

FoE and safety networks in provinces

Safety network/mechanisms for protection and promotion of free expression and journalists' safety have been formed in all seven provinces of Nepal. Freedom Forum mobilized its province representatives to institute the multi-stakeholder network to make FoE protection and journalists' safety a shared responsibility. Importantly, in a bid to make it a collaborative initiative, the networks have been set up also in line with recently amended National Human Rights Commission's Directive on protection and promotion of freedom of expression.

The network/mechanism is a 7-member team formed in each province comprising members including from Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ) Province chapter, Bar Association, human rights organizations, Province security agencies, Province government, Province Attorney Office, for the protection of journalists' rights.

Freedom Forum provided coordination and logistics support during the formation of the network. NHRC is the coordinator of the province mechanism, where FF actively facilitates the meetings. As per the directive, the networks formed will hold regular meetings to discuss contemporary issues on journalists' safety, media rights, freedom of expression online and offline. These networks will also function as a quick response team to monitor and investigate incidents of free expression violations in the provinces.

With the formation of the provincial networks/mechanism in all provinces, the groups are holding meetings and discussing safety of journalists, press and freedom of expression, and digital rights.

Koshi Province

In this connection, first meeting was held in Koshi Province on March 21. The meeting was coordinated by NHRC Koshi Province Office Chief Pawan Kumar Bhatt. Objective of the meeting was to make the network members aware of their roles and responsibilities.

Members of the mechanism in Koshi Province are :

1. Pawan Kumar Bhatt, Chief, NHRC Koshi Province
2. Rabin Sapkota, Assistant Attorney, Koshi Province Office of Attorney General
3. Hima Chemjong, Vice-Chairperson, Federation of Nepali Journalists Koshi Province
4. Prava Adhikari, NGO Federation Koshi Province
5. Bishwaram Bhattarai, Chairperson, High Court Bar Association Biratnagar
6. Deepak Pokharel, Superintendent of Police, Koshi Province Police office Biratnagar
7. Bikram Niraula, Province Representative, FF

Out of seven members, two are female. As decided in the first meeting, second meeting was held on March 26 at NHRC province office Biratnagar. In the meeting, NHRC Chief Bhatt oriented new representatives from the member organizations on the objective of network formation and its responsibilities.

Second meeting was attended by:

1. Pawan Kumar Bhatt, Chief, NHRC Koshi Province
2. Rabin Sapkota, Assistant Attorney, Koshi Province Office of Attorney General
3. Labdev Dhungana, Vice-Chairperson, Federation of Nepali Journalists Koshi Province
4. Prava Adhikari, NGO Federation Koshi Province
5. Arjun Kumar Adhikari, Koshi Province Police office Biratnagar
6. Bikram Niraula, Province Representative, FF

In the meeting, representatives appreciated NHRC's decision and FF facilitation to form the network for FoE protection in the province. Representatives in the meeting pointed out the need of clear procedures and resources to carry out the mechanism's action effectively. In the meeting, members decided to appoint an officer from NHRC Province Office as a dedicated staff to monitor and record FoE violation incidents, and to create

a messaging group of the province network members on WhatsApp mobile application for effective coordination.



Network members also suggested the commission to manage resources for operation of the network and proposed the team to conduct at least one field visit to Ilam before upcoming by-election of House of Representatives to monitor FoE situation.

Third meeting was held on July 11. In the meeting, members discussed misbehaviour meted out against a female journalist Sanjita Dhamala at Mayor Harka Sampang's office. Chief of NHRC Province Office Bhatt informed the members about NHRC's monitoring on the case. FF's representative Niraula also informed the members about FF's legal help to the journalist.

