



Free Expression

Issue 51 July-September 2020

A NEWSLETTER OF FREEDOM FORUM

People Deserve to Know

RTI for people-centered governance

Since its establishment, Freedom Forum has played significant role on establishment of legal, institutional and practical mechanisms for the implementation of right to information (RTI). It strongly advocated for the introduction of RTI Act in 2007, and for establishment of National Information Commission therefore. With this, the implementation of RTI has been a core activity of FF. Thousands of youths and women have been trained on RTI thereby building robust demand side of information, and tens of hundred public employees made aware on it to create friendly and responsive supply side of information. RTI has been an effective tool to make people aware of public issues and their rights and engage active citizens and public officials on building good governance, for RTI seeks transparency and accountability at public offices and encourages citizens' participation in planning and decision making. In addition to orientation, FF continued discussion, debates, follow up on RTI related development, research, suggestion for amendment of RTI Act, success stories, and safety to RTI campaigners and activists. Over this period, it must be celebrated that FF's campaign produced many success stories that exposed huge corruption and malfeasance in Nepali governance system. The campaign is still continuous.

Adding further dimension to the augmentation of RTI regime, FF developed an RTI Nepal App two years back and promoted it extensively across the country. The App was developed in view of the growing use of internet and smart phone by the youths in Nepal. It aims is the utmost convenience to those who apply RTI- ranging from campaigners to law practitioners. Everything- laws and regulation, success story and sample RTI application- is packaged here in the App. It has freed us from the hassles of turning pages of law book, but a click on the screen.



Since June to August, FF organized a total of 27 such programs bringing together people on the knowledge of this useful App.

At a time when people's movement was limited across the country with the COVID-19 pandemic, FF organized the Zoom meeting, thereby reaching the targeted groups for the promotion of RTI App Nepal.

ON July 5, the Zoom meeting entitled- 'Know your right to information' was organized in co-ordination with Rotaract Club of Kathmandu Metropolis. The program had the participation of 33 youths - 10 male and 23 females.

The program began with a presentation on fundamentals of right to information and procedures to demand information through the App which can be downloaded in Android Smart phones. At the program moderated by Dikchy Raut, RTI activist Aditya Dahal shared his experience of seeking information on expenses incurred during COVID19 response at a municipality office.

Program coordinator Sanju Dangol shared that knowing about RTI Nepal App, a first app on RTI in Nepal, the participants expressed happiness that they were now aware of it and would follow the formats, forms and procedures to receive information in future.

In the program, RTI expert and legal practitioner Sanjeeb Ghimire provided additional information on RTI, its legal provisions and also answered queries raised from the floor.

On July 12, similar orientation was held among 13 male and 5 female participants representing civil society, local government, teachers, youth and RTI activists from Kailali district of Far-West Province. Expert Ghimire highlighted upon the legal provisions of RTI and its use in Nepal focusing more on existing confusions on its practical use in the program. Moreover, policy advisor Krishna Sapkota pointed out the RTI being one of the major components of open government also contributes to making transparent and accountable government.

During the program, some participants shared their experience and difficulties they faced while using RTI. They also suggested inviting citizens along with local level authorities at such programs to ensure free access to information among general public.

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Message from Executive Chief

For restoration of vibrant media

After Nepali media began suffering in the wake of coronavirus pandemic, Freedom Forum conducted an assessment report covering four months- from March 24 to July 24, 2020. It showed that 38 percent of actively working journalists lost jobs to the pandemic. Huge decline of advertisement forced media houses to lay off journalists and media staffs. The decline in media advertisement was caused by huge shrinkage of economic activities. Nepali media house, especially the small ones, and working journalists are in stress at present. It is learnt that many journalists even thought of staging stir to draw attention of media houses that did not pay of political parties and government that did not take any substantial efforts to address their plight.

The retrenchment of journalists resulted not only in severe decline in investigative reporting but also the obstruction on people's right to expression and information. Many issues were underreported. Some also argued that the pandemic was treated both by the government and media owners as an excuse to suppress the journalists who question the authority. Despite this, the reports on corruption and irregularities perpetrated at various government levels in the mismanagement of COVID-19 can't be belittled. Gradually, the journalists leaving the legacy media joined the digital arena. However, the situation is still dull for both the legacy and digital media to secure robust future.

It was not that the debate was not initiated on who and how journalists and media could be supported and revived their vigor in the wake of the crisis, but no any noticeable step from any side- media house, political party, journalists' organizations/union, and government is quite alarming. Already hostile with the attempts to suppress citizens rights and journalists' right to free reporting against the constitutional guarantee, government has served nothing to ailing media industry except words of support, which hardly get materialized. At such situation, views surfaced again for building and strengthening community media, public and local media along with adoption of digital tool and techniques.

With this, the Nepali media at present is in sheer stress and uncertainty. A weak media means weak watchdog. So, it is imperative to keep intact the media current and watchful to correct system. Concerted endeavours can revive the strength of media where journalists are able to work in comfort and freedom. The watchdog role of media must not be diminished because the crisis can be handled as an excuse by the state which impedes democratic delivery. The revival efforts can focus on media pluralism, public service broadcasting and strengthening of local media. Along with the clean digital public sphere, vibrant digital media can seize the opportunity the pandemic created, being the voice of voiceless. Similarly, the legacy media can mull their traditional role and redirect themselves how they could best contribute to good governance being inclusive, plural and public media. The crisis has also served as a wakeup call for entire Nepali media industry questioning: what's your crisis management plan? It also accelerated the need of discussion and debate among the stakeholders that work to protect and promote well functioning democracy like media, CSOs, academia and political parties. Only sustainable, free and independent media works effectively to prop up the integrals of democracy- press freedom, justice, accountability, rule of law, and good governance which Nepal is yet to materialize fully. 

- Tara Nath Dahal



Murder convict held

Freedom Forum lauds the arrest of another murder convict of journalist Birendra Sah in Bara district on September 10. Nepal Police arrested convict Hare Ram Patel from his residence at Mahagadhimi Municipality, Bara. The district lies in Province 2 of Nepal.

Journalist Birendra Saha was a reporter with Avenues TV, Dristi weekly and Nepal FM. He was first abducted by the cadres of the then rebel Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) on October 5, 2007 from Pipara of Bara district. Journalist Sah then was found dead at Dumarwana VDC Ward No 7 of the same district after a month of abduction on November 8, 2007.

