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Pakistan

Back to Swat: press freedom after the Taliban defeat

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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

Journalists have gradually returned to work in the northwestern Swat valley, where many of them were forced to go into exile or suspend operations in 2008 and 2009. "The situation has considerably changed from what it was some six months back," said Ghulam Farooq, the editor of the regional daily *Shamal*. In Mingora, the capital of the Swat district, newspapers are functioning and the press club has reopened. The public can watch cable TV again and reporters can move about the valley without too much risk.

"I no longer carry a pistol with me and neither does my guard," *Express News TV* bureau chief Shireen Zada said. "Previously, I had to get home before sunset, but now I am in the bazaar or office until late at night. You can imagine how different the situation is now."

This strategic region north of Islamabad underwent a great deal of turmoil from 2007 to 2009. The Taliban and their local supporters waged an offensive that led the federal government to agree to the imposition of the Sharia in February 2009 and to grant broad powers to the fundamentalists. But then, in May 2009, the army launched Operation Rah-e-Rast (Right Path) with the aim of reasserting its authority. More than 2 million people, including most journalists, fled the region to escape the violent clashes.

After fierce fighting, the federal government regained control of the valley in September. Clashes continue and the Taliban have vowed to take revenge but life is gradually returning to normal. After months of curfew, journalists are again doing investigative reporting in the field and local newspapers that were closed for months are again being published.

A Reporters Without Borders representative visited the valley in December to investigate the press freedom situation after the defeat of the Taliban. This report aims to update the information published in April 2009 in "Swat, valley of fear" (http://www.rsf.org/spip.php?page=article&id_article=30742).

Now that press freedom has risen again from the ashes in the Swat valley in the wake of the Taliban defeat, what kind of future can the local media hope to have? Do the Taliban, who have not left northwestern Pakistan, still pose a threat to reporters? Will the army, which the federal government has put in charge of the district, accept criticism?

This report also aims to alert the authorities to the fact that the crimes committed against journalists in the valley have still not been punished. One year after reporter Mosa Khankhel's murder on 18 February 2009 near Mingora, those responsible have yet to be identified. His brother told Reporters Without Borders that no official investigation is being carried out.

Finally, Reporters Without Borders calls on the authorities and the international community to provide financial and material aid to the local media, which were deprived of income for months because of the fighting.

Swat Timeline:

- **2007:** Taliban led by Maulana Fazlullah launch a new offensive in the Swat valley
- **Early 2008:** They take control of most of the district and impose a regime of terror
- **February 2009:** The fundamentalists and the government in Islamabad sign an agreement allowing enforcement of the Sharia throughout the Swat valley
- **May 2009:** Army counter-offensive aimed at retaking the district. Mass exodus of its inhabitants.
- **September 2009:** The Taliban are driven up into the mountains and the government recovers control of the valley. The February 2009 accord is rescinded.

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Swat no longer a valley of fear

Hitherto known for its scenery and appeal to tourists, the valley was transformed by the Taliban and the army. As a result of clashes, extra-judicial executions, arbitrary justice and deliberate use of terror, chaos took hold and journalists were caught in a trap between government troops and Taliban militants. Today, a degree of normality prevails again in the region, and the violence and terror have shifted to Peshawar and the Tribal Areas.

The army virtually closed the valley off to the press during its May offensive. The authorities refused to issue journalists with permits to circulate, and several local reporters were threatened by soldiers. Accused of carrying out extra-judicial executions, the army issued denials and pressured media not to cover the allegations in detail.

Swat press club chairman Salahuddin Khan is happy at the media's return to the district. Last May, he told Reporters Without Borders that the valley was a region that existed "without any media." Now he said: "Everybody can feel the change."



Shireen Zada of *Express News TV*, who was one of the last journalists to pull out of the valley in May, said: "We feel fine now and we hope the situation will get even better." He and his colleagues can again visit previously "no-go areas" such as Ghat Peochar and Shah Dhere where the Taliban held sway. "Now foreign journalists can even come and work in Swat," he added. "That was not the case six months ago."

Four regional newspapers, *Shamal*, *Salam*, *Chand* and *Awaz-e-Swat*, are again being produ-

ced from Mingora while two others, *Azadi* and *Khabarkar*, are on sale in the valley although they are still being printed in Islamabad. Cable TV service and Internet cafés are back, after being banned by the Taliban, and a boom in the sale of TV sets suggests that people no longer fear Taliban reprisals for the possession of "non-Islamic objects."

Many inhabitants hail the return of the "box of sins," as television was called by the Taliban. "Before, I did not dare have a TV set at home for fear of being punished," said Riffat Khan, who works for a bank in Mingora. "It was the same for many of my neighbours. Now I enjoy watching the news and music videos."



Critical of both domestic and international TV stations, the fundamentalists repeatedly harassed local cable TV operations. Ali Cable, a Mingora-based operator, reopened on 20 August after closing in November 2008 under Taliban pressure. "I am pleased to be back with service after being closed for so many months," owner Umer Ali Baacha said. "I have sold some 4,000 connections since August and we have repaired many others that were badly damaged by the Taliban." Today five cable TV service providers are operating again in Mingora and there are dozens of TV salesmen.

Free from fear of the Taliban

Several Swat journalists told Reporters Without Borders it was "very difficult" to argue with the Taliban. "So their departure is a good thing, and if there is any problem with the military, it can be sorted out because you can argue with the military and they at least

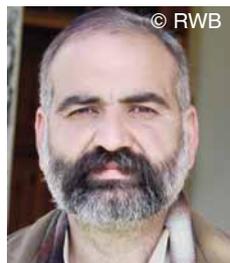
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understand what you are talking about,” one Mingora-based journalist said on condition of anonymity.

