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

ISSUES





STEVE BOSCH / VANCOUVER SU

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

oday 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 Indianborn 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 difissue 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

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

2005 book *Loss of Faith*. And in 1999, Canadian Journalists for Free Expression named their Press Freedom Award after the man.

At Sikh temples, where moderates and fundamentalists had for years been engaged in political battles, and even fist fights, Hayer's death galvanized the moderates. More than 2,500 people came to his funeral — including B.C.'s then-premier. Even overseas, his death made news. Alongside all the other outrages committed in the name of Sikh separatism. Haver's death helped sink the separatist cause to the point that, in 2008, the Khalistan movement is essentially moribund in the Punjab community itself, even

if diaspora firebrands con-

tinue to bang on about it. Could Haver's assassination have been prevented? In Loss of Faith, Bolan suggests the answer may be yes. Following the first attempt on his life, the RCMP ignored or bungled the numerous clues suggesting the hit was part of a larger conspiracy. Moreover, Bolan notes darkly, penetrating radical Sikh organizations brought the police up "against powerful people with connections to the highest political levels in Canada.'

What Bolan means is that Haver wasn't just a stick in the craw of Canada's radical Sikhs, but also the slew of cynical politicians who rubbed elbows with all factions of the Sikh community in the sleazy game of ethnopolitics. In December, 1998, just a month after Hayer's funeral, none other than prime minister Jean Chrétien appeared at a fundraising dinner attended by Ripudaman Singh Malik and various other Flight 182 suspects. In recent years, Liberal leadership contenders have been encouraged to make the rounds of the country's less reputable Gurdwaras in search of warm bodies to bring to conventions. Even as recently as 2007, B.C. Premier Gordon Campbell, Surrey Mayor Dianne Watts and assorted other politicians attended an openly Khalistani Sikh parade whose participants included well-known alumni of notorious Air-Indiaera radical groups.

This sort of event is not only a disgrace to Canadian values, but also to the memory of Tara Singh Hayer. A Canadian patriot, he died in the fight against terror and radicalism. Not many of us would be prepared to make that kind of sacrifice. But surely we can at least avoid shaking hands with his enemies.

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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 vears, 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

ship and control over the Open Society media operations, Institute's interand disseminate national media blatant propaprogram. ganda. Low levels of pro-Mellissa fessionalism Fung 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

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are not, once again, silenced

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.

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Khorshied Samad and Jane

McElhone co-curate the Voices on the Rise: Afghan 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