

Women journalists in Afghanistan defiant in the face of violence

The dangers of working as a journalist in Afghanistan have been dramatically underlined by an attack in the capital Kabul on Monday in which nine Afghan photographers and reporters were killed. They had gone to report on a suicide attack, and were targeted by a second suicide bomber when they arrived on the scene.

The cold-blooded murder took place just days before World Press Freedom Day marked annually on May 3rd.

Outside the Afghan capital, the dangers of reporting the news, particularly as a woman, have never been so apparent.

Sediqa Sherzai is the news director of Radio-TV Roshani, a media organization in Kunduz in the north of Afghanistan. Her female reporters are under constant threat not only from insurgents but also from men who do not want women to work in the media.

“When insurgents seized Kunduz in 2015, they came immediately for our station because they didn’t like our content focused on women’s rights,” she said. “Even though most of our reporters fled in advance of their arrival. They looted our equipment and destroyed what they could not take.”

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Elections

Despite the challenges of working as a woman in the media in a conservative and conflict-affected country, Sediqa Sherzai is committed to ensuring that the voices of Afghan women are heard ahead of the country’s elections slated for October this year.

In the volatile province of Kunduz where some territory is beyond government control, women say they fear to speak to the media and talk about human rights, much less advocate openly for democracy and change. Even Sediqa Sherzai and her staff of women shy away from photographs, cautiously protecting their identities.

Elections are considered essential to solidify fragile the social and human rights advances made during the last 17 years. The struggle for full women’s suffrage in Afghanistan, reminiscent of similar fights in centuries past in other nations, has gained broader international support in the last two decades.

UN in Afghanistan

Pushing for change, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) has supported initiatives that offer space for Afghan women from across all sectors of society to advocate against oppression and conflict, and also to stand up for basic human rights, including their right to vote.

UNAMA's chief, Tadamichi Yamamoto, said on the occasion of World Press Freedom Day that the UN continues to push for the government "to implement measures to improve journalist safety and foster an open media where no voice is silenced through fear."

Women don't want to talk because they are under threat, but also because of traditional restrictions, including fathers and husbands forbidding them from talking – *Journalist Sediqa Sherzai*

Ms Sherzai said the unwritten code to silence women runs deep in Kunduz. "Women don't want to talk because they are under threat, but also because of traditional restrictions, including fathers and husbands forbidding them from talking."

As news director in a city besieged by war, she faces the dilemma of trying to dispatch reporters to the field. "We can't say we are accurately reflecting the views of women when even our own female reporters are under constant threat," she said.

Democracy

Even if Kunduz, a bustling city of some 500,000 citizens, was not enduring near-constant conflict, there would still be immense obstacles standing in the way of women's full participation in democracy, according to media officials and human rights advocates.

"This is a pervasive issue across our society as even highly literate men in business and in government don't want their women to vote," said Lida Sherzad, an advocate working with the Afghanistan Women's Network (AWN). "There is an immense price to pay in terms of psychological damage and pressure on women, including their children, and these mothers are asking me why they should even participate in elections if no one is protecting them."

The right for women to vote goes hand in hand with several of AWN's efforts to create new social networks and connect different groups of women in a common effort to speak out for women's leadership and to end violence against women.

Women's rights advocates say that while progress has been slow at times, the last 17 years have witnessed immense gains for Afghan women, who under Taliban rule in late 1990s and through most of 2001 were confined to their homes and prevented from obtaining an education.

Many women working in the media in Kunduz left during the Taliban rule, but

Sediqa Sherzai said that stand' if the insurgents re-enter the city for a third time in five years, she will "defend the station if necessary."

[South Sudan: UN Mission chief urges warring parties to abide by truce agreement](#)

The surge of violence in South Sudan's Unity region will likely continue despite the ceasefire accord signed last year by warring parties, the top United Nations official in the African country said on Tuesday.

"All sides need to [abide by what they agreed to](#) and have their actions on the ground carefully monitored and scrutinized," said David Shearer, the Secretary-General's Special Representative and head of the UN peacekeeping mission in the country, known as UNMISS, referring to the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement signed in December 2017.

"The intensification of the conflict is having a serious human impact. Hundreds of people are sheltering next to the UN base," he said. "We saw tukuls (huts) burnt to the ground. We were told that elderly people and children had been killed and medical clinics ransacked."

Mr. Shearer made his comments during a visit to Leer and Dublual in the Unity region to see first-hand the impact of the deteriorating security situation on communities.

"I met a little girl who had been shot through her stomach and back. She is just one example of dozens of people injured and killed over recent weeks," said Mr. Shearer. "We also know that hundreds, if not thousands, of people have fled into the swamps and are surviving on wild vegetables and fruit."

Mr. Shearer and his mission team met with both Government and opposition leaders in the area, urging them to lay down their weapons, reconcile, and work together to build durable peace.

He said the signing of the Agreement last year had given the peace process momentum, but that it was at risk of unravelling without genuine political will.

