

Afghan Journalist Is Killed in Latest Attack on Media Figures

ISIS gunmen attacked Malalai Maiwand, a well-known TV and radio journalist, in Jalalabad. Her death is one of a string of high-profile targeted killings in Afghanistan.

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JALALABAD, Afghanistan — An Afghan journalist was killed on her way to work on Thursday, marking the third fatal attack on a well-known media personality in just over a month and sowing fear in a community that came of age reporting on a country at war for decades.

Gunmen shot the journalist, Malalai Maiwand, 26, a television and radio presenter with Enikas Radio and TV, as she was traveling in her car in Jalalabad, the capital of Nangarhar Province in eastern Afghanistan. Her driver was also killed.

The Islamic State affiliate in Afghanistan, which has been active in the eastern part of the country since 2015, claimed credit for the attack, according to the SITE Intelligence Group, which monitors ISIS announcements. The Taliban denied any involvement.

Ms. Maiwand is the latest casualty in the high-profile targeted killings that have racked Afghanistan in recent months, especially in the major cities including the capital, Kabul. The attacks have prompted a public outcry accusing the government of failing to protect its citizens.

Ms. Maiwand's father, Gul Mohamad Mullah, called on the government to find his daughter's attackers and "not just promise to investigate the case and never find the killers."

The presidential spokesman, Sediq Sediqi, called the shooting a "terrorist attack," while Zabihullah Mujahid, a Taliban spokesman, said the killing "had nothing to do with us."

Shaharзад Akbar, chairwoman of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, said on social media that the attack amounted to a "war crime."

Ms. Maiwand had worked at Enikas for seven years, and while there had been threats against the television station, none were directed specifically at her, said Zalmay Latifi, the station's head. Ms. Maiwand's mother, a women's education activist, was killed by gunmen about a decade ago, according to her family.

On Friday, Fardin Amini, an anchor for Ariana News, a national television network, died. The circumstances around his death are unclear.

So far this year, 10 journalists and media workers have been killed in Afghanistan, said Mujeeb Khelvatgar, the chief executive of Nai, an organization that supports open media in Afghanistan. Ms. Maiwand's death followed the killing of two other well-known media personalities.

Aliyas Dayee, a beloved radio journalist, was killed when a magnetic bomb attached to his car exploded on Nov. 12 in Afghanistan's southern Helmand Province. Yama Siawash, a well-known former news anchor who was working for the country's central bank at the time, was killed by an explosive device affixed to his car in Kabul on Nov. 7.

Rafi Rafiq Sediqi, the former chief executive of a local news network, Khurshid TV, also died under questionable circumstances in Kabul on Nov. 26. A spokesman for the interior ministry said Mr. Sediqi had died from "gas poisoning."

In the case of Mr. Dayee, the Taliban had threatened him in the days and weeks leading up to his death and had ordered him to stop reporting on the insurgent group's operations in Helmand Province, according to a report from Human Rights Watch. Other Afghan journalists have received similar threats from the group in recent weeks, prompting at least one to flee the country.



Aliyas Dayee, a respected and beloved radio journalist, was killed by a magnetic bomb on Nov. 12 in Lashkar Gah. Noor Mohammad/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Days before Mr. Dayee was killed, he had asked his brother, Modasir Dawat, for a picture of him in Kabul to post on social media. He wanted people to think he had left Helmand, his brother said.

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“The government promised an investigation, but we haven’t heard anything yet,” Mr. Dawat said. “We don’t know who killed my brother and why.”

The Taliban never publicly claimed responsibility for the attack. On Friday, Tariq Arian, a spokesman for interior ministry, said Afghan security forces had arrested people thought to be involved in the killings of Ms. Maiwand and Mr. Dayee.

Najib Sharifi, director of the Afghan Journalists Safety Committee, did not point directly to one organization for the killings, but implied that insurgent forces were behind them. At the same time, there is a growing suspicion that pro-government groups could be behind some of the threats, in an attempt to put more pressure on the Taliban as peace negotiations continue in Qatar.

Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

Who are the Taliban? The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here’s more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

“Some groups think that the last two decades of change in Afghanistan are their biggest threat, and the media reflects that change, so that is why journalists are targeted,” Mr. Sharifi said.

Mr. Siawash’s father, Dawood, has posted the same message on social media nearly every day since his son’s death: “The government should point out the terrorist killer of Yama Siawash, otherwise the government itself is the killer.”

The Taliban often use unclaimed attacks to spread fear and undercut the Afghan government — all while refraining from large-scale attacks in cities under a February agreement with the United States that encouraged all sides to reduce violence.

Instead, the insurgent group has relegated its violence mostly to the countryside, especially in offensives in the country’s south, and has often used the targeted killings for propaganda purposes.

The Islamic State in Afghanistan still maintains terrorist cells in cities, and last month claimed responsibility for an attack on Kabul University that killed at least 22 people, and a rocket attack in downtown Kabul just weeks later that left at least eight people dead. The group is seen by many experts as one of the primary spoilers for any future peace in Afghanistan.

From July to September, unclaimed insurgent attacks in Afghanistan were up by more than 50 percent from the previous quarter, accounting for nearly half of civilian deaths, according to a U.S. government watchdog report released last month. In November, at least 200 civilians were killed across the country.

In 2018, a particularly brutal year for news media workers in Afghanistan, 15 people were killed, according to a report from Reporters Without Borders, including nine journalists who were killed in twin bombings in Kabul claimed by the Islamic State affiliate in the country. Five media workers were killed in the country in 2019.

While endemic corruption and a flailing economy continue to plague Afghanistan, its local news outlets have flourished in the wake of the 2001 U.S. invasion.

Zaki Daryabi, the editor of Afghanistan's Etilaatroz newspaper, was recently awarded this year's Transparency International's Anti-Corruption Award for a series of investigative reports into the government's mismanagement.

Zabihullah Ghazi reported from Jalalabad, Afghanistan, and Thomas Gibbons-Neff from Geneva. Fahim Abed, Fatima Faizi, and Najim Rahim contributed reporting from Kabul, Afghanistan.