Earlier, among five convicts of the murder as declared by the court, two – Ram Ekwal Sahani and Myanejar Giri – were sentenced life imprisonment by the District Court Bara. Narendra Kumar Faujdar (Kundan) was arrested from his own residence at Baragadhi Rural Municipality, Bara on March 7, 2019.

Even after the arrest of Patel, one of the accused Lal Bahadur Chaudhary is still absconding.

According to the Police, Patel will be presented at the court demanding life sentence with compensation.



FF heartily praises the success of Nepal Police of Bara district to book the convicts to cater justice to victims' families. FF further urges the concerned authority to continue investigation and address remaining cases of impunity for crimes against journalists. Such activism of Nepali Police should be continued in other cases of journalists who were made victims in different times since 1996.

FF had prepared a report on the media persons killed and disappeared since 1996 to 2006. It had showed the status of the victim journalists and the struggle of the related families to get justice. FF believes that the report recommendation must have been useful for the authorities to launch efforts to end impunity relating to crimes against the journalists. Similarly, continued monitoring of freedom of expression and information and journalists safety has created huge informational resources for any positive action to be launched for journalists' safety. 

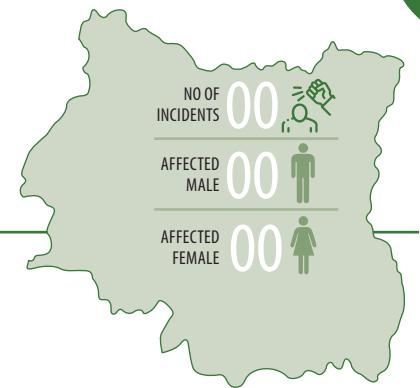


Slain Journo Sah.

Press Freedom Violations

PROVINCE 1

No incident of press freedom violation was recorded this quarter in this province. It is welcome in deed that journalists and media houses did not face any obstruction, threat and intimidation. It suggests journalists' rights are respected here.



PROVINCE 2

Threat

A. Reporter to the Prateek daily Om Prakash Chaudhary was threatened for reporting news by a local political cadre in Parsa district on July 9. Parsa district lies in Province 2 of Nepal.

Freedom Forum's representative for Province 2 Rajan Singh reported that a congress party cadre Hari Narayan Yadav misbehaved with the reporter for writing news about illegal storage and transportation of river-related products. Yadav also threatened reporter of physical attack in public and ordered him not to interfere in their matters as those materials were used in construction works.

Following the incident, reporter Chaudhary filed a complaint at a near police station, informed representative Singh.

B. Correspondent at Mithilanchal FM Rakesh Sah was threatened for reporting from quarantine in Dhanusha on August 25. Dhanusha lies in Province-2.

Reporter Sah was diagnosed positive for COVID 19 on August 18, since then, he has been staying in quarantine established by Province Governement in the local municipality.

According to FF's representative Rajan Singh, reporter Sah has been making aware the people on poor management in the quarantine through facebook live and his social media page. He has made public the poor quality of food served to the infected ones and negligence of media persons in monitoring health status of people staying in quarantine.



Following this, security officers on duty in the quarantine threatened him to stay quiet or else they would take action against him, informed representative Singh.

Threatening and silencing journalists who perform their job is sheer violation of press freedom and right to freedom of expression.

Arrest

A. Umesh Dube, a prominent investigative journalist who has earned his reputation for writing about corruption and malpractices was arrested for allegedly 'disturbing social peace and harmony' on July 29. Dube is Bureau Chief of TV Today Television HD and reporter at Sagarmatha National Television. He was arrested by District Police Office of Parsa. Parsa lies in Province-2.

As per Freedom Forum's representative for Province 2, Rajan Singh, "The dispute emerged after police disturbed Dube's movement for free reporting."

Dube informed Singh that he was wearing a press jacket and had press card at that time. Later the same day, when Dube posted a Facebook status saying that police's wrongdoings are not hidden from public's eye, he was arrested late in the evening.

According to DSP Manojit Kunwar, after holding him for two days, his custody was extended for 10 days as a court case against him has just been registered. The police rather blamed journalist

Threat to Female Reporter

Sharada Pokharel, a journalist with www. thahakhabar.com , was misbehaved for writing news about irregularities in Bara on July 12. Bara lies in Province-2.

According to Freedom Forum's representative, Rajan Singh, contractor of Shrestha Builder Lal Shrestha had threatened journalist Pokharel after she published news about Shrestha who had cheated municipality by handing over a bounced check for second installment of river excavation. Also, journalist Pokharel had earlier written news on the issue of river excavation and revenue embezzlement.

Shrestha had abused Pokharel during the discussion held at municipality office. 

Dube of demanding money from people misusing police's name.

Bijaya Kuswaha, a local journalist informed FF that the District Police Office, Parsa has the history of fabricating facts with the intention of revenge on those who speaks and writes against the authorities. In the past, several other journalists were called out and were forced to

sign papers accepting that they will not write or talk against the authorities. Journalist Dube frequently published news regarding security officials' involvement on boarder smuggling and corruption. Journalist Kushwaha said Dube's investigative stories were the reason behind such troubles.

The action taken by the police against Dube is one of many examples where journalists are troubled by initiating legal case on false ground. Such actions are discouraging to investigative reporting on the critical issues of the administration and security authorities.

B. Diwakar Shah, a reporter associated with Mountain Television was arrested for allegedly 'spreading false information through Facebook' on August 16. Shah is based in Saptari district which lies in Province-2.

According to FF's representative, Rajan Singh, DSP Tilak Bharati said, "The arrest was made due to the complaint filed by Federation of Nepali Journalist (FNJ)". A complaint by Chairperson of FNJ Saptari, Jitendra Khadka, was registered in Saptari Police Office after Shah was found spreading hoax information about FNJ Saptari through social media.

Shah will be held in custody for 5 more days for investigation purposes, as per DSP Bharati. But, what the false news was not made clear.

Attack

A. A group of masked men attempted to attack Sarlahi based reporter to the National News Agency Sankhar Pahadi for his

investigative reporting on crime and corruption on August 22. Sarlahi lies in Province-2.

