

Three Women Working for a News Outlet Are Gunned Down in Afghanistan

The women, the latest victims in a wave of targeted attacks, were killed on their way home from their jobs at Enikass Radio and TV in Jalalabad.

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JALALABAD, Afghanistan — Three women who worked at a local news outlet were gunned down in eastern Afghanistan on Tuesday, according to local officials, adding to the bloody tally of Afghan media workers and journalists who have been killed at alarming rates in the past year.

The women were on their way home from work at Enikass Radio and TV, in the bustling city of Jalalabad, when they were killed in two separate attacks, according to Shokorullah Pasoon, the manager of publishing at the station, who offered scant details of how the incident unfolded.

The Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attack soon afterward, according to the SITE Intelligence Group, which monitors announcements by the terror group.

The victims were Mursal Wahidi, 25, Sadia Sadat, 20, and Shahnaz Raofi, 20, who worked in a department that records voice-overs for foreign programs, Mr. Pasoon said. A fourth woman was wounded in one of the attacks and taken to the hospital, according to a provincial hospital spokesman.

Malalai Maiwand, 26, a television and radio presenter with Enikass, was gunned down in much the same way in December. The Islamic State affiliate in the country claimed responsibility for that killing as well.

The Nangarhar police chief initially attributed the attack to the Taliban and said law enforcement had made an arrest on Tuesday.

The Taliban denied any involvement in the attacks on Tuesday. They have been blamed for much of the wave of assassinations that began in earnest following the February 2020 peace agreement negotiated between the insurgent group and the United States, under former President Donald J. Trump.

The women's deaths come at a perilous time for Afghanistan as security around the country continues to decline, and President Biden weighs whether to stick to the May 1 date set by his predecessor for withdrawing American troops. An emboldened Taliban are set on either winning on the battlefield or forcing the Afghan government to capitulate in their ongoing peace talks in Qatar.

Shaharзад Akbar, the chairwoman of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, called Tuesday's attack "horrific" on social media. "Afghan women have been targeted & killed too often," Ms. Akbar said in a tweet.

Following the 2001 U.S. invasion that unseated the Taliban and its extremist form of Islamic law that banned women from most jobs, Afghanistan's media outlets and news stations emboldened a new generation of Afghans and especially women, despite the unending war around them.



Mourners carrying the coffin of Malalai Maiwand, a broadcast journalist who was fatally shot in Jalalabad in December, in an attack claimed by the Islamic State. Parwiz/Reuters

But since 2018, more than 30 media workers and journalists have been killed in Afghanistan, according to a recent United Nations report. From September 2020 to January of this year, at least six journalists and media workers were killed in such attacks, according to the U.N. report.

Civilian casualties overall jumped after peace negotiations between the government and the Taliban began in September, particularly a wave of targeted killings of judges, prosecutors, civil society activists and journalists.

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The recent attacks have amounted to an “intentional, premeditated, and deliberate targeting of human rights defenders, journalists and media workers,” the U.N. report said. “With a clear objective of silencing specific individuals by killing them, while sending a chilling message to the broader community.”

The New York Times documented the deaths of at least 136 civilians and 168 security force members in such targeted killings and assassinations in 2020, more than nearly any other year of the war.

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.

The wanton deaths, often in populated areas such as Kabul and other cities, have caused public outcry from many Afghans for better security, especially for vulnerable people like journalists and human rights workers. Government investigations and accountability for the killings have been infrequent at best.

The Afghan Journalists Safety Committee said in a statement that “practical and effective steps must be taken to ensure the safety and security of journalists.”

Though the Taliban rarely claim responsibility for such attacks, the insurgents use them for propaganda purposes, especially to undermine the Afghan government.

But the Taliban are not the only ones taking advantage of the chaos. Afghan and U.S. officials believe some of the killings over the past year were carried out by people aligned with the government or other political parties.



Relatives waiting outside the hospital on Tuesday. Sadaqat Ghorzang/Associated Press

The Islamic State's role in these targeted attacks is also growing. Though seemingly contained militarily in Afghanistan's mountainous east, the terrorist group has shifted its strategy from seizing territory on the battlefield to mass-casualty attacks in cities such as Kabul and Jalalabad.

In November, the group claimed that its fighters were responsible for killing more than 20 people at Kabul University, before rocketing the city some weeks later, killing at least eight people. And in December, the Islamic State claimed responsibility for the murder of Ms. Maiwand, the journalist at Enikass who had worked there for seven years.

According to her family, Ms. Maiwand's mother, an education activist, was killed by unknown gunmen roughly 10 years earlier.

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