



2023 Annual Report

Report on Afghan Journalists in Limbo Refugees in Pakistan and Iran

Table of Contents

- Introduction
- Background
- The Start of Disaster
- Categories of Refugees in Pakistan and Iran
- Summary of Letters from Afghan Journalists in Pakistan and Iran
- Trip to Pakistan
- Unemployment
- Financial Issues
- Safety Threats
- Mental and Psychological Issues
- Negligence of International Organization
- Requests
- Journalists' Stories
- Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction

This report focuses on the challenging circumstances, issues, and needs of Afghan journalists who sought refuge in neighboring countries, primarily Pakistan and Iran, following the collapse of the democratic government in Afghanistan. These journalists currently confront an uncertain future, grappling with the looming threats of expulsion, humiliation, economic hardships, and profound psychological distress in their host countries.

Background

The downfall of the Afghan democratic government on August 15, 2021, marked not just a political collapse in a war-torn nation but the complete defeat and breakdown of a civil society. The initial weeks were fraught with anxiety, fear, and uncertainty, prompting numerous questions regarding the events, the new ruling authorities, and their stance on civil society, media, women's rights, and journalism.

Prior to the regime change, there were unclear reports and sources suggesting potential shifts within the Taliban. The Taliban's spokesperson, in their initial press conference upon entering Kabul, assured that media operations would align with Islamic Shariah. However, despite these reassurances, apprehensive journalists remained hesitant, and fleeing the country became increasingly challenging. Soon afterward, it became evident that the Taliban's commitments were shallow, resulting in curtailed freedom of expression, constrained media independence, and limitations on women's activities. The first wave of censorship emerged swiftly, with journalists facing threats, arrests, and violence while reporting. Ambiguity surrounded the legal framework governing media, journalists, and freedom of speech, leaving them uncertain about the consequences of their work and the applicable laws.

Subsequently, financial support for media dwindled and eventually vanished. International institutions offered minimal assistance, causing a depletion in income sources for media entities, leading to their gradual closure or collapse. Fear, repression, threats, lawlessness, unemployment, economic crises, and a bleak future catalyzed a surge in immigration, exile, and the departure of journalists. Some fled to Western countries, while others found themselves in third countries through evacuation programs. However, a significant number were compelled to seek refuge in Pakistan and Iran due to various reasons.

The Onset of Crisis

Afghanistan has grappled with civil war for nearly half a century. Throughout this period, the involvement of neighboring nations in the conflict has exacerbated the country's national crisis. During moments of heightened turmoil, Afghan refugees historically sought shelter in Pakistan and Iran, providing these host countries with political and economic gains. However, this time, a paradigm shift occurred—both countries shut their doors, permitting entry solely to those with passports and visas, which came at a steep cost. Following the government's collapse, Afghans were required to pay around \$80 for an Iranian visa, but administrative procedures inflated this amount to \$200 or \$300. Pakistan charged from \$400 to \$1,000 for visas.

To afford these fees and survive, many Afghans, including numerous journalists and media personnel, had to procure the necessary funds to relocate to Iran and Pakistan.

Despite claims by both nations that millions of Afghans sought refuge within their borders, their assistance was limited to short-term visas. Upon visa expiration, refugees faced the looming threat of deportation.

Categories of Refugees in Pakistan and Iran

Political asylum seekers: Individuals who perceived their lives to be at risk in Afghanistan, including former soldiers, civil servants, activists, women's rights advocates, and journalists.

Afghans aiming to reach Western countries via smuggling routes.

Afghans with legal documentation attempting to reach Western nations through embassy exit procedures in these host countries.

Economic migrants: Those who left Afghanistan before its collapse, seeking employment opportunities in neighboring countries.

Educational migrants: Families concerned about their children's education due to perceived deficiencies in Taliban-controlled schools and declining university education quality, thus relocating to neighboring countries for better educational prospects.

Afghan journalists, unfortunately, found themselves among these diverse categories.

Beginning in 2023, neighboring countries-initiated harassment, deportation, theft, and detention of Afghan refugees. A mass exodus of Afghans from Iran ensued, while Pakistan commenced a humiliating and extensive deportation campaign in November 2023, continuing to date.

These refugees encompassed individuals from various walks of life, many facing life-threatening risks due to their political or professional backgrounds. This group comprised former military and government officials, artists, activists, professors, writers, cultural figures, and journalists.