According to FF representative Rajan Singh, Pahadi, also news chief at local Dhukdhuki FM 95.2 MHz, was returning home from radio station at around 7 pm. Meanwhile, five masked men verbally abused him and made attempt to attack.

Reporter Pahadi said that he might have been targeted for his support to anti-graft body (Commission for Investigation of Abuse of Authority) on good governance with the sting operation at the municipality's account section two months ago. He had been receiving threats for his reporting recently.

Representative Singh also informed that few days ago a government employee was caught red-handed while taking bribe in Dhanusha, which reporter Pahadi made story. Pahadi had filed complaint against the perpetrators at a local police station but in vain, he informed further.

B. Police persons attacked reporters to www.todaykhoj.com Santosh Yadav and Shivendra Rohita while reporting in Dhanusha on August 13. Dhanusha lies in Province 2 of Nepal.

Freedom Forum's representative Rajan Singh reported that Yadav and Rohita were reporting on death of a woman in a hospital after her family started a protest to stop police taking away the dead body reasoning hospital's negligence on her treatment. Reporters sustained minor injury on the baton charge by police persons while forcefully taking away the dead body. Reporters duo were attacked even

after disclosing their identity as media person, informed representative Singh

Police delete photos

Nepal Police manhandled reporter with the Radio Janakpur Shreekanth Jha while reporting in Janakpurdham, Dhanusha, a district in Province-2 on August 28.

FF's representative Rajan Singh reported that reporter Jha was taking photos and videos of the police inspection and inquiry to the public during the prohibitory order announced by the government to contain the spread of COVID 19. Meanwhile, the officers seized the reporter's mobile and shouted at him: Why he took videos. They also mentioned that taking video of police inspection during lockdown was prohibited as per order from high level.

They not only seized his mobile but also deleted the photos and videos recorded and then, returned the mobile phone after an hour, said, representative Singh.

However, Deputy Superintendent of Police at District Police Office Dhanusha Makendra Mishra said that no such order prohibiting reporters from reporting has been issued and that investigation on the case is ongoing, informed representative Singh.

The incident is a sheer violation of press freedom and citizen's right to information. Reporting on the issues of public concern is the right of journalists as guaranteed by Nepal's constitution. But such incidents have created fear among fellow journalists inducing censorship in media.

Spate of arrest of journalists spreads panic in province-2

The spate of the arrest of journalists in the recent days in Province- 2 has panicked fellow journalists, said Freedom Forum's representative from Province 2, Rajan Singh. Dozens of journalists from Bara and Parsa districts were arrested for allegedly 'spreading misinformation and disturbing social harmony.' Representative Singh reported that on April 22, Nehal Khan from Nepal Television, Mohammad Saddham and Abide Hussain from Sagarmath TV were arrested from Parsa and detained for four days for sharing a video against Parsa police's torture on social media.

He further informed that they were not charged of any crime, however. Talking to Singh, Parsa Police Superintendent Ganga Panta however said that they were detained just for enquiry.

Similarly, on May 10, police arrested Narayani FM's correspondent Tiwari Yadav while airing a program and took under control for 1.5 hours in police van in Parsa.

Again on May 27, Parsa's Chief District Officer Loknath Poudel verbally abused Public FM's correspondent Pranaya Sah. Sah had reached the office to report on squalid toilets.

In a separate incident, a camera person at News 24 television Zakir Hussain was brutally attacked by a group of three to four police persons in Birgunj on March 26. He was reporting on the ongoing lockdown in the municipality.

Though Hussain revealed his identity as a journalist, they not only beat him but also took him to the police station. Later, Police Inspector Deepak Sah released him assuring him of punishing the attackers.



Bagmati Province Threat

A. Editor at www.aayomail.com, Sunil Bhattarai was called at the midnight and threatened of physical attacking, breaking limbs on July 2. The online media is run from federal capital, Kathmandu, which lies in Bagmati province.

Sundar Khanal, the Chief Editor of NEPNSIGHT Media Pvt. LTD shared, “The threat was regarding a news publication on the topic relating to corruption within the Armed Police Force. Series of stories were published since June 24. Another news story the caller showed anger over was: The party registration of the CPN (UML) on July 1.” From the early morning of July 2, the media house received flurry of calls using abusive words and asking the location of the media office.

Also, only a day earlier in the evening, three suspicious people picketed the office premise and asked some unnecessary questions.

B. Mayor of Madi Municipality threatened the journalists in public on August 7. Madi Municipality lies in the Bagmati Province of Nepal.

According to FF’s representative Ram Mani Dahal, Mayor Thakur Dhakal threatened journalists for reporting news on ‘Mayor’s order to cut down trees for settlement of landless in Chitwan National Park area’ while speaking at a program. He also challenged the journalists to verify their news and threatened that he will smear soot on the face of those writing ‘fake news’.

Misbehaviour

A. Former President of the All Nepal Football Association (ANFA) Ganesh Thapa and his son Abhishek misbehaved with journalist Prakash Timilsina while asking for his statement over an allegation on July 16.

Editor of the www.hamrokhelkud.com, a specialized news portal on sports, Timilsina had called Thapa, asking the latter’s statement over using an employee of ANFA as his housemaid for years. Talking to Freedom Forum’s representative Ashok Dahal, Timilsina shared, “After following courtesy I asked him whether the allegation was true. He first accused me of not reporting about other corruption scandals in ANFA. Suddenly, he shouted on me saying he was recovering from an illness and my phone call panicked him more. He didn’t stop on that adding I was guided by his rivals and tried to kill him at the time of bed rest. He even told me that I should take responsibility if he died,” Timilsina added.

Representative Dahal further informed that minutes after conversation with Thapa, his son Abhishek had called Timilsina and used abusive words accusing the journalist of panicking his father. Thapa’s son had even visited the office of the online media and misbehaved with Timilsina accusing him of trying to kill his father. “I didn’t have any ill intention besides doing my duty. They misbehaved me for questioning over an irregularity,” Timilsina shared with Dahal.

However, Thapa has claimed that journalist Timilsina provoked him even though he declined to comment over the issue twice realizing ‘bias reporting’ from the media. “There wouldn’t have been any dispute if he had ended the call after I declined to comment on the issue. But he insisted and provoked me,” Thapa has posted on his Facebook.

