

Freedom of Press In Afghanistan Before and After August 2021

By Anisa Shaheed¹

Free press, freedom of expression and speech were among the most significant achievements of Afghanistan's democratic journey from 2001 to 2021. The August 2021 collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the accompanying return of Taliban rule has undermined these hard-earned gains to a devastating effect. This essay examines the trajectory and nature of these effects and contextualizes their big picture implications. In doing so, this essay considers the pre- and post-August 2021 state-of-affairs in relation to each other. To do so, the essay builds on primary and secondary sources, supplemented by this author's first-hand experiences as an award-winning investigative journalist in Afghanistan.

The essay begins by contextualizing the evolution of news media and press freedoms in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021, and the nature and scale of challenges faced by Afghanistan's media during this period. The subsequent section examines the patterns of attacks on the media alongside the timeline of the US-Taliban talks. How press freedoms and news media overall have been affected under the Taliban's *de facto* rule is analysed next, coupled with a discussion on the Taliban's treatment of media professionals, particularly female journalists. The essay concludes with four policy recommendations.

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In Context: News Media And Press Freedoms In Afghanistan (2001–2021)

Freedom of press is essential for the proper functioning of democracy because “[o]n one side it provides people active in journalism with an individual right to inform and to express opinions. On the other, press freedom gives the press guarantees appropriate to an institution inherent to the democratic process.”² Together, these features enable individuals to make informed decisions, which in turn helps advance human rights, good governance, accountability, and the rule of law. Thus, when press freedoms are threatened via censorship, intimidation of and violence against journalists, (in)direct attacks on the media institutions, obstructing the reporting of facts, and persecution for reporting facts, it severely obstructs the rule of law and prevents people from holding those in power accountable for their actions.

Until 2001, Afghanistan did not have a free, independent press, and the news media was virtually all state-run. The Ministry of Information and Culture administered the media, which was operated exclusively by *National Television*, *Afghanistan Radio*, *Bakhtar News Agency*, and branches of *Afghanistan National Radio*. It was only after the first Taliban regime (1996–2001) collapsed in 2001 that free, independent media (audio-visual, radio, print, and digital) began emerging in the country. *Ayane TV*, *Afghan TV*, *Ariana TV*, and *Tolo TV* were among the earliest independent media that commenced operations during this period.

These media outlets began broadcasting news and related programmes critical of the government’s shortcomings, human rights violations, administrative corruption, and crimes for the first time. The public at large welcomed these broadcasts, but the media nonetheless faced strong opposition from government officials and political leaders who detested having to deal with criticism and/or resistance from anyone. Although Afghanistan did not have

2. Poptcheva, E.-M. (2015). *Press freedom in the EU Legal framework and challenge*. [Online] European Parliamentary Research Service, p.2. Available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/EPRS/EPRS-Briefing-554214-Press-freedom-in-the-EU-FINAL.pdf>.

prior experience of free, independent media, and these early examples of news programming were nascent steps on the path to freedom of expression and democracy, the burgeoning media sector made remarkable breakthroughs and steadily expanded operations.

According to some statistics, there were about 1000 visual, audio, and print media actively operating in the country during the Republic era.³ However, beginning in 2014, some of these media outlets, especially print media, ceased operations due to reduction in aid projects and institutions. This was a consequence of the reduction of US and NATO troops in 2011 which brought with it a reduction in reconstruction funding as well.⁴ This was done to help the US reorient its programs to the reality that the Afghan government and security forces would have to take over the many functions that donors and their contractors had assumed.”⁵

By 2014, the total reconstruction spending was approximately 40% of its peak as compared to the spending of three years prior.⁶ Nonetheless, by 2015 Afghanistan still had 174 radio stations, 68 private television stations, and 22 state-owned provincial channels. And, as of August 2021, around 547⁷ media outlets were not only active but had also become strong enough to be truly considered Afghanistan’s fourth estate. For example, the Moby Group was established in 2003 as a diversified portfolio claiming 59% market share in Afghanistan’s media market with news, entertainment and children’s programming.⁸ The Killid Group, which began its first radio station in Herat in 2005, was managing 11 radio stations in 17 provinces by 2015. Afghan

3. Gallagher, A. (2023). *Event Extra: Afghanistan’s Media Landscape Amid Taliban Rule*. [online] United States Institute of Peace. Available at: <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/01/event-extra-afghanistans-media-landscape-amid-taliban-rule>.

4. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (2021). *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction*. [online] p.34. Available at: <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-21-46-LL.pdf>.

5. (Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2021)

6. (Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2021)

7. Afghanistan has lost almost 60% of its journalists since the fall of Kabul. (n.d.). *Reporters Without Borders*. [online] Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/afghanistan-has-lost-almost-60-its-journalists-fall-kabul>.

8. Procter, A.J. (2015). *Afghanistan’s Fourth Estate Independent Media*. [online] United States Institute of Peace. Available at: <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PB189-Afghanistans-Fourth-Estate-Independent-Media.pdf>.

media programming played a crucial role in shaping public attitudes.⁹

Additionally, in 2012, the BBC Media Action pioneered a live discussion public affairs program called Open Jirga, which brought Afghans together to discuss and debate directly with government leaders and policymakers. *Salaam Watandar*, produced by Internews, was another such program which offered a mix of news and entertainment, mixing Dari and Pashto as a means to promote national unity.¹⁰ Beyond these, there were shows like *TOLO TV's* Afghan Stat, and Voice of Afghanistan, which showcased young musical talent featuring men and women from across the country, along the lines of America's Got Talent. Although several government officials and politicians were unhappy with press criticism, the freedom of press and of expression was hailed as Afghanistan's most significant achievements by all political and diplomatic circles within and outside Afghanistan.¹¹

Advancements made by Afghanistan's free media in the decade after the collapse of the first Taliban regime was unprecedented in the history of journalism in the country. Veteran journalists, media experts, and professors of journalism felt empowered. They were able to keep the public informed, hold the government accountable and push for much needed laws to protect and preserve an independent Afghan media.¹² This included the 2004 Constitution, which guaranteed the right of freedom of expression and access to information, and the 2009 Mass Media Law, which promoted the right of freedom of thought and speech, defended the rights of journalists, and ensured an environment for their free operation.¹³

According to the managing director of Nai, a media watchdog, the Mass Media Law was unprecedented in the region but unfortunately, its implementation by the government created several difficulties for journalists. For example, the government replaced the Media Violations Investigations Committee with

9. (Procter, 2015)

10. (Procter, 2015)

11. President Ghani's Message On World Press Freedom Day. (2016). *Bakhtar News Agency*. [online] 4 May. Available at: <https://www.bakhtarnews.af/en/president-ghanis-message-on-world-press-freedom-day/>.

12. (Gallagher, 2023)

13. (Procter, 2015)

the Mass Media Commission, vesting authority for monitoring alleged media violations strictly with the Ministry of Culture and Information Technology and nine commission members, none of whom were from the media sector.¹⁴

From 2001 to 2010, Afghanistan's free media played a significant role in advancing freedom of expression and democracy. "Hello and good evening. I want to welcome you to the first presidential debate," stated television journalist Mujahid Kakar in 2009, as he commenced the first ever televised presidential debate in Afghanistan.¹⁵ Produced by *TOLO TV*, this kick started a television tradition where presidential candidates were questioned about their policies and campaign promises, and was widely watched all over the country.¹⁶ Its success saw its replication in both the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections. While this itself is a noteworthy achievement, the quantum of its significance is even higher when compared with the performance of their counterparts in Afghanistan's neighbourhood.

For instance, in 2020, the Reporters Without Borders (RSF) Index, also known as the World Press Freedom Index, an annual ranking that evaluates the state of press freedom in 180 countries and regions worldwide, ranked Afghanistan in the 122nd place, while neighboring countries Pakistan and Iran ranked 145th and 173rd respectively.¹⁷ The Index assesses the level of freedom available to journalists, as well as the efforts made by governments to respect and ensure this freedom, by considering a range of criteria like media pluralism, media independence, environment and self-censorship, legislative framework, and transparency, among others.

