MAY 3RD– WORLD PRESS FREEDOM DAY:

A GRIM REFLECTION ON THE STATE OF MEDIA IN AFGHANISTAN BY AJSO

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A 3rd of May has been designated as World Press Freedom Day by UNESCO since 1993, commemorated annually to emphasize the importance of press freedom, journalists, and the public's access to information.

The Afghanistan Journalists Support Organization congratulates all journalists on this occasion, especially women journalists, those working under threats, civil society activists, and all individuals committed to freedom of expression and the media across the globe. We mark this day while the media, journalists, freedom of expression, and the people's right to access information in Afghanistan are experiencing their worst conditions in the past twenty-five years.

The current rulers of the country, like their first period of governance, have once again banned the broadcasting of images of living beings in the media. So far, this restriction has been enforced in 16 provinces of Afghanistan and is being implemented in others.

Dozens of media outlets have shut down due to various restrictions and bans, and many others have lost their qualitative and quantitative capacity. Just in recent months, Begum Radio was shut down, women's voices were completely banned from Kandahar's media, and political programs and debates were suspended. Journalist Mehdi Ansari was imprisoned for a year and a half, and Shamshad TV journalist Saber Rahimi was jailed for seven months. In addition, Etehad Azizi and Rashid Kashifi have been detained, and filmmaker and Anar Media head, Sayed Rahim Saeedi, remains in prison.

Overall, due to severe censorship and restrictions, media outlets inside the country have lost their professional capacity, and their content quality has deteriorated to the extent that they are not only financially incapable of continuing operations but are on the verge of collapse. One such example is Tolo TV and its affiliated media productions, which have recently downsized their operations significantly and laid off dozens of media employees.

Globally, among the bitter events of the past year for Afghanistan was the cessation of funding for Voice of America and Radio Azadi following the rise to power of Donald Trump in the United States. These widely followed media outlets are now facing the risk of closure. Although legal efforts and management follow-ups are still underway to keep them running, they raise a serious question: if these media go silent today or tomorrow, what will Afghans do? Afghanistan is perhaps one of the few countries in the 21st century that lacks strong and professional domestic media, leaving its people largely dependent on these international outlets for access to information.

Inside Afghanistan, media and journalists support organizations also operate under immense pressure and restrictions. The situation is no better for journalists in exile. Compared to other countries, exiled Afghan media receive far less attention. It seems the world has forgotten Afghanistan and its people, no longer considering them of even secondary importance.

Many Afghan journalists remain stuck in limbo in neighboring and regional countries, at constant risk of arrest, deportation, or uncertainty. In Iran and Pakistan, where many journalists await relocation to third countries, the pace of Afghan deportations has recently increased. Disturbing reports have emerged regarding the treatment of journalists. In recent weeks, Pakistani police and security forces have arrested several prominent Afghan journalists, subjected them to torture, attempted to deport them, and treated them with humiliation. The situation in Iran is reportedly even worse. Elsewhere in the world, Afghan journalists continue to face professional exclusion and numerous challenges.

Over the past year, the Afghanistan Journalists Support Organization has taken comprehensive steps in these areas, aiming to fulfill its share of responsibility by establishing systematic working relations with international organizations to help address these barriers and challenges. We thank those international organizations that have cooperated with us in this mission.

During the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 547 media outlets operated in Afghanistan, employing around 12,000 people, of whom around 2,000 were women working across various media sectors.

However, since 2021, that number has dropped drastically. Currently, only 296 media outlets remain active in the country. The number of media employees has

declined to 4,157, of whom only 557 are women. This marks a significant setback in women's participation.

Violence and Pressure Against Journalists:
Since 2021, a total of 525 cases of violence against journalists have been documented, including physical attacks, threats, arrests, and imprisonment. Currently, nine journalists are behind bars, highlighting serious concerns over press freedom and journalists' safety.

In Afghanistan, press freedom, journalism as a profession, and the presence of women in media face severe threats. The decrease in media outlets and journalists, along with violence, censorship, and legal restrictions, has eroded the foundations of free expression. The international community, human rights organizations, and media institutions must give special attention to supporting Afghan journalists and work to create conditions for the revival of a free and responsible journalism sector.

On the occasion of May 3, we once again call on all international organizations, partner institutions, and responsible bodies not to abandon Afghanistan's media community. Through consistent engagement and support of this essential pillar of democracy, they can help Afghan citizens regain access to information.

The Afghanistan Journalists Support Organization has concrete plans for the upcoming year and will regularly inform the international community about progress and developments. Once again, we congratulate all journalists on World Press Freedom Day.

We honor freedom of expression and media independence as fundamental rights.

Afghanistan Journalists Support Organization