B. Activists of ‘Enough is Enough’ movement mistreated journalist and creative writer Biswas Khadkathoki of www.onlinekhabar.com while covering news at Basantapur, Kathmandu on July 30. According to Freedom Forum’s representative Ashok Dahal, journalist Khadkathoki was mistreated by an activist of the movement while interviewing an activist who was staging a hunger strike at Basantapur for the last 11 days. “An activist with a placard on his chest pulled him back catching on his shoulder while he was interviewing Samayara Shrestha with prior permission from her. He was also asked to leave the place,” said representative Dahal, quoting Khadkathoki’s Facebook post. “I was shocked by the misbehavior which was rare in my decade-long journalism career and left the place stopping the interview at the moment,” wrote Khadkathoki on his post.

C. Reporter Royal Acharya and photojournalist Chandra Bahadur Ale associated with the www.onlinekhabar.com, a news portal run from the federal capital, Kathmandu, were misbehaved while reporting on September 18. The incident took place in Kathmandu. According to the information received at Freedom Forum, reporters duo were interviewing a local near the Federal Parliament Building on the occasion of Constitution Day 2020. Meanwhile, a team of Nepal police approached them and not only misbehaved with those but also tried to arrest. The police persons misbehaved with the reporters even after they showed their press cards. They also chased away and attacked the person being interviewed. 

Entrepreneur threatens, defames journo via social media

A businessman involved in sand mining threatened editor of ramropost.com Kailash Lama through social media posts over his reporting in Dolakha on August 29. Dolakha lies in Bagmati Province. According to FF’s representative Ashok Dahal, journalist Lama has been continuously exposing illegal sand and pebble mining in the Tamakoshi River in his reporting to the Sagarmatha Television and ramropost.com online.

“On the night of August 28 too, following his reporting, the police arrested some individuals involved in the illegal mining. Then, the irked racketeer Rajib Shrestha resorted to defamation, threat, and hate speech against Lama on his social media post,” added Lama. Talking to Dahal, Lama said that he had been facing threat from the racketeers for long after his reporting drew attention of the authorities about illegal sand mining.

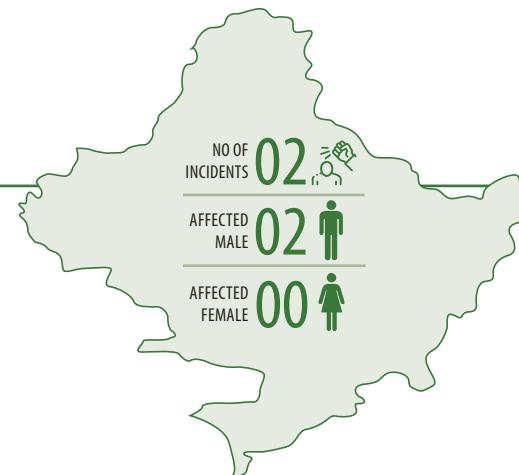
“He didn’t take it seriously before. But crusher industry operator Shrestha posted several posts against Lama on his Facebook spreading rumors about his professional integrity and hatred”, said Dahal quoting Lama. Also, editor Lama has filed a complaint at District Administration Office (DAO), seeking punishment against Shrestha at the earliest. 

Gandaki Province

Attack

Journalist Aash Gurung associated with the Kantipur Television. He was attacked over news by Ward Chair Govinda Basnet on July 2. Basnet is the Ward Chair of Besisahar Municipality Ward No-7 of Lamjung. Lamjung lies in Gandaki province.

According to the Freedom Forum representative for Gandaki province, Rajan Upadhyay, journalist Gurung was attacked over news which was about the misuse of agricultural



grants. Gurung had mentioned in the news that those who had access to authority were receiving grants without fulfilling grants criteria. He had also highlighted that one

who should recommend grants were themselves misusing the grants.

On the other side, Ward Chair Basnet claimed that he had not attacked journalists instead he had suggested him to research before writing stories.

Meanwhile, journalist Gurung was criticized and threatened through social media by cadres of the political parties over the news related to misuse of grants.

Lumbini Province

Attack

A. Journalist Tekendra Basyal was attacked while reporting in Nepalganj on July 3. Nepalganj lies in province-5.

Basyal is associated with online portal <http://globalsamachar.com.np/> .

According to Freedom Forum's representative for province-5, Sudip Gautam, journalist Basyal was in the field to report about land dispute among the locals. Land dispute between two parties was occurred and while reporting about the incident, journalist was attacked by the locals of one party named Aljam Halwai and Chandani Halwai. They broke journalist Basyal's camera.

Apology: Later both Aljam and Chandani apologized for their wrong act and also told journalists that they would compensate the loss of camera which was broken by them.



B. Journalists duo Bhagwati Pandey and Dinesh Pandey were misbehaved while reporting in Rupandehi district on August 7. Rupandehi is situated in Province-5 of Nepal.

Bhagwati Pandey is news chief at Lumbini Television of Butwal city, and correspondent to www.setopati.com (online news portal) run from the federal capital, Kathmandu. Dinesh Pandey is General Secretary at Lumbini Television and editor at www.samayachakra.com.

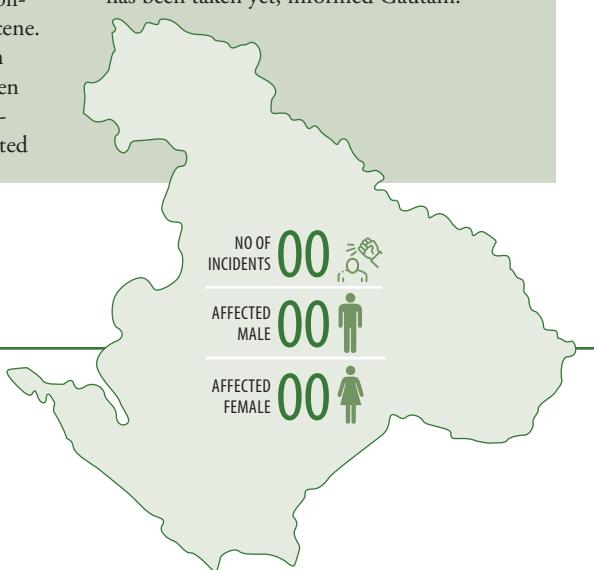
According to FF's representative Sudeep Gautam, journalists saw a police team from an anti-corruption body searching a government vehicle while heading to report news in Kapilvastu. Bhagwati then took pictures of the scene. In the meantime, a Police Inspector Roshan Pandey from the team seized her camera even after she revealed her identity card as a journalist. Again, journalist Dinesh Pandey started

recording video but the officer grabbed him by neck, manhandled him asking: Who permitted you to record the video? He then seized his mobile.