"Earlier this year it felt like we were moving in the right direction. But after seeing the effects on civilians of this conflict, I believe there is a real risk that the situation will deteriorate further and undermine the chance for lasting peace."

Mr. Shearer said UNMISS would continue to fulfill its mandate.

“Our job is still to protect people and help them get through these dark times so that the peace process can work and we can find a durable solution. We will do all we can to support the people of South Sudan,” he said.

Vitamin A deficiency puts 140 million children at risk of illness and death – UNICEF

More than 140 million children are at greater risk of illness, hearing loss, blindness and even death globally if urgent action is not taken to provide them with life-saving vitamin A supplements, the United Nations Children’s Fund ([UNICEF](#)) has warned.

In a new report “[Coverage at a Crossroads](#),” released on Monday, UNICEF stressed that just two doses of vitamin A per year, can save thousands of children’s lives.

Vitamin A boosts the immune system and can help protect young children from potentially fatal diseases like measles and diarrhea.

The [World Health Organization](#) (WHO) has classified vitamin A deficiency as “a public health problem” affecting about a third of all children aged 6 to 59 months – according to 2013 figures – with the highest rates registered in sub-Saharan Africa, at 48 per cent; and South Asia at 44 per cent.

The UNICEF report says only 64 per cent of children in need are receiving the life-saving benefits of vitamin A supplementation, leaving the remaining third, or more than 140 million children, without sufficient coverage.

The coverage of vitamin A supplement programmes dropped by more than half, in countries with the highest under-five mortality rates in 2016 – the countries where such programmes are needed the most.

As a result, the number of children left unprotected in high-mortality countries more than tripled between 2015 and 2016, jumping from 19 million to 62 million, the report notes.

Global coverage reached a six-year low in 2016, with the largest dip seen for West and Central Africa. On the contrary, targeting children in East Asia and the Pacific has proved effective, with more than 80 per cent of children there, receiving two-dose coverage over the past decade.

The report recommends that the global community incorporate vitamin A doses

into other programmes to reach every child, strengthen monitoring to identify those yet to be reached, and expand knowledge overall concerning the most effective platforms.

Leaders obliged to confront anti-Semitism 'everywhere and always', stresses UN envoy

The United Nations' top official for the Middle East Peace Process has said that spreading "deeply disturbing" conspiracy theories which fuel anti-Semitism are unacceptable, and serve neither the interests of Palestinians themselves, or the pursuit of peace in the region.

UN Special Coordinator Nikolay Mladenov was responding to remarks which were made by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas at the opening of the Palestinian National Council on Monday.

According to news reports, the Palestinian leader suggested that the mass murder of European Jews during the Holocaust had been connected to their financial practices.

Mr Mladenov said in a [statement](#) on Wednesday that President Abbas "chose to use his speech at the opening of the Palestinian National Council to repeat some of the most contemptuous anti-Semitic slurs, including the suggestion that the social behaviour of Jews was the cause for the Holocaust."

"Leaders have an obligation to confront anti-Semitism everywhere and always, not perpetuate the conspiracy theories that fuel it," stressed Mr. Mladenov.

Mr. Mladenov also reiterated that denying historic and religious connection of the Jewish people to the land and their holy sites in Jerusalem "stands in contrast to reality".

He also stressed that the Holocaust was the result of thousands of years of persecution and that it did not occur in a vacuum.

"This is why attempts to rewrite, downplay or deny it are dangerous," he said.

Central African Republic: UN urges calm in wake of violence in capital Bangui

The United Nations peacekeeping mission in the Central African Republic (CAR) has appealed for calm following fresh violence in the capital Bangui which claimed the lives of several civilians, including a religious leader.

“MINUSCA [the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the CAR] condemns attacks against civilians and places of worship and emphasizes that such attacks are contrary to national and international laws,” the UN Mission said in a [statement](#).

It reaffirmed that only mandated State authorities have the right to enforce justice and that any acts by non-state actors, such as the attacks Tuesday morning, are illegal.

“The sponsors and the perpetrators of such acts will be held responsible,” added the Mission.

The clashes were sparked off by the arrest of a member of a criminal group by the country’s security forces. In the ensuing violence, a church was attacked on the edge of the predominantly Muslim PK5 neighbourhood, and a pastor was killed. Health facilities and medical staff were also reportedly threatened.

The violence later spread to other parts of the city.

The Humanitarian Coordinator in the CAR, Najat Rochdi, [denounced](#) the targeting of a religious institution by attackers, saying that it demonstrated a lack of respect due to all places of worship.

“I am shocked by the death of Father Tougoumalé-Baba who was one of the defenders of the pact of non-aggression,” she said, recalling that the agreement enables Muslims in the surrounding area to give their dead a befitting burial according to the precepts of Islam.

Also in a subsequent attack, two MINUSCA peacekeepers were wounded – one seriously – after they were reportedly pelted with stones by a crowd.

In accordance with its mandate, MINUSCA has deployed reinforced patrols to secure key locations in Bangui in close cooperation with the national security forces and is monitoring the situation.

It has also strengthened its presence in other parts of the country.