This report primarily focuses on the plight of journalists within this broader context.

Journalists were compelled to migrate due to several reasons. Their prominence made them easily recognizable to ordinary Taliban members, exposing them to immediate threats before higher authorities could intervene. Additionally, numerous media outlets had received threats via written or verbal communication during their operations, fostering fear among journalists. The Taliban's amnesty policy lacked credibility, further contributing to the climate of uncertainty and apprehension.

Moreover, many journalists and media professionals lost their jobs due to restrictions and economic pressures enforced under the Taliban regime.

Journalists found themselves deeply concerned about the well-being of their families. As primary breadwinners, their paramount worry revolved around their children's education, particularly that of their daughters. Their utmost desire was to secure avenues for their children to continue their schooling.

During the evacuation, some journalists managed to leave the country, while others departed under the guise of journalism or due to their affiliations with influential media figures. However, numerous journalists faced barriers preventing them from accessing Western countries. Consequently, they either remained in Afghanistan, under the looming threat of the Taliban, or undertook arduous efforts to reach neighboring countries, especially Pakistan and Iran.

In the context of Afghanistan's enduring war and crisis, traditionally, people sought refuge in these two neighboring countries during hardships. However, the current situation diverged drastically. Both Pakistan and Iran, previously not known for their humane treatment, greeted new Afghan refugees with bleak and hostile reception upon their arrival.

Institutions responsible for deportation and abduction of refugees in Iran and Pakistan are particularly attentive to journalists, anticipating that they will amplify the voices of all refugees and document the inhumane treatment experienced by Afghan refugees.

Consequently, for Afghan journalists, Pakistan, Iran, and other regional countries have become a tormenting realm oscillating between fear and hope. On one side, there exists the scorching uncertainty of an ambiguous future and prolonged waiting, while on the other lies their cherished homeland, which they cannot return to.

Since its inception, the Afghanistan Journalists Support Organization (AJSO) has maintained communication with colleagues in these two countries. We have prioritized efforts to address their circumstances. Initially, we took measures to integrate these journalists into the AJSO structure, facilitating easier communication and collaboration. Fortunately, this consistent contact paved the way for the organization to become an active intermediary between them and various international institutions.

Officially, the cooperation institutions of journalists residing in both Pakistan and Iran have corresponded with our organization, sharing comprehensive details of their situations and presenting their demands, outlined below.

Summary of the letter from Afghan journalists based in Pakistan

Following the Taliban's assumption of power in Afghanistan on August 15, 2021, journalists who championed free speech over the past two decades encountered threats from the ruling regime. The authorities imposed fourteen restrictions to curtail media activities:

Prohibition of women's work in national television and participation in television dramas, enforced masking for women in media appearances, and banning international television broadcasts in Afghanistan.

Restrictions on covering civil protests, pressure on journalists to portray the Taliban as the legitimate government, and prohibition of media music broadcasts.

Segregation of male and female colleagues in media, prohibition of interviews between genders, and ban on interviews with opponents or critics of the Taliban.

Ban on publishing commercial advertisements with political, security, or social content, and prohibition of criticizing Taliban officials through media outlets.

Collaboration with "banned media" and exclusion of women's voices from local media.

These actions undeniably constrain freedom of speech and media work in Afghanistan under the Taliban's rule. Over 5,00 media outlets in Afghanistan have shuttered operations, with more than 300 outlets suspending activities, and the remaining operating under strained conditions, as reported by TOLO News.

Since the Taliban's ascension, the country has recorded 366 instances of media freedom violations, including three journalist fatalities, 23 injuries, 176 arrests, 139 threats, and 25 instances of assault.

Journey to Pakistan

Over the past two years, more than 200 journalists and media workers fled Afghanistan for Pakistan due to direct or indirect threats from the uncompromising Taliban. These journalists, uprooted from their homes, jobs, cities, and country, are enduring harsh living conditions in Pakistan alongside their families.

This group includes individuals with pending immigration applications for European countries and America, responding to these countries' requests by relocating to Pakistan and awaiting the outcomes of their immigration cases for over two years. Others have sought assistance from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Unemployment

In Afghanistan, journalists were integral to the economy, leading hand-to-mouth lives. Those who fled to Pakistan with meager savings are grappling with the most challenging phase of their lives. Unemployment and financial turmoil have plunged Afghan journalists in Pakistan into severe distress.