Nevertheless, even as Afghanistan's independent media grew and consolidated in strength and impact, the challenges journalists faced also tended to increase with it.

14. (Procter, 2015)

15. Medley, D. (2009). Afghanistan: First TV debate in presidential campaign. *UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan*. [online] 24 Jul. Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-first-tv-debate-presidential-campaign>.

16. (Medley, 2009)

17. *Reporters Without Borders*. (2020). *World Press Freedom Index*. [online] Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/index?year=2020>.

Challenges Faced By Afghanistan's Media (2001–2021)

Barring a handful of the initial post-2001 years, the past two decades were replete with challenges for journalists in Afghanistan. Beyond suppression of information and similar obstacles, Afghanistan's journalists also faced verbal abuse and security threats like physical assault and assassinations.¹⁸ Thus, Afghanistan's free press related achievements were hard won over 20 years, and made possible due to journalists' courage, persistence, and sacrifices.

Between 2010 and 2020 alone, 136 journalists lost their lives in service of press freedoms and freedom of speech.¹⁹ Individuals and groups such as the Taliban who viewed the media and freedom of expression as dangerous for themselves and their futures began killing journalists. In December 2014, the Taliban issued a fatwa against media outlets stating that 'fighters will use any possible ways to conduct suicide attacks and destroy such movements'.²⁰ However, media directors also faced an equal if not at times a more serious threat from government officials, law enforcement, and power brokers during this period.²¹ Most slain journalists and media workers were killed in targeted attacks in the last ten years.

The first significant attack on the media occurred in 2015 at the peak of media activity when the Taliban intensified attacks in the northern provinces and seized control of Kunduz city for the first time since their regime was overthrown in 2001. Reporters, especially those from *TOLO News* reported amid bullets and fire inside and outside the Kunduz city, informing the public about the conflict and the helplessness of Kunduz's residents. At the time, *TOLO News* broadcast a news report on the rape of female students in a Kunduz University dormitory by Taliban soldiers.²² Both *TOLO TV* and

18. AJSC 2020 Annual Report. (2021). [online] Afghan Journalists Safety Committee. Available at: <https://safety-committee.org/211/ajsc-2020-annual-report>.

19. Sadat, F. (2020). Concerns Grow over Journalists' Safety Amid Recent Attacks. *TOLONews*. [online] 11 Dec. Available at: <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-168425>.

20. (Procter, 2015)

21. (Procter, 2015)

22. Taliban 'Rape' Girls At Hostel After Kunduz Attack. (2015). *TOLONews*. [online] 8 Oct. Available at: <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/taliban-rape-girls-hostel-after-kunduz-attack>.

TOLO News faced grave threats from the Taliban who claimed no one was raped in Kunduz.

In January 2016, a suicide bomber targeted a car ferrying Moby Group²³ employees on Kabul's Darul Aman road, killing seven media employees, including three women.²⁴ The Taliban publicly accepted responsibility for this attack. International institutions widely condemned it as the deadliest attack on the media. This attack was a warning to Afghanistan's media and journalists. It caused several media professionals—especially from Moby Group—to quit working for the press and/or leave Afghanistan. This was the first major attack on a media organization since the collapse of Taliban regime in 2001.²⁵ Media watchdog Nai named 2018 the bloodiest year for Afghan journalists with 20 media workers killed and over 200 incidents of violence reported against the press.²⁶

A Comparative Timeline: Us–Taliban Talks And Attacks On The Media

Targeted killings of journalists escalated after the talks between the US and the Taliban intensified in 2019.²⁷ A United Nations (UN) report claims that 33 Afghan media professionals were killed between 2018 and 2021 and both the Taliban and groups linked to the Islamic State admitted responsibility for many of these attacks, while perpetrators of various other attacks continue to remain unknown.²⁸ In 2019 alone, 20 cases of murders of journalists and media workers were recorded in Afghanistan.²⁹ The Islamic State 'Khosaran Province' (ISKP) was also said to be responsible for some of these attacks. These targeted attacks on journalists and media professionals continued

23. The Moby Media Group is Afghanistan's largest private media company. It is the parent organization of various broadcast media outlets including *TOLONews* and *TOLO TV*.

