

## **Pakistan: Investigate Killings of Human Rights Defender Arif Wazir and Journalist Sajid Hussain**

(Bangkok/Kathmandu, 13 May 2020) – Justice and security continue to fall short for Pakistani human rights defenders, the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) says today.

Following the targeted killing of political activist Arif Wazir on 3 May, ten days after journalist Sajid Hussain's body was found since going missing on 2 March in Sweden where he had lived in exile, human rights defenders are still at grave risk.

'Pakistani authorities have to put an end to all acts of harassment and ensure human rights defenders are able to carry out their legitimate work without fear of reprisals. Pakistan's record of impunity has created an increasingly hostile environment for human rights defenders,' said FORUM-ASIA's Executive Director Shamini Darshni Kaliemuthu.

Arif Wazir was a leader of the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM), an organisation that openly challenged the Pakistani army<sup>1</sup> and campaigned for civil rights for the Pashtun, an ethnic minority group in the country. PTM has been critical of Pakistan's policies in the country's tribal belt, formerly known as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

Since September 2001, the Government has mobilised security forces for a massive anti-terrorism operation in the tribal belt, resulting in large-scale displacement and enforced disappearances. The Pakistani army and security forces have been widely accused of extrajudicial killings and war crimes, which they have brushed off as collateral damage.

PTM has been advocating for the welfare of all, irrespective of caste or creed, and the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to investigate the killings of civilians.<sup>2</sup> Many members of the movement have been forcefully exiled, abducted or killed.<sup>3</sup>

The killing of Arif Wazir appears to have been due to his activism. Earlier in April, Arif Wazir was arrested by police for alleged 'anti-Pakistan speech' when he reportedly spoke about the impact of war on Pashtuns and the need for unity. Pakistani authorities have a record of using accusations of 'anti-Pakistan speech' as an expedient label to target human rights defenders.<sup>4</sup>

In a blatant violation of the freedom of expression, media coverage of PTM's activities have been ordered shut, and its leaders tacitly denied any screen or airtime.

<sup>1</sup> <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/sardar-muhammed-arif-wazir-murder-pashtun-tahafuz-movement-pakistan-army-6401803/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://thediplomat.com/2018/04/what-does-the-pashtun-tahafuz-movement-want/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://thewire.in/south-asia/pakistan-army-pashtun-tahaffuz-movement-fata>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.rferl.org/a/pakistani-rights-activist-in-hiding-from-authorities-arrives-in-u-s-/30173254.html>

In Sweden, Pakistani journalist and Baloch rights activist Sajid Hussain was found dead near the Uppsala River on 23 April. Sajid Hussain had been a prominent writer on enforced disappearances and organised crime in Balochistan, a province in Pakistan which has witnessed a long-running nationalist insurgency. He was granted political asylum in Sweden after having fled Pakistan in 2012 following death threats. Pakistani intelligence have been accused of being involved with Hussain's disappearance and death.

Pakistan has been rated one of the most dangerous countries for journalists<sup>5</sup>, owing to targeted intimidation, harassment, surveillance and threats. However, no effective protective mechanism has been made available to journalists, while impunity for crimes of violence against them prevail.

'The killings of Arif Wazir and Sajid Hussain are emblematic cases of Pakistani authorities tightening their grip on human rights defenders and dissenting voices. Without justice for Arif Wazir and Sajid Hussain, those who stand up for human rights will continue to face reprisals and harassment, even beyond State boundaries,' Shamini said.

Pakistan's only independent National Commission for Human Rights (NCHR) with a legal mandate to investigate human rights violations in the country has been dysfunctional for more than a year.<sup>6</sup> The lack of political will and commitment to human rights will continue to hamper the effectiveness of NCHR and the realisation of its mandate.

'FORUM-ASIA urges the Pakistani authorities to carry out an immediate, impartial, independent and thorough investigation into the killings of Arif Wazir and Sajid Hussain. The perpetrators responsible for the killings must be held accountable and brought to justice. Authorities need to guarantee the safety, integrity and wellbeing of all Pakistani human rights defenders,' Shamini added.

#### **About FORUM-ASIA:**

- **The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA)** is a regional network of 81 member organisations across 21 Asian countries, with consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council, and consultative relationship with the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights. Founded in 1991, FORUM-ASIA works to strengthen movements for human rights and sustainable development through research, advocacy, capacity-development and solidarity actions in Asia and beyond. It has sub-regional offices in Geneva, Jakarta, and Kathmandu.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://rsf.org/en/pakistan>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.dawn.com/news/1515906>