Ranked 150th out of 180 countries in the Press Freedom Index 2023, Pakistan lacks job opportunities for Afghan journalists. Journalists, reliant on minimal budgets, now struggle intensely to secure basic sustenance.

Financial Hardships

The financial burdens faced by Afghan journalists in Pakistan encompass expenses for food, clothing, housing rent, medical costs, children's education in private schools, and coping with Pakistan's high inflation rate. The extension of journalists' residency further exacerbates their predicament, compelling them to seek loans from relatives to prolong their stay.

Extending their residency documents in Pakistan entails illicit payments to officials, adding reprehensible economic pressure on these journalists.

Threats

Over 200 Afghan journalists and their families in Pakistan confront daily threats of forced deportation by the government. Under Pakistan's laws, journalists arriving on family or health visas must leave or face legal repercussions.

The deadline imposed by the Pakistan interim government for the departure of undocumented foreigners has significantly exacerbated the plight of these journalists. Their

daily existence has become confined to their homes due to fear of police raids, causing continual anguish, terror, and mental strain.

Mental and Psychological Challenges

Over the past two years, unemployment, economic duress, a lack of income to sustain livelihoods, coupled with threats from Pakistani government and law enforcement agencies, have compelled these journalists to contemplate leaving the country. Their children confront challenges arising from language and cultural disparities, resulting in either deprivation of education or an inability to afford school fees. Uncertainty clouds the prospect of relocating to Western countries, while returning to Afghanistan poses risks of peril and fatality. These distressing circumstances have triggered waves of fear, anxiety, and profound depression, inflicting severe psychological anguish upon the journalists.

Neglect by International Bodies

International organizations supporting refugees and asylum seekers have shown minimal engagement in assisting Afghan journalists in Pakistan. Their approach to addressing the issues faced by Afghan refugees, especially journalists, lacks effectiveness, leading to limited positive outcomes.

Appeals

The Afghanistan Journalists Support Organization advocates for freedom of expression and implores the United Nations, pertinent agencies, international media advocacy groups, aid committees, human rights-supporting organizations, foreign ministries, and nations committed to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to earnestly address these dire situations.

The United Nations, particularly the UNHCR, is urged to issue directives to Pakistani authorities to ensure proper treatment of Afghan journalists until their fate is definitively determined.

International organizations supporting journalists are implored to renew efforts to evacuate journalists stranded in Pakistan to nations committed to assisting in this regard.

Independent international aid committees and bodies affiliated with the United Nations are urged to pay serious attention to the legal, economic, and health conditions of these journalists and their families.

Nations dedicated to upholding the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and international human rights organizations are urged to persuade the Pakistani government against deporting Afghan journalists and to refrain from further exacerbating their plight until their status is clarified.

Countries managing immigration cases for these journalists are encouraged to swiftly take action and rescue Afghan families from the looming threat of harm.

Summary of the Letter from Afghan Journalists Based in Iran

“We, a group of Afghan journalists residing in Iran since the fall of Afghanistan, are enduring an exceptionally arduous, cruel, and fear-ridden existence. Prior to the country's takeover by

the Taliban, journalists faced severe threats, violence, imprisonment, and intolerable hardships, compelling them to flee the nation.

Fifty of us sought refuge in Iran, encountering conditions for Afghan refugees more challenging and dire than ever before. Regrettably, neither any country nor any institution has extended support to us. Over the past two years, we've been deprived of employment opportunities, denied visa extensions, and constantly live in fear of arrests and deportations by Iranian authorities. We've been subjected to interrogations and menacing threats.

The Iranian government refuses to extend our visas and has barred institutions from employing Afghans. Anti-immigrant sentiments and policies are increasingly prevalent and serious.

We confront two imminent threats: hunger and death. Returning to Afghanistan means facing potential execution by the Taliban, while in Iran, we grapple with the grim specters of starvation, poverty, and joblessness.

We have reached out to the embassies of France and other nations for assistance in facilitating our relocation abroad, yet we've received no positive responses.

We implore journalist support institutions, international organizations, and nations committed to human rights to aid us in three critical areas:

Facilitate our swift relocation to Western countries from Iran.

