

*Samad and McElhone:
‘The media is a key part
of the young democracy,
struggling to take hold.’*

ISSUES &

Covering Afghanistan

KHORSHIED SAMAD
AND JANE MCELHONE

CBC journalist Mellissa Fung's kidnapping ordeal is a harrowing visible example of the ongoing challenges facing foreign journalists covering Afghanistan. What is less well known is that Afghan journalists are fighting their own daily battles to survive.

Despite unprecedented gains in media independence over the past seven years, the war-torn country remains a battleground with an uncertain future for local journalists. They are threatened by the Taliban and their terrorist associates, but also by warlords, drug traffickers and increasing levels of interference from anti-democratic forces. Twelve of them have been killed over the past four years, including two women journalists. Although it is not always easy to determine the exact cause of their deaths, the attacks deal a consistent and chilling blow to the media and freedom of expression. Other journalists have been detained, beaten and forced to leave the country to save their lives.

Most recently, a young journalist was sentenced to 20 years in jail, downgraded from a death sentence, for what is alleged to have been a religiously provocative article about women's rights. Free speech groups from around the world have been unified in their condemnation of this unfair verdict which, according to the Afghan Independent Journalists Association, violates the very concepts of freedom of expression and freedom of the media that are upheld by the Afghan Constitution. This case is currently awaiting a hearing before the Afghan Supreme Court; due to the intense international focus, he may get a reprieve.

Ever since the repressive Taliban regime was driven from power in 2001, there has been dynamic growth in Afghan media. There are now an estimated 600 print publications, at least 100 radio stations and 16 TV stations, as well as a concerted effort to promote media independence. A recently passed media law has helped, at least in principle, to promote the development of a healthier media sector.

But these strides forward are under increasing threat from anti-democratic elements who have once again claimed a foothold in the Afghan parliament and government, and from the growing insecurity linked to Taliban and al-Qaeda insurgents. The ongoing challenges facing the establishment were recently illustrated when a suicide bomber fought his way into Afghanistan's Ministry of Information and Culture last month and blew himself up. The Taliban claimed responsibility for this attack on rule of law and information.

The increasing politicization of the media sector is another growing threat, as politicians and parliamentarians with little understanding of freedom of the press, not to mention warlords and the Taliban, wield ownership and control over media operations, and disseminate blatant propaganda. Low levels of professionalism also present a challenge, with Web

logs and publications that cannot differentiate between lawless freedom and journalistic ethics. Yet, regardless of the current environment, the power of media remains strong and is a vital part of the young Afghan democracy, struggling to take hold. And, there are shining examples.

Later this month the internationally renowned Committee to Protect Journalists in New York will honour Afghanistan's first independent news agency, Pajhwok Afghan News, with its prestigious International Press Freedom Award, in recognition of the agency's efforts to tell Afghans' stories in the face of ongoing conflict. It is these local journalists, and the stories they uncover, that serve as the foundation and inspiration for news that is heard around the world.

Sadly, much of the news heightens concerns about women's rights and safety, illustrated all too horribly by the recent acid attack on young Afghan girls on their way to school in Kandahar province. That chilling incident vividly illustrates the integral role media plays in empowering Afghan women and girls, by telling their stories and helping to ensure they

“The country remains a battleground, with an uncertain future for local media

are not, once again, silenced or forgotten.

As in civil society and politics, dramatic efforts have been made to encourage women's participation in media. As a result, hundreds of Afghan women currently work in journalism and communications. And they are all protected, in principle at least, by Afghanistan's 2004 constitution, which defines women as equal citizens and ensures they are once again being seen, heard and read about in the media.

It is only by respecting the rights of all Afghan citizens that Afghanistan can become a legitimate, sovereign nation. It is only by giving full voice to all of its citizens, without threatening reprisals, that it can have long-lasting peace. Afghan media and journalists are crucial to this progress.

National Post

■ Khorshied Samad and Jane McElhone co-curate the *Voices on the Rise: The Women Making the News* photojournalism exhibition opening at the Canadian High Commission in London on Nov. 26, 2008 (www.voicesontherise.org). Khorshied Samad is the former Kabul bureau chief and correspondent for Fox News, and is married to Afghanistan's ambassador to Canada. Based in London, U.K., Jane McElhone is a Canadian journalist and international media development specialist working with the Open Society Institute's international media program.

Mellissa Fung



STEVE BOSCH / VANCOUVER SUN

Tara Singh Hayer at his desk at the Indo-Canadian Times office in Surrey, B.C. Today is the 10th anniversary of his murder.

