

NOTE

Silencing Journalists

A Correspondent writes :

A year after the murder of Saleem Shahzad and in light of the strong reaction by journalists to his killing, are media professionals safer in Pakistan today? The revulsion and outrage with which not journalists but society more broadly reacted to Shahzad's gruesome murder was both commendable and brave. But the sad fact is that his killers remain at large and the right to freedom of expression and information is under persistent pressure by both militant groups and state security agencies. And the government has been able to do little to change that situation. Pakistan is widely considered to be one of the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists. At least 10 journalists were killed in Pakistan during 2011 and six have been killed so far this year. Four journalists were killed in the month of May alone. These are not just statistics but real people. Tariq Kamal and Aurangzeb Tunio were killed on May 9 and May 10 respectively. On May 18, the bullet-riddled body of *Express News* correspondent Razzaq Gul was found dumped in a deserted area near Turbat. Security agencies are suspected of involvement in his killing. On May 28, Abdul Qadir Hajizai was killed in Balochistan when armed men on a motorbike shot him dead. Reportedly, the Baloch Liberation Front claimed responsibility for his killing. In none of these cases has anyone been held accountable. Not just in Balochistan but also in FATA and KP, a climate of fear impedes media coverage of the military and militant groups. Journalists rarely report on human rights abuses by the military in counterterrorism operations and the Taliban and other armed groups regularly threaten media outlets. Meanwhile, legitimate media scrutiny of the judiciary also stands greatly curtailed due to fear of contempt of court proceedings. In Balochistan, Siddique Eido, a coordinator for Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), was abducted with another man by men in security forces uniforms on December 21, 2010, from the town of Pasni. The bodies of both men, bearing marks of torture, were found in Ormara, Gwadar district, on April 28, 2011. In March 2011, an HRCP coordinator for the city of Khuzdar, Naeem Sabir district, was shot and killed by unknown assailants. And now even someone as prominent and respected as Asma Jahangir has alleged a plot by the intelligence agencies to kill her. Asma Jahangir is no ordinary person. She is an activist of 30 years with a demonstrable record of unflinching integrity. Not only is she a figure viewed with admiration in Pakistan, she is seen as an icon by many in the international human rights movement. During these decades, she has been a consistent critic of the military and intelligence agencies but has never made such an allegation. But when she speaks the world hears respectfully and with attention. In April 2010, a three-member United Nations inquiry commission concluded its investigation into the Benazir Bhutto assassination. The commission was highly critical of the "pervasive role" played by the ISI and concluded that not only did authorities fail to provide Bhutto security but elements within the military may have

played a role in her assassination. It is a pity that the compulsions of political survival have forced the government to disown the findings of the report. □□□