Negotiate with the Iranian government to extend our visas until our fates are determined, shielding us from deportation risks.

Offer us economic support, aid in securing employment, or provide sufficient humanitarian assistance to help us survive until our fates are determined."

Alongside these letters, we present the narratives of two active journalists from both countries concerning their immigration and life during exile, representing the collective circumstances and challenges faced by all journalists.

The only obstacle preventing us from departing was the absence of a male chaperon, or "Muharram," accompanying us.

On that day, as evening approached, we continued our search for a passage in Spin Boldak. Eventually, we had to retreat back to Kandahar city.

The following day, our attempts were met with the same persistent issue. On the third day, we endeavored through smuggling routes, finally entering Pakistan illegally by paying 70,000 Pakistani rupees.

We spent four uncertain months in Quetta, facing visa complications and financial constraints that hindered our progress.

After enduring four months of adversity, I reached Islamabad with my family.

Life in Islamabad presented its own challenges; grappling with unemployment and financial instability, I sought support from various journalist assistance organizations, which provided some relief amidst those difficult nights and days.

In 2022, I connected with officials from the Journalists' Support Organization, engaging in various activities with them. These endeavors revitalized me; as I grew busier, my network expanded, and importantly, job opportunities arose.

Pakistan's economic conditions could be better, making life difficult for Afghans residing here. Daily encounters with individuals facing more dire circumstances remind us to endure hardships for our families and future.

It's been about six months since I resumed my journalism work. I find happiness in having overcome those trying times. Equally fulfilling is my ability to collaborate and assist my colleagues in various capacities.

Several journalists have suffered violations of their rights, experiencing difficulties accessing support or financial aid. While some receive substantial assistance from aid agencies, others struggle to secure even a single meal.

In some instances, individuals who engaged in media work for a mere couple of days achieved their goals within two to three months, while those younger than twenty-five, with over two years of media experience, remain in limbo in Pakistan.

Under the umbrella of the journalists' support organization, we've rallied dozens of journalists, endeavoring to combat injustices, carve a path for our futures, and thwart those exploiting the name of journalists through deceptive projects.”, Marzia Hafizi.

Another journalist based in Iran, Mr. Hussain Ahmadi, shared his story:

"I am Hussain Ahmadi. I worked as a spokesperson and reporter in Afghan media for three years. The increasing restrictions on media and direct/indirect threats from the Taliban post-Kabul's fall compelled me to seek refuge in Iran. It's been sixteen months with my wife and six-month-old son. This period has brought not just economic and housing woes but severe mental and psychological distress for me and my wife. While attention is directed towards Afghan journalists in other nations, our situation in Iran remains overlooked.

This is deeply concerning for me and my fellow journalists. Even in European countries' evaluations, journalists in Pakistan and Iran are treated differently, with Afghan journalists in Iran given low priority. Visa extensions in Iran pose significant challenges; optimistic scenarios allow for a limited extension, after which substantial fines accrue for each day of overstaying.

We are unable to attract the attention of supportive institutions and nations due to existing restrictions. Even when our presence is acknowledged by the government, assistance or follow-up is minimal.

I implore reliable supporting entities and nations to prioritize humanitarian aid for journalists in Iran. Organizations backing journalists, particularly European nations like France handling numerous journalists' cases, should pay more heed to Afghan journalists in Iran."

Conclusion and Recommendations

Following Afghanistan's fall, there's an urgent need for international discourse addressing the plight of Afghan journalists and media workers in exile, notably those in Pakistan and Iran.

While acknowledging the challenges faced by journalists and media inside Afghanistan, the uncertain fate of those in Iran and Pakistan represents a humanitarian crisis.

Prioritizing their legal status and extending economic support is recommended.

The Afghanistan Journalists Support Organization, dedicated to these priorities, is prepared to lead or actively engage in coordination, discussions, and practical efforts in this area.

Disseminating information, raising public awareness, maintaining regular contact with relevant international bodies, and transparently requesting aid can mitigate this crisis.

Entities associated with the United Nations, especially UNHCR, organizations safeguarding journalists' rights, international human rights bodies, esteemed journalists, media personalities, media outlets, and the broader civil society all bear responsibility in addressing this crisis.

Afghanistan Journalists Support Organization