally troublingly, state functionaries were a close second, with suspected involvement in 19 per cent of the total cases. Iqbal Khattak, the Executive Director of Freedom Network, says that, “attacks on independent journalism block access to essential information, which is especially damaging during the ongoing political and economic crises when the public needs reliable news to understand the issues and respond to them,”...“It is ironic that Pakistan in 2021 became the first country in Asia to legislate on safety of journalists but one and a half years later the federal and Sindh journalists’ safety laws have not helped a single journalist resulting in the increasing violence against them.”

The 2022 Freedom Index, released by a media advocacy group called Reporters Without Borders (RSF), also showed a general decline of press freedoms in Pakistan. Pakistan was 145th on the 2021 index and fell to 157th on a list of 180 countries in 2022. The report noted that despite changes in political power, “a recurring theme is apparent: political parties in opposition support press freedom but are first to restrict it when in power.” It claimed that the “coverage of military and intelligence agency interference in politics has become off limits for journalists.” The RSF report noted that since 1947, Pakistan has “oscillated between civil society’s quest for greater press freedom and the political and military elite’s constant reassertion of extensive control over the media.” It noted that “Pakistani law is used to censor any criticism of the government and the armed forces” under the guise of protecting journalism.

In Pakistan unprecedented pressure tactics are applied to editors, cloaked as ‘advice’— to drop certain stories, even specific quotes publicly uttered by elected officials; give a particular spin to news reports; and avoid some topics entirely. The modus operandi employed includes anything from a vicious smear campaigns, to physical violence, abductions and legal harassment on spurious charges, including treason.

Another very useful point of reference is the EU Election Observer Mission’s final report on the 2018 general election, which noted that Pakistani media’s “editorial policies were carefully calibrated to downplay issues relating to the army, state security structures and the judiciary”. In addition, it detected “concerted efforts to stifle the reporting environment”, and concluded that in such circumstances, “severe self-censorship was the safest way to continue publication”.

After Arshad Sharif, a Pakistani journalist, was shot and killed in Kajiado, Kenya, by local police on 23 October 2022 there was speculation on social media that he had been assassinated. The late journalist’s mother accused senior Pakistani intelligence officers of their involvement in the murder.

In August 2023, two journalists Ghulam Asghar Khand and Jan Mohammad Mahar from Sindh were killed a week apart by unidentified assailants. Targeted attacks across Sindh have laid bare a deeply flawed criminal justice system’s inability to take action against both the culprits and their handlers. This is a pattern that has been oft-repeated in Pakistan. It seems to be the case in the high-profile murder of journalist Arshad Sharif. Then there was investigative journalist Saleem Shahzad, whose body was found a day after his disappearance from Islamabad in May 2011. There has been little to no headway into either of the cases. Among the unsolved cases are those of Shan Dahar, the bureau chief of a local TV station in Larkana, who met his tragic end in 2014; Aziz Memon, killed in 2020 in Naushahro Feroze; Mushtaq Khand, murdered in the line of duty in 2018 in Khairpur Mir’s; Ajay Lalwani, a local reporter who lost his life in Sukkur; Ali Sher Rajpur, President of a Press Club; and Asghar Khand, who fell victim to an assailant’s rage in Khairpur Mir’s.

In a special report compiled after recording testimonies in various cities of the country, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) said journalists, including freelancers, had “painted a picture of a media under siege”. The report noted that “The military has quietly, but effectively, set restrictions on reporting: from barring access to regions ... to encouraging self-censorship through direct and indirect methods of intimidation, including calling editors to complain about coverage and even allegedly instigating violence against reporters,” alleged the CJP, an independent organisation working to promote press freedom worldwide.

Pakistan Is One Of The Most Dangerous Countries For Journalists (thefridaytimes.com)

<https://thefridaytimes.com/09-Oct-2022/pakistan-is-one-of-the-most-dangerous-countries-for-journalists>

<https://rsf.org/en/country/pakistan>

Threats, Attacks Against Journalists Jump By More Than 60%, Reveals Freedom Network Annual Report - FNPK <https://www.fnpk.org/threats-attacks-against-journalists-jump-by-more-than-60-reveals-freedom-network-annual-report/>

Threats, Attacks Against Journalists Jump By More Than 60%, Reveals Freedom Network Annual Report - FNPk

Pakistan's standing on freedom index plummets - Newspaper - DAWN.COM

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1688205>

Slain Journalist Arshad Sharif's Mother Wants Gen Bajwa, DG ISI To Be Nominated In The FIR (thefridaytimes.com) <https://thefridaytimes.com/07-Dec-2022/slain-journalist-arshad-sharif-s-mother-wants-gen-bajwa-dg-isi-to-be-nominated-in-the-fir>