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Women and reporters remain under threat in Afghanistan, Pakistan

Paul Muir

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This week, as 2013 draws to a conclusion, we revisit two Takeaway columns from the past year that continue to have resonance and examine new developments.

In February, we focused on concerns over the danger of advances made in women’s rights in Afghanistan being rolled back in the run-up to the majority of foreign troops withdrawing in 2014.

While violence against women was dramatically rising, there had been significant gains for females since the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001: “The number of girls attending school has topped two million, and 25 per cent of government jobs and 27 per cent of the seats in parliament are now occupied by women,” we reported.

Since then conditions for women have become progressively worse: a “human rights commissioner”, an ex-member of the Taliban government who was handpicked by President Hamid Karzai, has called for the repeal of the Elimination of Violence Against Women law, which he said “violates Islam”; a draft law that would have reintroduced execution by stoning as punishment for adultery was seriously considered by Afghan government officials; and a recent UN report showed that reported cases of violence against women went up by 28 per cent in the last year – but prosecutions rose by only 2 per cent.

“Lots happened this year – mostly bad,” Heather Barr, a researcher for Human Rights Watch, told The Review.

In June, we examined the murder of the Pakistani journalist Syed Saleem Shahzad on the second anniversary of his disappearance. The May 2011 murder of Asia Times Online’s Pakistan bureau chief, one of about two dozen journalists who have been killed in the country over the past decade, remains unsolved, but many observers believe it was the work of members of the country’s intelligence community.

“While the facts are never likely to surface, it was clear at the time that Islamabad’s journalists blamed Inter Services Intelligence [ISI],” Tom Hussain, a regular contributor to The National based in Islamabad, told The Review.

The commission formed to investigate Shahzad’s murder found no evidence of the military or intelligence agencies being involved. However, Hussain described the commission’s verdict as “a predictable cover up”.

Bob Dietz, the Asia programme coordinator for the Committee to Protect Journalists, told The Review this week: “Following the special investigation, testimony and recommendations nothing has changed in any significant way when it comes to investigating or prosecuting the deaths of journalists in Pakistan. There is still perfect impunity for anyone who murders a reporter.

“We’ve said that Pakistan’s leaders are not meeting their obligation to guarantee the rule of law and fundamental human rights, and that has not changed under the Nawaz Sharif government.”

The murder of the 40-year-old father of three, who went missing on May 29, 2011, while on his way to do a TV interview in Islamabad has, however, prompted action outside Pakistan.

“Maybe the best thing is that because of the string of murders, Pakistan has become the focus of the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity and there is movement to draft legislation to address the killing of journalists,” Dietz told The Review.