

Media not able to report on many issues: journalists

ISLAMABAD: At a seminar on World Press Freedom Day, Punjab Information Commissioner Mukhtar Ahmed Ali said Pakistan's bureaucracy has inherited a culture of secrecy. He said laws like the Official Secrets Act 1923 had led to a long history of classified documents, and it would take a long time to change such trends.

Mr Ali said even government officials cannot get information due to the mindset of the bureaucracy, because civil servants were trained to keep things secret.

Mr Ali was speaking at a seminar on "Right to Information Legislation and Safety of Journalists in Pakistan," organised by UNESCO, the Netherlands embassy, Media Matters for Democracy (MMD) and the Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives.

He said there had been some progress since the right to information (RTI) legislation was passed in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

"During the last two years, 2,000 complaints were received in Punjab and almost 1,300 have been decided. The commission has also given some decisions against the chief minister's office, such as how many presents were received by the chief minister, and the office finally provided the information," he said.

However, he added that the government had not provided adequate assistance, and the commission – which was set up two years ago – was still understaffed.

Punjab information commissioner says press freedom not possible if culture of secrecy persists

Mr Mukhtar said things would improve with time, and that hopefully people will be able to ask media houses how much they pay their employees, and what measures they have taken for the security of their employees.

Senior journalist Mohammad Ziauddin said there was a lot in the country that the media would like to report on, but this was not possible.

"Nobody knows what is happening in Fata. In Karachi, things are worse and the situation is the same in Punjab. The media has the role of a watchdog but it cannot report - especially on security forces, the judiciary and even about governments," he said.

"Journalists face pressures from the state and also from media owners, because most owners of media houses have many other businesses. A working journalist faces pressure all the time," he added.

"Recently, a movie was banned in Pakistan and after that two documentaries, about Balochistan and the Red Mosque, were also banned. And the RTI bill has been stuck somewhere," he said.

Senior journalist Hamid Mir said Pakistan was the fourth most dangerous state for journalists. He said while 117 journalists had been killed in Pakistan, the killers of just two of them have been punished.

“At the moment, both state and non-state actors have been threatening and killing journalists. A journalist from Fata, Mukarram Khan, was killed because he was close to security agencies. On the other hand, another journalist from Fata, Hayatullah Khan, was killed as, according to him, he was not ready to work for the security agencies. Saleem Shahzad, a journalist, was kidnapped from Islamabad and assassinated,” he said.

Mr Mir said while the number of assassinations of journalists had decreased over the last two years, the pressure on journalists and media houses had increased.

Human Rights Commission of Pakistan co-chair Kamran Arif said an ‘emergency’ had not been imposed in the country and basic human rights were not banned, so people should get their basic rights.

CPDI representative Zahid Abdullah said he had heard that RTI legislation was going to be reviewed under the changing conditions of the country, and would be passed as soon as possible. An MMD representative said security agencies were not answerable to parliament.

Meanwhile, a number of events were held on Tuesday to mark World Press Freedom Day. The Rawalpindi Islamabad Union of Journalists (Barna), led by the adviser to the International Federation of Journalists Pervaiz Shaukat, held a march from China Chowk to D-Chowk.

The union’s president, Namood Bin Muslim, demanded that the government make the insurance of journalists mandatory for media houses.

Another Rawalpindi Islamabad Union of Journalists (RIUJ) led by Ali Raza Alvi held a rally from the National Press Club to Super Market.

RIUJ secretary general Bilal Dar said the safety of journalists should be ensured. NPC president Shakeel Anjum, while addressing the rally, said 120 journalists have been killed but the majority of them could not get justice.

The Supreme Court press association also held a meeting, chaired by Hasnat Malik, and passed a resolution in which the Supreme Court was requested that the proceedings of the Supreme Judicial Council be opened to public.

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