Attendees of the meeting are:

1. Pawan Kumar Bhatt, Chief, NHRC Koshi Province
2. Rabin Sapkota, Assistant Attorney, Koshi Province Office of Attorney General
3. Prava Adhikari, NGO Federation Koshi Province
4. Bikram Niraula, Province Representative, FF
5. Chiranjibi Koirala, NHRC office
6. Yagyaraj Angdembe, NHRC office

The meeting decided to hold next meetings at least once a month. The members urged Mayor Sampang and journalist Dhamala to refrain from violence and not to repeat such incident against journalist. The meeting further decided to hold the meeting of the province working group on FoE and journalists' safety and take necessary steps if such incident happens again.

"With the formation of provincial network/mechanism in Koshi Province with the incorporation of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) and other public agencies including representative from the Office the Chief Minister and Council of Ministers, multiple agencies' pay attention towards any anti-press incident and become further careful for the journalists' rights," said Bikram Niraula, FF representative in Koshi Province.

Madhesh Province

Similarly, multi-stakeholders' network in Madhesh Province held the first meeting on March 14. The first meeting was attended by

1. Rekha Dutta, NHRC Madhesh Province Chief
2. Anjali Kumari, Province Office of Attorney General
3. Sanjeev Yonjan, Province Police Office
4. Hadish Khuddar, FNJ Madhesh Province Committee
5. Balaram Subedi, High Court Bar Association
6. Sabitri Shrestha, NGO Federation of Nepal province committee
7. Rajan Singh, FF representative
8. Ashok Kumar Mishra, Bar Association
9. Dipesh Mallik, Journalist

Three out of nine representatives are female. The meeting formed a seven-membered multi-stakeholders' network for protection of FoE and ensuring journalists' safety in the province. Participants in the meeting expressed their commitment to do their best for effective functioning of the network. They also agreed to meet at least once a month to

discuss FoE issues in the province. Representatives from FNJ and NGO Federation province committees also praised the commission's move to form the network and said that they would raise voice for protection of human rights through news, articles and awareness campaigns.



Again, second meeting was held on April 10 in NHRC Madhesh Province office, Janakpurdham. The meeting was held to develop strategies for effective activity of the network to document foe related cases and record keeping of actual victims. In the meeting, representative from province police office said that the police would inform network members of any incidents of foe violation recorded at police office and ensure justice to the victims.

Attendees of second meeting are:

1. Rekha Dutta, NHRC Madhesh Province Chief
2. Anjali Kumari, Province Office of Attorney General
3. Shekhar Jung Thapa, Province Police Office
4. Deepika Ojha, Province Police Office
5. Rajesh Kumar Karna, FNJ Madhesh Province Committee
6. Sabitri Shrestha, NGO Federation of Nepal province committee
7. Rajan Singh, FF representative

Four members out of seven representatives are female. Similarly, chairperson of FNJ Madhes Province Rajesh Karna assured that FNJ will collect data on FoE violations from each districts of the province and support the network to document those. Other members also committed to work in whatever way possible to protect and promote FoE in the province and ensure justice to the victims.

In the third meeting held on June 21, network members committed to conduct a monthly meetings and support journalists and their families, FoE practitioners who are intimidated or threatened in the province. The meeting was attended by:

1. Manju Khatiwada, NHRC Madhesh Province Chief
2. Rajan Nepal, Office of Chief Minister and Council of Ministers
3. Anjali Kumari, Province Office of Attorney General
4. Shekhar Jung Thapa, Province Police Office
5. Parmanand Thakur, Province Police Office
6. Rajesh Kumar Karna, FNJ Madhesh Province Committee
7. Rajan Singh, FF representative

In this meeting, two representatives are female. Officer from Province's Attorney General Anjali Kumar shared that though justice process to the victims has been delayed somehow due to lack of adequate human resources, they are fully committed to ensure justice to the FoE victims. Representative from province police office said that the police office will inform the network as soon as it receives any complaints regarding FoE and journalists' safety and take action accordingly.