24. Shaheed, A. (2019). Black Wednesday Victims Remembered. *TOLONews*. [online] 20 Jan. Available at: <https://tolonews.com/index.php/afghanistan/black-wednesday-victims-remembered>.

25. (Shaheed, 2019)

26. Ebrahimi, B. (2019). Prominent Afghan Journalist Assassinated. *IRANWIRE*. [online] 13 May. Available at: <https://iranwire.com/en/features/66014/>.

27. (AJSC 2020 Annual Report, 2021)

28. Gossman, P. (2022). No Justice in Afghanistan for Slain Journalist 2 Years On. *Human Rights Watch*. [online] 7 Nov. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/11/07/no-justice-afghanistan-slain-journalist-2-years>.

29. (AJSC 2020 Annual Report, 2021). Also see: AJSC 2019 Annual Report. (2020). [online] Afghan Journalists Safety Committee. Available at: <https://safety-committee.org/210/ajsc-2019-annual-report>.

through 2020 and 2021 and became the deadliest years for journalists. 11 journalists were killed just between the end of 2020 and the first half of 2021 alone, some of whom were murdered under mysterious circumstances. These include the November 2020 killing of a prominent former *TOLO News* presenter Yama Siawash, who was killed in a car bombing by assailants who continue to remain unidentified.³⁰

Attacks on women working in the media also soared, leading some Afghan women's rights activists at the time to argue that women had become particularly vulnerable during the US–Taliban talks as they were entirely excluded from the discussions.³¹ For example, on 02 March 2021, three female Enikass TV employees were killed in two separate shootings in Nangarhar.³² This was the second attack on female employees of this private media firm in Nangarhar. Three months earlier, *Enikass TV* anchor Malala Maiwand had been shot dead by armed men in Nangarhar,³³ and the ISKP claimed responsibility for that attack.

Around 136 journalists and media workers were killed in Afghanistan between 2001 and the collapse of the Republic in August 2021. Several of them were killed in targeted assassinations after the commencement of the US–Taliban talks starting in 2018. According to the Brussels-based International Federation of Journalists, in 2018, armed conflict and militant extremism accounted for most deaths among journalists in Afghanistan.³⁴

Journalists and political analysts believed that the Taliban wanted to create a conducive environment for their presence in power as they wished before

30. (Gossman, 2022)

31. Graham-Harrison, E. (2019). Mena Mangal: journalist and political adviser shot dead in Kabul. *The Guardian*. [online] 11 May. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/11/afghan-journalist-mena-mangal-shot-dead-in-kabul>.

32. 3 Female Media Workers Shot to Death in Nangarhar. (2021). *TOLONews*. [online] 2 Mar. Available at: <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/attack-mediajournalists-170399>.

33. (3 Female Media Workers Shot to Death in Nangarhar, 2021)

34. 2018 Reverses Downward Trend in Killings of Journalists and Media Staff with 94 Victims of Violence. (2018). *International Federation of Journalists*. [online] 31 Dec. Available at: <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/campaign-against-impunity-2018/article/2018-reverses-downward-trend-in-killings-of-journalists-and-media-staff-with-94-victims-of-violence>.

they came to power. The Taliban does not tolerate freedom of expression and criticism. Therefore, before seizing power, they prepared the space for their presence. By targeting journalists, the Taliban were able to instill fear among media agencies, showing them their fate if they did not self-censor. Thus, after they seized power, the Taliban were able to swiftly issue and implement decrees restricting content that was critical of the group; enforce punitive measures for not following their guidelines; and remove women from all TV and radio programs.³⁵ For instance, in May 2022, the Taliban *de facto* authorities (DFA) ordered female TV presenters to cover their faces while presenting; in September 2022, they removed the women's seat from the Commission of Media Violations; and in May 2023, Taliban officials verbally³⁶ directed media outlets to not produce content about women's hygiene issues.³⁷

At the provincial level, *ad hoc* instructions were given to the media by Taliban provincial authorities, adding further limitations on the media. For instance in the southern Helmand province, the Department of Information and Culture, through *mullahs* in mosques, instructed media outlets not to feature women in their programs without prior approval from the department.³⁸ In northern Kunduz province, the Taliban instructed³⁹ media outlets to submit drafts of their content for review and approval prior to publication.⁴⁰ The governors of the southern Kandahar, Helmand, and Farah provinces issued audio directives barring DFA employees from participating in video interviews with media

35. Siddique, A. And RFE/RL's Radio Azadi (2024). This Is What It's Like To Be A Journalist Under Taliban Rule. RFE/RL. [online] 3 May. Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-taliban-press-freedom-journalists-media/32925395.html>.