Later, the journalists got their mobile and camera back with the help of local police. Although journalists reported the incident to the chief of the authority but no action has been taken yet, informed Gautam.

Karnali Province

No incident of press freedom violation was recorded this quarter in this province. It is welcome in deed that journalists and media houses did not face any obstruction, threat and intimidation. It suggests journalists' rights are respected here.



Sudurpaschim Province

Journalists attacked at work station

A group of locals have attacked media persons by barging into the office of <https://dineshkhabar.com>; an online news portal and Dinesh FM in Dhangadhi on September 11. Dhangadhi city lies in Sudurpaschim Province. According to FF representative Min Bam, the online had published news about suicide committed by a 19-year-old Roshan BK in police custody.

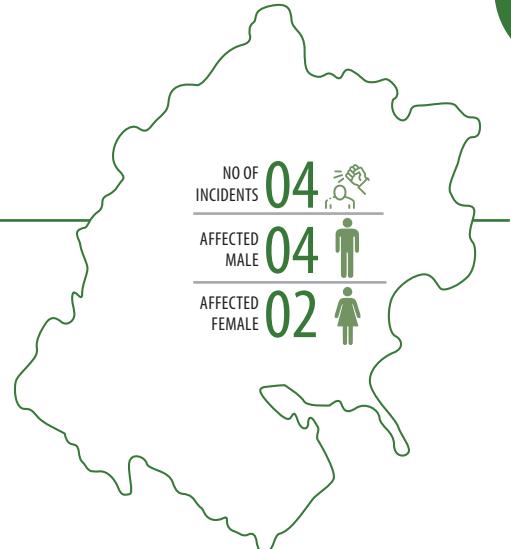
Few hours after the news was published, agitated locals attacked media persons claiming the news was fake and threatened to remove it. Editor of the media Nawaraj Paneru informed that they had published the news after confirming information from the police. Associate editor Janak Bista, reporters Ashmita Kunwor and



Kalpana Singh sustained minor injuries in the attack, informed representative Bam. Moreover, District Police spokesperson said that the news was genuine and they had sent police team for security at the media house.

Attack

A. Kamal Sabat associated with Dinesh Khabar/Dinesh FM was assaulted by Harka Bahadur Deuba and his son Thakkar Bahadur Deuba. The assaulters were arrested for investigation from Dhangadi, Sub-Municipality, Ward No 5 on July 5. Dhangadi lies in Sudurpaschim province. The incident took place at Ministry of Land Management, Agriculture and Cooperative of Sudurpaschim Province. Both father and son were held by the police under the charge of public offense. Spokesperson and DSP of District Police Office, Pratik Bista said the arrest was made after Journalist Sabat reported the complaint. The duo beat the journalist alleging him of defaming them by writing news about their ignorance to make a fish pond even after taking the grants from the Ministry of Agriculture. Harka Bahadur received the subsidy of Rs. 1,42,600 for the purpose of making the fish pond. Freedom Forum appreciates the prompt action taken by the police against the assaulters, and urges to initiate further investigation in fair and just manner.



B. Journalist Ganesh Chaudhary was attacked in Kailali on August 11. Kailali lies in Sudurpaschim Province. Journalist Chaudhary is associated with the Kantipur daily. According to FF's representative for Sudurpaschim Province, Min Bam, journalist Chaudhary was attacked while he was back from reporting. Chaudhary sustained injury on his face. Pillion rider Bhojraj Chaudhary, a friend of journalist, also sustained injury on the head. Journalist Chaudhary said, "I'm now aware why I was attacked. But, I know the attackers are local residents. I had no dispute with them at all."

Chaudhary also shared that complaint was registered at police station, Tikapur against the attackers Dinesh Shah, Shree Shah and Dinesh Kadayat. Meanwhile, Police Inspector Arun Bam of the Tikapur Area Police Office said that a necessary investigation is underway. The reason behind the attack could be found out only after the arrest of the attackers, said Police Inspector Bam.

Death threat, harassment to female singer

Various religious organizations and individuals issued threats and resorted to online harassments against singer Sophia Thapa for her song. In the song, she has said 'no fasting in the Teej festival', a cultural festival celebrated by Hindu women. Her new song "Aba ko Teej no brata please" (no fasting this Teej) was premiered from Highlights Nepal YouTube channel on 19 July. "Since the release of video song, comments from a section of people using abusive words and threats have been flooded on YouTube and social media," Thapa said. "Some have even threatened me of picketing my home for assault."

A comment from YouTube user Abhiman Jung Shah Shankar has warned of slaughter-

ing the singer for singing against Hindu religion. Teej festival is mostly celebrated by Hindu women in Nepal. Most of them stay on whole-day fasting wishing for the healthy life of their husband or beloved one.

"My intention is not to hurt the sentiment of any religion or belief. I am also a Hindu and follow Hindu rituals. I have just appealed to women not to risk their health by fasting and it doesn't help for the good health of their husband either," Thapa said. "But some people blamed me for being Christian and labeled with various accusations just while using my freedom of expression via the song," she said. A Facebook page in the name of World Hindu Youth Committee has demanded removal of the song and warned of starting protest if not removed. Freedom Forum condemns the online harassment and threat



of attack on singer Thapa because it violates her right to freedom of expression. She has not belittled any belief in the song. There are no words of hate speech, but just the message for women not to risk their health in the name of fasting. The song has further advocated for equality among male and female. Freedom Forum also urged the administration to stay alert to prevent the possibility of untoward incident against singer Thapa.

Information sought from local govt on details of COVID-19 expenses

Freedom Forum requested information at local levels of Province-2 and all districts of Bagmati Province, seeking details on expenditure they made in response to COVID-19. The applications for the information were sent via post offices. Total 220 information applications were filed, seeking details so that it would be clear how transparently the local levels worked in crisis.

The information applications were filed as part of the month-long observation of the International Day of Right to Information/ International Right to Know Day. FF organized various activities related to the right to information during September.