Bagmati Province

The first meeting was held on March 22 at the NHRC's province office in Hetauda. The meeting was chaired by executive chief of NHRC province office Rewa Regmi. Executive Chief Regmi informed the meeting attendees of the provision of directive on formation of FoE protection committee in the province, organizational representation in the committee and the committee's tasks, rights and responsibilities. As a member of the committee, FF's representative Rammani Dahal shared FF's active role to make the mechanism functional not only in central level but also at provinces.

Participants (two female and seven male) decided to form a committee and prepare a strategy for the mechanism in the next meeting.

1. Rewa Regmi, Executive Chief, NHRC Province office
2. Rajendra Mani Poudel, Office of Chief Attorney
3. Navaraj Dhungel, Bagmati Province Police office
4. Rupesh Dulal, FNJ Bagmati Province
5. Arun Kumar Khatiwada, President, Province High Court Bar Association
6. Kamal Kumar Bishwakarma, NGO Federation Bagmati Province
7. Pabitra Bhandari, NHRC office
8. Krishna Prasad Mishra, NHRC office
9. Rammani Dahal, FF



Second meeting was held on March 26. In the meeting, a committee (three female) was formed and next meeting date was decided. The committee members are:

1. Rewa Regmi, Executive Chief, NHRC Province office
2. Binod Amatya, Office of Chief Minister and Council of Ministers
3. Rajendra Mani Poudel, Office of Chief Attorney
4. Subash Bhatta, Bagmati Province Police office
5. Rupesh Dulal, FNJ Bagmati Province
6. Arun Kumar Khatiwada, President, Province High Court Bar Association
7. Arati Pathak, NGO Federation Bagmati Province

8. Rammani Dahal, FF's representative for Bagmati Province

9. Program Coordinator, Maiti Nepal Makwanpur office

Province High Court's Bar Chair Khatiwada opined the continuation of committee's works is necessary owing to its responsibility towards protection of foe in province. Members of the committee also discussed the need for joint action to make the province and local government aware to draft laws and policies in favour of FoE and media rights. NHRC Bagmati Province's executive chief Regmi reminded that the committee will act as stated by the directive whenever any incident of FoE violation will be recorded.

Third meeting was held on June 19.

1. Rewa Regmi, Executive Chief, NHRC Province office
2. Subash Bhatta, Bagmati Province Police office
3. Rammani Dahal, FF
4. Laxmi Poudel, NHRC office
5. Pabitra Bhandari
6. Rubina Ghimire
7. Loknath Ghimire

Four representatives are female. The meeting decided to form a district level protection mechanism by the end of this month. Meeting attendees committed to remain aware on any incidents related to foe practitioners and journalists in the province.

Gandaki Province

First meeting was conducted on May 6 at NHRC Gandaki Province office. The meeting formed a seven-member committee with members representing Office of Chief Minister, Chief Attorney, Province Police office, High Court Bar Association, Federation of Nepalese Journalists, Gandaki, NGO Federation province chapter and Freedom Forum.

Multi-stakeholders' network members are (one female):

1. Maya Devi Sharma, Coordinator, Chief of NHRC Gandaki Province

2. Shalik Ram Regmi, Member, Office of Chief Minister and Council of Ministers
3. Madan Sharma, Member, Office of Attorney General
4. Tek Prasad Subedi, Member, Province Police Office, Gandaki
5. Govinda Subedi, Member, FNJ Gandaki Province
6. Bishnu Prasad Sharma, Member, High Court Bar Association
7. Indira Poudel, Member, NGO Federation Gandaki Province

The meeting decided to call for the future network meetings every two months and formed a WhatsApp group for effective communication among members.



Second meeting was conducted on July 30 in Rastriya Bank Chowk, Pokhara. The meeting was focused on two recent incidents: a minister threatened journalists for their news reporting and two journalists were attacked by the protestors. Representatives from High Court Bar Association and FF decided to provide required support to the journalists on the case.