Sufi Muhammad, the maulana at the head of the Movement for the Enforcement of the Prophet Muhammad’s Sharia (TNSM), told Reporters Without Borders in March 2009 that he believed in press freedom. But the Taliban militants were hostile to free expression and the free flow of information and imposed censorship and self-censorship, especially as regards the fate of women. In mid-2008, the TNSM banned television in the valley and the office of one cable TV operator was even bombed.

For the most part, Swat’s journalists are nowadays free of the fear imposed by the Taliban, especially Maulana Fazlullah and his illegal radio broadcasts (see the report “Swat, valley of fear”), and they have started to cover the Taliban’s abuses.

The Taliban stepped up their threats on the eve of the military offensive. Leaflets signed by Tehreek-e-Taliban “suicide candidates” threatening “dire consequences” for journalists who did not stop their “anti-Taliban” coverage were posted outside media offices in Mingora at the end of April. The threats were made after several media accused the Taliban of violating an accord with the government by continuing their attacks in the Swat valley and neighbouring districts.



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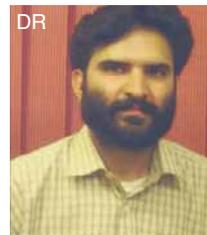
“We used to receive calls on our mobile phones almost every morning if any anti-Taliban report had been published but that is no longer the case,” *Shamal* editor Farooq said. “The Taliban tension is gone from our minds now.”

But self-censorship has not disappeared completely. “I think there is still a degree of self-censorship, partly because of fear and partly because we feel we should contribute to the peace process,” a Mingora-based TV reporter said.

Under their new leader, Hakeemullah Mehsud, the Pakistani Taliban of the Tehreek-

e-Taliban have stepped up terrorist activity in other regions. The suicide bombing at the Peshawar press club in December is a symbol of the new dangers the Pakistani media face. Accused by Mehsud of “taking part in the war” against his militants (listen to the audio message), Pakistani journalists are being targeted more than ever by the rebels. Five Pakistani journalists died in the course of their work in 2009

Crimes against the press go unpunished



Murders of journalists and other cases of violence against the press in Swat are still awaiting serious investigation. Reporters Without Borders has been following four cases in particular. Firstly, that of Mosa Khankhel, 28, a Swat-based correspondent for *Geo News TV* and the newspaper *The News*, who was found dead on 18 February 2009, a few hours after being kidnapped during a “peace march” by Maulana Muhammad’s followers. His body was discovered near Matta, where the march had taken place. No group claimed responsibility but fellow journalists blamed the Taliban. His brother, himself a journalist, condemned the lack of a serious investigation when he met Reporters Without Borders a year later. (Watch the video: XXX)

The security forces have also failed to carry out any serious investigation into how reporter Abdul Aziz of the newspaper *Azadi* came to die. Aziz, 33, was detained by the Taliban on 27 August 2008 when he went to a Taliban camp in Peochar to ask why he was on a blacklist and was killed during an air-strike by government forces on the camp two days later. “His name was on the Taliban list of people to be killed because he was a brave journalist who criticised Islamist militants,” a colleague, Mumtaz Buner, said.

Similarly, no soldier has even been punished for the November 2008 death of Qari Muhammad Shoaib, a reporter with the newspaper *Khabarkar*. He was shot by a group of soldiers who opened fire without warning as

he was driving home with a relative. Senior army officers in Mingora expressed regret for the incident and promised to compensate the family.

Finally, no one has ever been arrested for the January 2009 bombing of the home of Hameedullah Khan, the Mingora correspondent of the *Dawn* newspaper and *Dawn TV*, six months after gunmen burned down a shop he owned.

Reporters Without Borders calls on the police and judicial authorities to establish whether any the Taliban leaders currently detained had a role in these crimes committed in 2008 and 2009.



Relations with the army

After its victory in the field, the army seems to be cooperating fairly well with local journalists. Maj. Mushtaq Khan, an army spokesman and head of the army media centre in Swat, told Reporters Without Borders: "We believe the media role in post-Taliban Swat is very important to inform the masses about what the government is doing to restore peace. There are no restrictions on media now in Swat and we believe partnership with media is very important for the success of the operation."

While most of the reporters interviewed by Reporters Without Borders welcome the return to normal, they are still wary of the army and the military intelligence agency, the ISI, which has been implicated in many cases of threats against media personnel and extra-

judicial detention of journalists in Pakistan. There is concern that the ISI could be tempted to try to silence any journalist criticising the "peace process" in Swat.

An Islamabad-based observer pointed out that the Swat media have not really covered any of the extra-judicial executions in the region, some of which may have been the work of the army. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan maintains that some of the bodies found in common graves are those of Taliban executed by the army.

In contrast to the Tribal Areas, the army is allowing both Pakistani and foreign journalists to visit the Swat valley. Reporters Without Borders is not aware of any case of a journalist being denied access to any part of the region or refused an interview by military officials since the end of September.

Media in need of support

The local media sustained significant financial losses as a result of having to close for six months. *Shamal* editor Farooq is one of the many media owners and executives trying to recover. "Although there were no production costs during this period, I had to pay for office rent and repair of the printing machine, which became non-operational because it was not oiled for six months," he said.

The media suffered very little from theft or looting – only the correspondent of the Pakistani TV station *KTN* had his equipment stolen – but a great deal of machinery and equipment was inoperable after the long period of disuse.

To assist in the emergency, Reporters Without Borders providing funding in May 2009 to Swat journalists who had been forced to flee the fighting between the army and Taliban. There is now a need for the Pakistani government and international organisations to make direct and indirect assistance available to the Swat media. State aid could, for example, take the form of a significant increase in state advertising in the local media.