Project Manager and advocate Sanjeeb Ghimire and Program Associate Aditya Dahal requested for the information through the post office. The information was sought as per Article 27 of the Nepal's Constitution 2015, and Section 3 and Section 7 (1) of Right to Information Act, 2064.

Following information was sought from the local levels:

- a. How much money has been deposited and in which bank so far in relation to COVID-19?
2. What is the source of the money? How much money was spent on which titles?
3. Has any goods or money distributed as relief?

4. Who are the relief recipients?
5. What items were purchased to build/construct the quarantine and holding centers, with a certified copy of the bill?

Similarly, an application was filed, seeking information along with a certified copy of the decisions of the board meeting for the procurement process and the proposals regarding the Covid-19 from January 2020 to date.

Earlier, information was sought from 12 local levels of Sindhupalchowk and 18 local levels of Dhanusha and some local governments of Kathmandu. 

Podcast integral to digital lifeworld

We are in the digital lifeworld. Whether it is for entertainment or information, digital gadgets are appendage. Podcast is a new media avatar we enjoy often. In view of this very digital lifeworld, which is further boosted by the global pandemic, FF has continued production of podcasts on the issues that surround press freedom, media, freedom of expression, journalists' rights and security. FF has produced a total of 93 podcasts which are mostly based on its thematic areas.

Six episodes of Freedom Chautari podcasts were produced and broadcasted from July to September.

Owing to the current pandemic, not only journalists but also citizens had to face hard times exercising their fundamental rights. The 88th episode of podcast focused on status of press freedom and freedom of expression after enforcement of lockdown from March 24 to June 24 owing to coronavirus in Nepal. This episode mentions that a total 54 cases of press

freedom violation were recorded. Out of which, 45 cases were press freedom violation and nine freedom of speech. This data represent growing number of violation around COVID-19 pandemic after enforcement of lockdown.

Next 89th episode is about women in Nepali media and the pandemic. The podcast was based on FF's monitoring of Nepali media contents through gender perspectives from 2017 to 2020. Major finding of the four year's monitoring along with the voices of two female experts Namrata Sharma, Former Chairperson at Centre for Investigative Journalism and Suman Bajracharya, Director and Information Officer at Department of Information and Broadcasting.

The 90th episode brings forth discussion among media persons from Province 2 and those working in mainstream media on recently drafted bill on broadcasting of radio, FM and television. The discussion moderated by Sanjeeb Ghimire was focused on whether the bill addresses fundamental rights as guaranteed

by the Nepal's constitution and international community and whether it included stakeholders' feedback.

Moreover, 91st episode is about the media being an important medium that raises the voice of the voiceless and advocates various issues including gender equality in our society. The next episode includes a discussion on 'Democracy in the time of pandemic' among recognized advocates on International Democracy Day 2020. The program brought together views of senior journalists Taranath Dahal, Chandra Kishore and rights activist Bharati Silwal Giri who discussed various challenges citizens were facing in the name of transparent and accountable governance and how the pandemic was taken as an excuse to suppress freedom of expression.

Democracy and human rights are stressed in the 93rd episode, where views by Dahal, and National Human Rights Commission's Member Mohna Ansari discussed human rights status in Nepal. 

Continued from Page 1

They also said that the program was relevant, very useful and that they could easily seek information with the help of application formats available in the app.

Local coordinator Thakur Prasad Kariyapradhan facilitated the program while Pramod Bhattarai presented principles of RTI, related act, and its practical application through RTI Nepal App. The program was also held through Zoom application.

Similarly, next program was conducted on July 10 in Bajhang district of Far-West Province gathering 4 males and 16 females representing civil society, youth and RTI activists. Representative DambarSunar facilitated the program while Bhattarai from FF provided orientation on theoretical and practical aspects of RTI and RTI Nepal App. At the program, participants shared their experience while exercising RTI at public agencies. One of the participants shared that a community school which was reluctant to provide information before responded within two days after filing application using RTI. He had demanded information regarding student's scholarship scheme.

FF's General Secretary and Senior RTI activist Dharmendra Jha discussed how RTI evolved worldwide, its basic concepts and importance at citizens' level. Similarly, in a separate orientation held among media technology post-graduate students in federal capital Kathmandu on July 18, Jha explained that importance of RTI is to expose existing irregularities. He also stated present challenges on retrieving information from local authorities and making local citizens aware about their right to information.

During the program, one of the students Kabita Sharma shared difficulties she had to receive copy of her answer sheet using RTI at examination board. All the participants being media professionals expressed thanks to FF for building such informative and understandable App with facility of sharing questions through the App. The program was held via zoom. It was attended by 10 males and five females.

Again, at an orientation held on July 9 in Karnali Province, Chairperson of Karnali Foundation, Narayan Bhattarai, presented introduction, principles of RTI and its application through the App. Total 28 participants (17 male and 11 female) including journalists, civil society representatives, teachers and law students from different districts of the province attended the program.

Coordinator Khagendra Bhattarai had moderated the Zoom program where participants

At the program, participants shared their experience while exercising RTI at public agencies. One of the participants shared that a community school which was reluctant to provide information before responded within two days after filing application using RTI. He had demanded information regarding student's scholarship scheme.

especially journalists and students expressed commitment to use RTI through the app to contribute to creating informed citizenry for good governance. The participants also described RTI as an effective tool to expose corruption and develop information culture helps build responsible and accountable public authorities.

The campaign further continued among 22 students and tutors of a law college in Kathmandu. FF's Secretary and Advocate Ram Maya Lamichhane provided orientation, maintaining physical distance among the participants on July 10. At the program, Lamichhane discussed RTI Act, its principles, practices and success stories in Nepal whereas, Pramod Bhattarai described the App and its use. The participants were eager to learn more about process to appeal at National Information Commission after the first information request is denied from concerned authority and they also urged for the need to bolster NIC's function to promote use of RTI.

Again, on July 12, Lamichhane conducted an orientation among local representatives, community school representatives and citizens of Suryabinayak Municipality of Bhaktapur district. Along with Lamichhane, Aditya Dahal from FF moderated the program providing information on the App and its contents. The orientation was attended by 26 male and 5 female participants. In the program, Ward Chair Kiran Thapa said though the program was short, it was informative and useful for ward members as well as citizens for building good governance. He further informed the participants to read a book published by the municipality about its program and policies.