Tara Singh Hayer was a fearless enemy of radicalism in the Sikh community. Ten years ago, he paid the ultimate price

A TRUE MARTYR



JONATHAN KAY

Today marks the 10th anniversary of the first assassination of a journalist in Canadian history. I hope my colleagues remember the victim's name. Tara Singh Hayer deserves to be remembered alongside such famous martyrs to their craft as Daniel Pearl and Anna Politkovskaya.

Hayer was the publisher of the *Indo-Canadian Times*, a Punjabi weekly printed in Surrey, B.C. An Indian-born Sikh, Hayer once embraced the cause of Sikh separatism — and even the military struggle to liberate “Khalistan” from India. But he changed his mind in the 1980s, as he saw corruption and terrorism infect the movement. When Sikh separatists bombed Air India Flight 182 in 1985, Hayer's newspaper took sides against the militants.

Three years later, a man walked into his office and shot him twice at point-blank range. Hayer survived. He would spend the next decade, crippled but unbowed, in a wheelchair.

In 1995, Hayer revealed to the RCMP why he'd been targeted. In the fall of 1985, several months after Flight 182 exploded, Hayer visited his friend Tarsem Singh Purewal at the offices of the newspaper he owned, *Des Pardes*, in the suburbs of London, England. During the meeting, Purewal received another Canadian visitor: Ajaib Singh Bagri, who would

subsequently be tried (and acquitted) for the Flight 182 bombing. According to Hayer's Oct. 15, 1998 statement to the RCMP, Bagri and Purewal recused themselves to a nearby cubicle for a private discussion — but spoke loud enough for others to hear:

“Bagri stayed talking to Purewal for about one hour during which time the subject of the Air India Flight 182 bombing came up. Purewal asked Bagri how he managed to do that. Bagri replied that they (the Babbar Khalsa [separatist group]) wanted the government of India to come on their knees and give them Khalistan.”

Had Hayer been able to testify at the Air India criminal trial, the infamous 2005 result might have been dif-

“Had Hayer been alive to testify at the Air India trial, the infamous 2005 result might have been very different

ferent. But on Nov. 18, 1998, he was gunned down in his garage — this time fatally — thereby rendering his statement inadmissible.

Purewal, another one-time militant separatist who'd changed his tune after becoming disgusted with the Khalistani movement, was gunned down in 1995 under similar circumstances. The death toll of Air-India Flight 182 is listed as 329. I'd say the real number is at least 331.

Tara Singh Hayer was no saint. Like many publishers in the spectacularly fragmented and gossip-mongering Punjabi-Canadian media, he often went in for petty feuds and personal vendettas. But on the most important

issue facing his community, he was utterly fearless. Despite numerous death threats, including open calls for his murder on Punjabi radio, Hayer kept pumping out articles attacking Khalistani Sikhs. How many journalists in this country, or any country, would have the guts to do this — even before they'd been rendered paraplegic by two rounds from a .357?

Ten years later, Hayer's memory has been preserved — at least among journalists and his fellow Sikh Canadians. *Vancouver Sun* reporter Kim Bolan (who herself has received numerous death threats for her outstanding coverage of Flight 182 and its aftermath) laid the facts out about Hayer in chapters six and seven of her definitive

issue facing his community, he was utterly fearless. Despite numerous death threats, including open calls for his murder on Punjabi radio, Hayer kept pumping out articles attacking Khalistani Sikhs. How many journalists in this country, or any country, would have the guts to do this — even before they'd been rendered paraplegic by two rounds from a .357?

issue facing his community, he was utterly fearless. Despite numerous death threats, including open calls for his murder on Punjabi radio, Hayer kept pumping out articles attacking Khalistani Sikhs. How many journalists in this country, or any country, would have the guts to do this — even before they'd been rendered paraplegic by two rounds from a .357?

issue facing his community, he was utterly fearless. Despite numerous death threats, including open calls for his murder on Punjabi radio, Hayer kept pumping out articles attacking Khalistani Sikhs. How many journalists in this country, or any country, would have the guts to do this — even before they'd been rendered paraplegic by two rounds from a .357?

issue facing his community, he was utterly fearless. Despite numerous death threats, including open calls for his murder on Punjabi radio, Hayer kept pumping out articles attacking Khalistani Sikhs. How many journalists in this country, or any country, would have the guts to do this — even before they'd been rendered paraplegic by two rounds from a .357?

National Post
jkay@nationalpost.com