

## **MEDIA-NEPAL: District Reporters 'Jobless in Their Jobs'**

By Damakant Jayshi

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NEPALGUNJ, Nepal Apr 20 (IPS) - Before King Gyanendra's Feb.1 declaration of emergency-rule, journalist Rameshwor Bohora was a frequent traveller to the Himalayan kingdom's rural areas -- where large swathes of Nepal are under Maoist rebel-control.

From the rugged terrain there he filed stories for the Kathmandu-based 'Rajdhani' newspaper on how the daily life of ordinary Nepali villagers had been affected by the 11-year Maoist insurgency, which has seen over 11,000 lives lost in fighting between the rebels and government forces.

But now Bohora is cooling his heels in his office in Nepalgunj - in Banke district - the largest city in mid-west Nepal. "There are bigger risks in travelling outside the city at present," he told IPS. "We might be followed by security personnel and may even be summoned or detained by the CDO (chief district officer)."

One big risk in being tailed by security forces is that the Maoist rebels might mistake the scribes as spies. The rebels have been known to be ruthless to anyone they deem a government spy, even going to the extent of killing the suspects.

While Bohora and his district reporter colleagues are "jobless in their jobs", the fate of 'Kantipur' daily correspondent Suraj Kunwar in the remote far-west Achham district is worse. He had to flee his duty station in Mangalsen, the district headquarters, after he started receiving direct and indirect threats. "I was being followed too," he said. After speaking to his editor, he left Mangalsen and is now in Kathmandu, the capital.

His previous reportage included writing about corruption in the local administration, the army and police's refusal to pay rent for the buildings and school premises they occupy during their hot pursuit of Maoists in remote areas, and the rape of a woman allegedly by soldiers.

At an estimated 10 killings a day, Nepal is currently the deadliest conflict in Asia. The London-based rights group Amnesty International accuses the 10,000 strong Maoists of kidnapping, torture and murder - including a penchant for clubbing victims to death and beheading truck drivers who defy its blockades. Meanwhile, the Brussels-based International Crisis Group says King Gyanendra runs "a non-party state that has decimated democracy and kills people at will."

Gyanendra dismissed the government and imposed emergency rule on Feb. 1 in what he said was a move to tackle the Maoists who are battling to set up a kingless republic in the desperately poor country.

According to the New York-based Human Rights Watch, over 600 rights activists, journalists, lawyers, students and political activists remain detained since Feb. 1.

Besides the heightened intimidation, journalists' tasks have been made difficult by directives or codes of conduct from several district administrations that the media has to follow. This is in addition to the code of conduct issued by the Nepal Press Council, which governs the work ethics of journalists and publications.

In Banke, the local administration issued a 12-point code of conduct for the press within two days after the king's emergency declaration. While the local media opposes the entire directive in general, they have particular objection over two points: not covering any political rally or meeting opposed to King Gyanendra's move and not writing any news about the clash between the security forces and Maoists. Journalists are forbidden to report on casualty figures including those of civilians unless it comes from the Royal Nepalese Army (RNA).

"We did this so as to help the local press resume operations," explained Dilli Raj Joshi, the chief district officer, who also doubles up as head of civil administration in Banke district. Ensnared in his office in Nepalgunj, the CDO reasons that was the only way to help the resumption of the local press that was ordered closed for a week since Feb. 1. "If we had not come up with such directives, the press might have remained closed."

Local district reporters, however, do not buy this argument. "The objective is to cripple the press so that the truth about the situation on the ground does not get out," said the editor of a local Nepali daily who did not wish to be named for security reasons.

Media defiance began soon after they resumed publishing newspapers. And calls from the army have continued unabated.

"Some editors got calls from the army officer from the RNA's mid-western division headquarters after they reported that two civilians were also killed in the cross-fire between the army and the rebels in Bardiya district in February this year," said the editor. "The army maintained that no civilians were killed."

According to New York-based Committee to Protect Journalist (CPJ) that came to Nepal recently on a fact-finding mission, a journalist from outside the capital was issued threats by an army sergeant. "We can do anything to you now as we are back to old days (referring to the days of absolute monarchy) again," the journalist was told.

It is evident that district journalists, being in the direct line of fire, are under greater pressure and subject to more threats than their brethren in the capital.

"The confidence level of journalists working outside Kathmandu is low," said 'Kantipur's' editor Narayan Wagle. "Even the level of checks and balances are low in the districts."

Wagle who himself was summoned by the crime branch of the Kathmandu district police last month for the prominent display of news about country-wide demonstrations against the king's move and the subsequent arrests of hundreds of political cadres and leaders, mentions the presence of the Supreme Court, international press, foreign embassies and other international organisations as check and balance factors that have kept the authorities on their toes in the capital.

But there is no such presence in the districts, he said. "Psychologically the journalists working outside are down, so it is difficult to work without fear," Wagle, arguably the most-travelled journalist in rural Nepal, pointed out.