Owing to the pandemic, majority of the programs were conducted through Zoom online platform and few in-person with precaution. Starting from June, twelfth program was conducted on July 20 by FF's Secretary and Senior Advocate Rammaya Lamichhane among women members in Bhaktapur Municipality maintaining physical distance among participants and necessary precautionary measures. In the program, advocate Lamichhane described right to information and its importance along

with the use of RTI Nepal App for exercising RTI. In the program, Aditya Dahal presented features of the application. Participants were excited to know about the app with many features including information request formats.

Also in Province-5, FF representative Sudeep Gautam organized a similar program among youths on the same day. Bipul Pokhrel, Vice-Chair of the Federation of Nepali Journalists explained RTI and its app among students at the program. Students were enthusiast to learn about their fundamental right through which they could demand required information at the public offices. Gautam informed that more than 50 participants have downloaded the app so far and started using it.

Next on July 23 Narayan Bhattarai, Chairperson of Karnali Foundation threw light on the objectives of RTI and its legal provisions in Nepal at an orientation held among journalists, teachers and law students in Karnali Province. At the program conducted in coordination with Karnali Foundation, Vice Chair Khagendra Bhattarai moderated the program. The program was useful to orient the participants on importance of app for exercising RTI thereby making public bodies accountable towards citizens.

Then on July 25, students from Gandaki Province were provided basic information on RTI, its objectives and the RTI Nepal App. FF Chairperson Hari Binod Adhikari shared few success stories of RTI and described about various information that could be sought by students using RTI. The program was coordinated by Gandaki Province representative Rajan Upadhyay. On July 26, Upadhyay again gathered youths in the province and advocate Lamichhane oriented them on the RTI Nepal App. She also focused on legal provisions binding RTI and its application process. Youths were enthusiast to learn about the useful app with application request formats. One of the participants thanked FF and said, "With the help of this application, we can demand information without anyone's help."

On the same day, next orientation was held among RTI activists, youths and teachers from Morang, Sunsari, Jhapa, Terathum, Panchthar,

Sankhuwasabha, Udayapur and Dhankuta districts of Province-1. The orientation started with a presentation on introduction and objectives of RTI by Raju Shrestha, an RTI activist. At the program, Sandilya Kafle, an RTI activist and technology student suggested FF that it added a feature on the app so that one could directly upload information requests and information received oneself.

Another participant Sishu Panta shared the experience that he had filed RTI application with the help of Shrestha in a university after he received absent remark in one of the subjects in his mark sheet. He further added that the app would be much helpful to seek information in a hassle-free manner. On the next day July 27, orientation was held among youth politicians, activists, students and media persons from Jhapa, Ilam and Panchthar districts of Province-1 maintaining physical distance. Activist Shrestha coordinated as well as made presentation on the objectives of RTI and the features of the app.

Next orientation was conducted among media technology graduates of Shepherd College in Bagmati Province on July 28. The program coordinated by Kabita Sharma was moderated by Nanu Maiya Khadka. She presented the basic principles of RTI, its application process and the app, while FF's General Secretary and RTI expert Dharmendra Jha informed the participants about evolution of RTI and its practical aspects including legal provisions. The orientation continued on July 29 among teachers, social workers, activists and locals in Province-2 through Zoom online. At the program, Jha shed light on the importance of RTI at community level and described how a citizen could contribute to good governance using RTI. Most of the participants shared worrying condition of RTI implementation in the province where the activists were attacked, misbehaved and their voices went unheard. Such incidents discouraged one to exercise RTI which in turn leads to corruption at local bodies, he added. Jha however encouraged the participants to continue demanding information despite difficulties and assured those of FF's support when required. The program was coordinated by representative from the province Rajan Singh and Nanu Maiya Khadka from FF made presentation on the RTI App.

Following orientation to the youths in Gandaki Province, representative Upadhyay coordinated the fourth orientation to journalists in the province on July 31. The program was facilitated by FF Chairperson Adhikari who emphasized the general practices and objectives of RTI and how RTI Nepal App could help demand information of public interest with the local government. Realizing the power of RTI as a tool for good governance, journalists further claimed that although the use of RTI was important, informa-

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tion was delayed or in some cases denied by the supply side because of which they rather used telephone calls for news reporting.

We believe women's access to information is equally essential to empower them. Taking it into account, local women were also provided orientation on RTI and the app. FF representative Sudip Gautam conducted next program in Province 5 among the members of Dang Women Jaycees on July 31. FNJ's central Vice-President Pokhrel facilitated the program by providing information on RTI, its use and steps to demand information along with importance of the App to conveniently practice RTI. The program was organized in-person adopting basic precautionary measures.

Again, on August 1 Gautam gathered around 57 women with majority of homemakers. At the program, Pokhrel acquainted participants on introduction, objectives, basic steps of RTI and the features of RTI Nepal App. He also helped the participants download the app on their mobile phones to ease information-seeking process. Similarly, an RTI activist Kiran Thapa shared his experiences and process to file application with the participants. At Province 2, Rajan Singh again conducted second orientation on the app among journalists, RTI activists and few local representatives from the Province on August 1. Senior RTI activist Dharmendra Jha discussed the evolution of RTI and its current scenario in Nepal. He also informed the participants about FF's recent campaign on RTI from where he demanded information on COVID 19 related expenditures at all districts of Province 2 and Bagmati Province.

Local representatives at the program expressed their commitment to cooperate with the information seekers and ensure free access to information to citizens at the province. Next orientation on RTI and use of the app was organized in Gairikot of Gandaki Province with the support from local youth on August 7. The local youth organizations- Gairikot Municipal Youth Forum and Rotaract Club of Gairikot collaborated for the event where 40 youths had participated. FF Policy Advisor Krishna Sapkota delivered the introductory

presentation on RTI including its legal and practical aspects while Nanu Maiya Khadka highlighted the RTI App features.