In the meeting, NHRC Chief Gadtaula and other attendees also decided to send an attention letter to the concerned ministry demanding information on the case and the letter will also be cc-ed to the Province Office of Chief Minister and Council of Ministers. Meeting was attended by (3 female):

1. Nitu Gadtaula, Coordinator, Chief of NHRC Gandaki Province

2. Shalik Ram Regmi, Member, Office of Chief Minister and Council of Ministers
3. Sujata Poudel, Member, Office of Attorney General
4. Tek Prasad Subedi, Member, Province Police Office, Gandaki
5. Govinda Subedi, Member, FNJ Gandaki Province
6. Bishnu Prasad Sharma, Member, High Court Bar Association
7. Indira Poudel, Member, NGO Federation Gandaki Province
8. Tanka Prasad Khanal, NHRC Office
9. Rajan Upadhyaya, FF

Gandaki Province representative Rajan Upadhyay shared happiness that the network building had been very effective medium to whet freedom of expression issues and journalists' rights in a collective manner. But network strengthening is important, he suggests.

Lumbini Province:

Amid many challenges, multi-stakeholder's meeting in the province was held on July 4 in the province capital city, Bhaluwang. As reported by the province representative Sudeep Gautam, meeting's objective was to form a province FoE and Journalists' safety network and discuss status of freedom of expression and speech in the province.

The newly formed members of network are-

1. Somlal Subedi, Chief, NHRC Lumbini Province, Butwal- Coordinator
2. Keshav Ghimire, Office of Chief Minister and Council of Ministers, Dang-Member
3. Birendra Kumar Lal Das, Member, Office of Attorney General, Dang
4. Damodar KC, Member, Province Police Office, Dang
5. Basanta Giri, Member, FNJ Lumbini Province
6. Gokarna Khatri, Member, High Court Bar Association Tulsipur
7. Jeet Kumari Belbase, Member, NGO Federation Gandaki Province
8. Sudeep Gautam, Freedom Forum

At the program, NHRC Chief Subedi oriented all the participants on NHRC's directive on formation of safety mechanism for protection of FoE.



Subedi shared that main aim of formation of the mechanism are-

- to provide protection to journalists, media workers, their families, and their properties, as well as to individuals' practicing freedom of expression if they are intimidated or at risk of intimidation,
- to minimize current trend of impunity by immediately preserving necessary evidence related to the incident thus, protecting freedom of expression.
- to promote freedom of expression and make attempt to prevent attacks on freedom of expression through monitoring, investigation, and public awareness.

All the participants in the meeting shared their commitments to inform the network about any incident in future and collaborate to take swift action on it. They concluded that though the province has not witnessed more incidents of violation of FoE, continuous monitoring and vigilance are necessary to protect and promote FoE to discourage unprofessional conduct.

Karnali Province:

First meeting to form the network was held on April 10 in the province headquarters Birendranagar. The meeting formed seven-member task force as guided by the NHRC's Directive.

Meeting attendees are (3 female):

1. Loknath Bastola, Chief, NHRC Lumbini Province, Butwal- Coordinator
2. Devilal Sapkota, Office of Chief Minister and Council of Ministers-Member
3. Krishnaa Kumari Bhandari, Member, Office of Attorney General
4. Rajan Gautam, Member, Province Police Office
5. Khagendra Bhattarai, Member, FNJ Karnali Province
6. Durga Prasad Sapkota, Member, High Court Bar Association
7. Bishnu Prasad Rawal, Member, NGO Federation Lumbini Province
8. Laxmi Bhandari, Freedom Forum
9. Man Bahadur Karki, NHRC office



NHRC Chief, Loknath Bastola stated that newly formed provincial-level committee will form working groups and conduct activities as required to protect FoE and journalists' safety. According to Bastola, individuals and organizations advocating for the protection of freedom of expression have been receiving threats lately, so the committee will work to ensure their protection as well.

Representatives at the meeting committee to carry out rescue and protection efforts jointly if incidents of violations of freedom of expression are found.