36. تسلا اش خف جی ورت نان ز تشاد ادب دروم رد ی هدی ها آگآ: نابلاط. [Taliban: Raising awareness about women's health is promoting prostitution']. (2023). *Nimrokh Media*. [online] 11 May. Available at: <https://nimrokhmedia.com/raising-awareness-about-women-hygiene/>.

37. United States Institute of Peace. (n.d.). Tracking the Taliban's (Mis)Treatment of Women. [online] Available at: <https://www.usip.org/tracking-talibans-mistreatment-women>.

38. (United States Institute of Peace, n.d.)

39. دننک کی یرش ام اب رشن زالبق ار دوخی تارشن ی اوت حم اهناسر: زودنق رد نابلاط. [Taliban in Kunduz: The media should share their broadcast content with us before publication']. (2023). *Rukhsana Media*. [online] 14 Oct. Available at: <https://rukhsana.com/taliban-in-kunduz-the-media-should-share-their-broadcast-content-with-us-before-publication>.

40. (United States Institute of Peace, n.d.)

outlets, only allowing audio interviews.⁴¹

The targeted killing of journalists and decrees issued by the Taliban in the last three years reveal the group's deep fear of the media and the power it holds, and they are scared to let the society know of their true intentions and what they are doing. By systematically targeting the media, the Taliban were, and continue to be, able to silence critics, while projecting a false narrative that a) they have brought security and stability in the country; and b) that citizens are not only supporting them in their decrees but also in their system of governance lodged within an Islamic Emirate framework.

Impact of Taliban Rule On Free Press And (Female) Media Professionals In Afghanistan

When the Taliban seized power in August 2021, one of their first actions was conducting door-to-door searches for journalists, former government officials, and those who collaborated with foreign forces.⁴² In Kabul, just days after taking over, the Taliban DFA began turning away women news presenters coming to work. Journalist Shabnam Dawran shared a video on social media about how she was turned away from her job at *Radio Television Afghanistan*.⁴³ "They told me that the regime has changed. You are not allowed, go home," she said.⁴⁴

Approximately 250 media outlets shut down after the Taliban takeover.⁴⁵ Only a handful of independent media outlets continue to operate under the Taliban rule, but their journalists face strict restrictions, often leading to self-censorship. There are multiple cases where the Taliban DFA have imprisoned and/or beat journalists, when they were reporting on women's demonstrations

41. (United States Institute of Peace, n.d.)

42. Khurram, Z. (2021). Taliban carrying out door-to-door manhunt for Afghans on blacklist, report says. *NBC News*. [online] 20 Aug. Available at: <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/taliban-carrying-out-door-door-manhunt-afghans-blacklist-report-says-n1277231>.

43. (Khurram, 2021)

44. (Khurram, 2021)

45. Moradi, K. (2022). *Afghan Media Under the Taliban: Restrictions and Violations*. [online] Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organization, p.9. Available at: https://www.ictj.org/sites/default/files/2023-01/AHRDO_Report_Afghan-Media-Under-Taliban.pdf.

in Kabul. The media are no longer allowed to broadcast music and have been instructed to replace such content with 'sermons or readings from the Quran'.⁴⁶ They have also been warned to refer to the Taliban as the 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan' in all news and programs.

