



Help desk improves the **safety of** **journalists** in Nepal

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DONATE

Journalists should be protected by law, so they can carry out their profession safely. Because that protection is often lacking in practice, journalists in Nepal can now call the legal help desk of Freedom Forum. Ashmita Pokharel runs the help desk on her own and digs her teeth into issues ranging from confiscated cameras to missing journalists.

It is one year ago that Ashmita Pokharel set up the help desk. Since then she has been really busy. “I have dived into countless cases. Sometimes they could be solved with a telephone call to a police station, but I may have to work for years on other cases.”

Press releases

If a journalist in Nepal gets into trouble because of his work, he can call the help desk. But Ashmita also gets tipped about a lot of cases by local stringers. “Those are often the simple cases, for example where a camera has been confiscated by a police officer.” First she publishes a press release and then does everything in her power to resolve the issue. “Because of the press releases the other journalists in need are better able to find us.”

Drop by the police station

“My work consists to a large extent of telephoning police stations,” she says, laughing, but it is not easy. “I often hear that the station is not allowed to reveal anything and I am given a new number. From that new number I get another new number and so I am sent on a wild goose chase. Sometimes I am certain that a journalist is locked up somewhere but that is strongly denied on the phone.” If needed, Ashmita will drop by a police station. “A journalist had been locked up for twenty days. The day after my visit, he was free.”

The legal help desk is part of Freedom Forum, a social organisation based in Kathmandu, dedicated to press freedom and the right to information. Free Press Unlimited supported Freedom Forum with the setting up the help desk and increasing their capacity. Partly because of this, Ashmita can now commit full time to the safety of these Nepali journalists.

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Ashmita Pokharel, Freedom Forum Nepal.

End to impunity

Ashmita also makes contact with the families of murdered and missing journalists, who disappeared during the civil war between 1996 and 2006. These are unsolved cases that have been neglected by the government because of the peace treaty. “I try to find out more about these cases, but often only the family members have access to the most important information. Contact with them is therefore extra important. Ultimately she hopes to put an end to impunity for these crimes.

Intimidation by local officials

That the help desk is desperately needed, is evident from the annual report from Freedom Forum, in which all the violations of press freedom in Nepal are listed. In 2016, they reported 29 incidents where journalists were the victim, in 2017 there were 66. “We looked at all the data of ten years and

saw that the number of incidents greatly increase at times of political unrest.” Last year there were national, provincial and municipal elections in Nepal. It is the first time in twenty years that Nepal now has municipal councils elected by the people. “Those officials are new to the job and often do not know what to do with these curious journalists. Or they are involved in a case being investigated and intimidate a journalist.” These types of case have increased enormously since 2017.

Extra protection

According to Ashmita, intimidation by officials is a serious problem. “By law, the government must guarantee the freedom of every citizen, including journalists. But journalists need that extra bit of protection. Because of the cases they investigate, they end up in conflict situations more often.” When the Nepali government fails to provide that extra bit of protection for journalists, at least they can call Freedom Forum.

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