

It has become dangerous to be a blogger or a journalist in South Asia

By **Biraj Patnaik** South Asia Director,

1 March 2017, 17:54 UTC

For all the differences South Asia's countries insist on, they have depressingly similar attitudes when it comes to human rights. Over the past year, as Amnesty International documents in its Annual Report, civil society organisations have been harassed and shut down, journalists have been targeted, crude colonial-era laws have been unleashed against government critics, new laws have been invoked against critics online, and brutal practices have endured in areas afflicted by conflict.

After a gruesome 2015 in Bangladesh, where five secular bloggers were slain in separate attacks, the machete killings continued without any determined action from the government. LGBTI activists, Hindus, Christians, Sufi Muslims and academics became new targets. In Pakistan, this year began with the suspicious disappearance of four bloggers. They've all since returned home, but the government hasn't investigated who took them. In 2016, according to the Pakistani Press Foundation, two journalists were killed, 16 injured and one abducted. In India, two journalists were also killed last year. Freedom of expression was curtailed by the authorities in several cases. In Bangladesh, Dilip Roy, a 22-year-old student activist, ran afoul of the country's Information and Communications Technology Act for allegedly making "derogatory remarks" about Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajid on Facebook.

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In Sri Lanka, despite commitments to deliver on accountability for alleged crimes under international law, the authorities made frequent use of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). Tamils suspected of links to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) continued to be detained under the PTA, which permits extended administrative detention and piles the burden of proof onto the detainee alleging torture or other ill-treatment.

In Afghanistan, the conflict has been widening. As the Taliban and other armed groups seize more territory, punctuating their advances with horrific attacks on civilians, the number of people displaced has risen to record numbers. More than 1.5 million people now languish in overcrowded camps, where they go without adequate food and water in freezing temperatures.

The humanitarian catastrophe is set to worsen as the world turns its back on Afghan refugees and asylum-seekers. In Pakistan, even as the UN noted that civilian casualty figures have reached their highest point since records began being compiled in 2009, the UN refugee agency worked with the Pakistani authorities to forcibly return tens of thousands of Afghan refugees. The returns breached the international principle of non-refoulement: People cannot be sent to a country where they are at risk of serious human rights abuses. That the UN is directly complicit in this does not bode well for the rights of refugees in the region.

Like so many other countries who have abandoned refugees over recent years, Pakistan justified its behaviour on grounds of national security. The government alleged that the refugee camps hosted armed groups. While countries are entitled to take necessary steps to protect their populations, these must never come at the cost of human rights.

It's a principle that the Pakistani authorities have abandoned in Karachi and Baluchistan, where security operations have perpetuated a range of human rights violations, including arbitrary arrests, torture and other ill-treatment, and extrajudicial executions. And it's a principle the Indian authorities abandoned in Jammu and Kashmir last year, where authorities imposed curfews across the valley and

security forces deployed excessive and unnecessary force against protestors, even blinding hundreds of young people with the use of inherently indiscriminate pellet shotguns.

Instead of replicating each other's failures on human rights in a race to the bottom, South Asia's countries might want to focus their rivalries instead on who can provide a better future for their people – where each country is distinguished by the value it puts on human dignity.

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