

Press freedom termed central to building strong democracies

The Pakistani media needs a proper framework to provide security to journalists besides safeguarding their rights and all media stakeholders should form a unified "code of ethics" to promote media standards in Pakistan.

This was said by speakers at the PPF-Aslam Ali Press Freedom Award ceremony held at a local hotel on May 3 to mark the World Press Freedom Day. The program was arranged by the Pakistan Press Foundation (PPF) with the support of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO).

Former Federal Minister for Information Sherry Rehman said that there is a lack of proper rules and regulations within the Pakistani media and this vacuum could be filled by a new code of conduct, which should be formed by all media and other stakeholders, so that the government could not reject it. She said such a code could provide journalists security from pressures and threats. "The journalist community should jointly take this initiative, so that the corporate sector and government have no excuse to reject it."

She said the media's role to make different sections of society accountable is a difficult task as journalists put their jobs and life at stake while covering sensitive issues, she added. Rehman said that the kidnapping of journalists is another big issue in Pakistan. "It is unfortunate that we get to hear very few stories about the release of such kidnapped journalists and the ordeals they faced during their captivity. She suggested that narratives of those journalists should be catalogued as to make a record of such happenings," she said.

Speaking at the occasion, Amber Junaid, UNESCO Communication Officer said "the World Press Freedom Day is an annual reminder to the international community that freedom of the press and freedom of expression are fundamental rights. We need to defend these rights because they are a fundamental cornerstone of democracy and make a difference in the lives of the people all around the world," she said. Quoting from the message for UNESCO Director General she said efforts must be made to build a media that was critical of inherited assumptions yet tolerant of alternative perspectives.

In his address, Owais Aslam Ali, Secretary General of PPF said, effective laws are required for ensuring access to information, as Article 19 speaks about the freedom to receive and impart information. "There should be a certain mechanism to give journalists an easy access to information, Most of the government-related information is termed 'confidential' and access to it is denied, but when journalists write without having such information, the government criticizes them for writing a one-sided story," he maintained.

Ali also called on the government to issue licenses for community radio. He lamented that Pakistan is the only country in South Asia that does not issue licenses for community radio. The unintended consequence of this misguided policy is that militant organizations, who are broadcasting without government permission, have a monopoly over the airwaves in large parts of the country. He said the only way to counter the impact of radio broadcasts by militants is to grant licenses for community radio stations. He said as a first step licenses for community radio

could be granted to local press clubs that have the professional resources and competence to manage small radio stations.

Regarding the security conditions for journalists in Pakistan, Ali said that things are dismal and bleak. One reason why attacks on media are on the rise is that there is virtual impunity for those who threaten, harass and attack the media. He quoted the report by the US based Committee to Protect Journalists that included Pakistan among the 14 countries that do not properly investigate murders of journalists.

Others who spoke on the occasion included Fazal Qureshi, Chairman, PPF; Quadratullah Chaudhry, Group Editor, daily Pakistan; Idrees Bakhtiar, senior reporter, monthly *Herald*; S.M. Fazal, Editor, *Daily News*, Muqtida Ali, Editorial Coordinator, PPF; Faisal Aziz Khan, President, Association of Television Journalists and Zahid Hussain, Photo Editor, Jang Group of Newspapers.

PPF-Aslam Ali Press Freedom Award was given to Zubair Mujahid, correspondent of Urdu daily Jang in the town of Mirpurkhas. He was fatally shot for what is widely believed to be his hard hitting coverage highlighting police corruption and atrocities, which led to the arrest of a number of police officials.

The panel of judges for PPF Aslam Ali Press Freedom Award funded by UNESCO for the year included Syed Faseh Iqbal, Editor-in-Chief, Daily *Balochistan Times* Quetta; Rahimullah Yousafzai, Executive Editor, *The News International* Rawalpindi; Quadratullah Chaudhry, Group Editor, *daily Pakistan* Lahore; Idrees Bakhtiar, senior reporter, monthly *Herald*; S.M. Fazal, Editor, *Daily News* Karachi, Ashar Rehman, Resident Editor, *Dawn*, Lahore; Tahir Najmi, Editor, *Express*.

The award is named after Founder Trustee of Pakistan Press Foundation (PPF) and Founder Chairman Pakistan Press International (PPI) News Agency late Aslam Ali, who was declared as one of the 50 heroes of Press Freedom in the 20th century by the International Press Institute (IPI).