In the run up to August 2021, in every province, after capturing power, the Taliban instructed female media sector employees to stay at home. When they seized Kabul, they did not allow female reporters of the state-run *Afghanistan National Television* to go to office. Now they treat female reporters with immense discrimination and even violence. They do not answer phone calls from female journalists; are unwilling to provide information to and speak with women; and berate women who attend interviews or news conferences, asking them why men are not coming to meetings or interviews.⁴⁷ The Afghan National Journalists Union's 2022 survey on the situation of women journalists found that 87% have experienced gender discrimination since the Taliban takeover.⁴⁸ The survey shows that an alarming 60% of female journalists lost their jobs and 79% indicated being insulted or threatened by the Taliban.⁴⁹

As a result, numerous journalists and media professionals have left the industry due to increasing instances of reporters being arrested, beaten, or imprisoned for violating Taliban guidelines.⁵⁰ Some have been displaced to other countries, and some are either unemployed or have taken up other jobs. Some are doing odd jobs on the road. The collapse of the government, extensive Taliban restrictions on the media, and the dire economic situation have also placed immense psychological pressure on journalists. There are also reports of media workers committing suicide due to

46. Saber, S. (2023). 'I Feel Suffocated': Taliban Intensifies Clampdown On Music In Afghanistan. *RFE/RL*. [online] 17 Aug. Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/taliban-intensifies-crackdown-music-afghanistan/32551971.html>.

47. Afghanistan: Taliban Threatening Provincial Media. (2022). *Human Rights Watch*. [online] 7 Aug. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/07/afghanistan-taliban-threatening-provincial-media>.

48. For women journalists in Afghanistan, showing up for work is an act of resistance! (2024). *International Media Support*. [online] 1 Mar. Available at: <https://www.mediasupport.org/news/for-women-journalists-in-afghanistan-showing-up-for-work-is-an-act-of-resistance/>.

49. (For women journalists in Afghanistan, showing up for work is an act of resistance!, 2024) a

50. (Siddique and RFE/RL's Radio Azadi, 2024)

unemployment and poverty.

Conclusion

The August 2021 collapse of Afghanistan's government and political system, and the accompanying return of Taliban rule have produced an extremely challenging and treacherous situation for the country's media, which had thus far played an essential and influential role in documenting corruption, human rights violations, security, political and social problems for 20 years. Since 15 August 2021, Afghanistan has been experiencing some of the worst economic, political, and human rights crises but there is no free media and free professional journalists to report on and document this situation. The system's collapse and Taliban rule has destroyed 20 years of efforts and sacrifices for the freedom of expression in Afghanistan.

Policy Recommendations

- **Develop a Specialised Mechanism to Regularly Consult Afghan Journalists:** All UN agencies, international organizations, and governments must regularly meet and hold consultations with journalists in Afghanistan and those living in exile by creating a specific mechanism for this purpose. Concerns shared/raised by journalists during these consultations must be formally factored in when formulating engagement strategies and agendas *vis-a-vis* Afghanistan. These concerns must also be included as key agenda points during any external actor's engagement with the DFA.
- **Establish a Specialized, Integrated Rapid Response Mechanism:** The UN must partner with international organizations and journalists' associations within and outside Afghanistan to establish an integrated rapid response mechanism to tackle violence and threats against journalists in the country. This could help streamline protection related actions, thereby providing timely relief to at-risk journalists (especially women) not just in Kabul but also in other provinces.

Such a mechanism could also prove crucial for documenting crimes committed by the Taliban, and for holding the Taliban accountable.

- **Support Resettled Afghan Journalists to Continue Practising Journalism:** Several journalists who previously worked in the country are now based overseas after being evacuated following the Taliban takeover of August 2021. These journalists' careers have been disrupted in a very severe manner, but as trained, skilled professionals, they must be provided with adequate and timely support to continue in their professions. The UN, its member states, and international organizations must therefore simplify the resettlement processes of evacuated journalists and ensure that tangible measures are put in place to enable them to continue working as journalists in their current countries of residence.
- **Enable Afghan Media in Exile to Strengthen Press Activities Inside Afghanistan:** The UN and international organizations must work together with Afghan journalists in exile to develop platforms and facilitatory mechanisms that enable them to continue reporting on developments in Afghanistan. Such support could also include providing material and financial assistance to train new journalists inside the country, and to scale up reporting activities and related infrastructure in different parts of the country.