Second meeting was held on July 4 in NHRC province office Surkhet. Meeting was attended by (3 female):

1. Loknath Bastola, Chief, NHRC Lumbini Province, Butwal- Coordinator
2. Krishnaa Kumari Bhandari, Member, Office of Attorney General
3. Binod Sharma, Member, Province Police Office
4. Durga Prasad Sapkota, Member, High Court Bar Association
5. Man Kala Bhandari, Member, NGO Federation Lumbini Province
6. Laxmi Bhandari, Freedom Forum
7. Man Bahadur Karki, NHRC office
8. Narayan Subedi, INSEC Province Coordinator
9. Ram Prasad Upadhyaya, NHRC office

Coordinator of the multi-stakeholders' network Loknath Bastola referred to FF's annual press freedom report and said that Karnali has fewer cases related to press freedom violations as compared to other provinces. If we record any incident of press freedom violations, the network should immediately monitor the incident and take necessary action.

Representative from INSEC Subedi shared that as compared to press freedom violations, more incidents of human rights violations were recorded in the province. Hence, the network should prepare plan to counter those type of incidents in future, he stressed. Representative from the Bar Association Sapkota marked that the association is unaware of such incidents as no one reports the incident in court. Hence, the network should be active to identify such cases and support the victims accordingly and timely.

Sudurpaschim Province

Moreover, the first meeting of Sudurpaschim Province to form a province network for protection of FoE and journalists' safety was held on March 29 in the province headquarters, Dhangadhi. FF's representative for the province Min Bam highlighted the formation of the network, protection of journalists and their families, FoE practitioners,

need to end impunity relating to FoE and journalists' rights, to prevent attack on journalists through regular monitoring, investigation and awareness activities.

Representatives present in the meeting are:

1. Tirtharaj Ojha, Sudurpaschim Province Office of Chief Minister and Council of Ministers
2. Shree Ram Ojha, Province Office of Attorney General
3. Bharat Bahadur Chaudhary, Province Police Office
4. Hari Joshi, FNJ Sudurpaschim Province
5. Lokman Dhama, NGO Federation of Nepal Sudurpaschim Province
6. Hari Prasad Gyawali, Chief, NHRC Sudurpaschim Province

Representative Bam reported that formation of such network will be very helpful to probe the cases of attack on FoE and journalists.



In the meeting, representatives decided to actively lobby for protection of human rights in the province and collect necessary resources for operationalization of network. They

also agreed to create a messenger group for easy communication among members of the network.

Second meeting was held on June 13 in the NHRC province office Dhangadhi.

1. Hari Prasad Gyawali, Chief, NHRC Sudurpaschim Province
2. Tirtharaj Ojha, Sudurpaschim Province Office of Chief Minister and Council of Ministers
3. Bharat Bahadur Chaudhary, Province Police Office
4. Hari Joshi, FNJ Sudurpaschim Province
5. Shree Ram Ojha, Province Office of Attorney General
6. Indra Prasad Lekhak, Nepal Bar Association
7. Min Bam, FF
8. Bhupendra Bahadur Dhami, NHRC office

Representative from province police office Chaudhary said that the WhatsApp group of network has made it easy to coordinate and share information among members of the network. FNJ's representative Joshi noted the need for discussion among district level journalists and concerned stakeholders about the network's function and duties for effective monitoring and investigation of the violation incidents. The network should also be vigilant upon government's draft of new laws and policies related to FoE and media rights and coordinate with the concerned authorities for formulation of FoE friendly laws.

Representative Bam shared that it was possible to form the provincial network for journalists' safety after the amendment in a Directive related to journalist's safety at the National Human Rights Commission. But, the network members need to be trained and resourceful so that they can be more strengthened and enlightened.

The networks/mechanisms in the province have underlined the need of capacity building on freedom of expression and digital rights which would help identify pressing issues relating to journalists' rights in the present digital context as well.

(Reports to these stories are contributed by the FF representatives in provinces.)