According to program coordinator Birat Sapkota, participants learnt that RTI is a solid base for governance and accountability and also for boosting local democracy. The youths also understood that they could demand information from the local municipality on the expenses of the recent COVID-19 management. Additionally, after being aware of the RTI law, some youths made commitment to use RTI law to demand information from Gairikot Municipality and continue the dialogue on the RTI in future days. On August 14, another orientation was held in Gairikot among members of child club. Children actively participated in the event conducted through Zoom online. At the program coordinated by Santosh Bhattarai, Sapkota briefed the basic concepts of RTI and the app. Bhattarai shared about his recent information request at Gairikot Municipality about COVID 19 expenditure. Further, President of Child Club Pradip Kandel thanked FF for providing them opportunity to participate in the event and sharing valuable information about the app.

FF's Sudurpaschim Province representative Min Bam conducted orientation among youths and journalists in Dhangadhi on August 13. He informed the participants about the app through which everyone could get necessary information about RTI and its practices. Coordinator of National Network for RTI and senior RTI Activist in the province Umid Bagchand also highlighted the importance of RTI, what type of information could be acquired by using RTI, what were the steps to be followed, etc. Moreover, participants discussed the challenges of its implementation where approximately people are illiterate and most of the information on government websites is inaccessible or in English language.

This way, FF concluded its nationwide campaign on promotion of the RTI Nepal App. The campaign covered all seven provinces of Nepal. Total 877 participants including 381 females (43%) learnt about RTI as their fundamental right and the RTI Nepal App as a convenient and useful tool to exercise their fundamental right.

Safety materials to journalists

As coronavirus spread to Nepal, journalists too became vulnerable because of the nature of their job. Mostly they are in field reporting. Social gathering is normal form them. While the virus was so threatening that social gathering is not allowed warranting strict safety measures. To this scary and panicked situation, FF though little, provided relief- the safety materials to the journalists. Of course, it was not possible for FF to reach everywhere, but in a representative manner in all seven provinces.

Freedom Forum distributed necessary safety materials (masks, sanitizer, gloves, and personal protective equipment) to journalists and media staffs for protection from possible infection. In coordination with its province representatives, additional materials were also distributed for other journalists who were reporting in the field. FF representatives distributed equipment to the journalists.



FF dispatched sets of safety equipment to each province with pieces of KN95 masks, bottles of sanitizer, packets of surgical, press jackets with FF's logo and some PPE sets. Receiving KN 95 mask and a jacket from FF's representative from Gandaki Province,

a reporter at Adarsha Samaj daily Top BK thanked FF for providing the materials, saying it was useful in the field during reporting. Journalists in other places too shared that they felt safer after using those gears during reporting. 🌱

FF demands serious, fair probe on death of senior journo Baniya

Freedom Forum is deeply shocked over the death of a senior journalist at Kantipur national daily, Balaram Baniya. His dead body was found in the filter of a hydropower project site at Sisneri of Makwanpur district on August 11. The dead body was identified at Hetauda Hospital next day and brought to Kathmandu.

It was learnt that his family had reported police to search Baniya who had gone missing for two days while he was returning home from the media house. Senior journalist Baniya had joined the Kantipur daily in around 1992, since then he had been writing on parliamentary affairs, political issues and governance, establishing himself as a recognized journalist. He had also been a member and secretary at

the Federation of Nepali Journalists' central committee as well as an active leader advocating for rights of the working journalists.

In the wake of COVID-19 pandemic, Baniya was learnt to have disappointed with the management at his media house. Few weeks back, the news about Nepal-China border he penned had faced wide criticism. His death seems mysterious.

FF demands serious and fair investigation on his death. The police administration is strongly urged to investigate into the possible involvement of the suspicious network. FF also pays tribute to the departed soul and expresses heartfelt condolence to the bereaved family members.

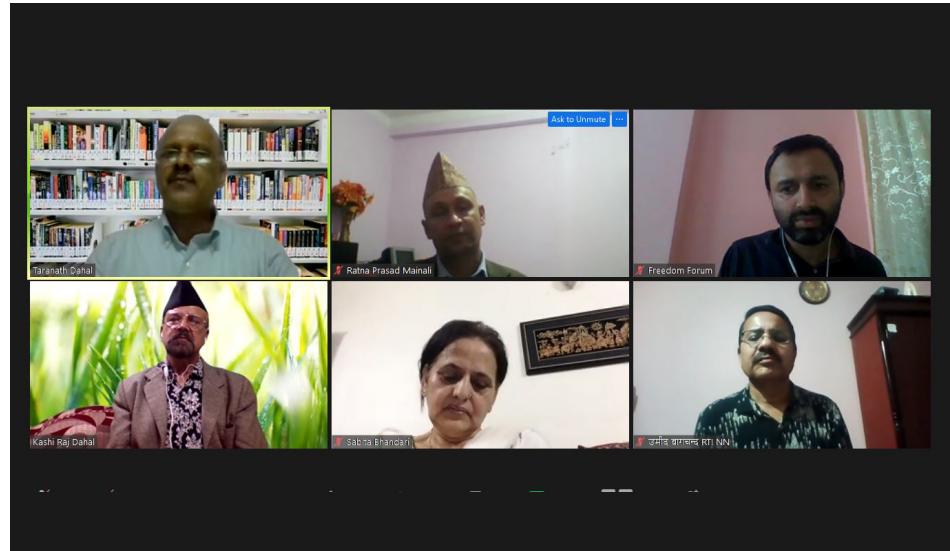


RTI key to good governance, experts say

F organized a virtual program on the occasion of the International Right to Know Day on September 28. At the event, governance expert Kashiraj Dahal pointed out the need of augmenting the right to information (RTI) movement in a bid to ensure good governance. "Citizen's right to know has direct relation to building rule of law, transparency, accountability and good governance in the country," Dahal observed.

Dahal further said democratic delivery would be disturbed if the implementation aspect of RTI is feeble. He argued that prompt public service delivery is the essence of federalism, the changed system of governance in Nepal. He however said culture of secrecy in Nepali bureaucracy poses serious challenge to implementation of the RTI. In the program that focused the present challenges before the implementation of RTI in Nepal, another expert and former Commissioner at National Information Commission (NIC), Sabita Bhandari, said major challenge of RTI movement was lack of RTI awareness among the citizens and weak management of information records and ignorance of RTI obligations by public bodies. "Transparency in information dissemination and proactive disclosure is the key to RTI," said, seeking the more pro-active and strong role of government agencies like NIC. At the same time, citizen too should be careful while requesting for information, she made aware.

According to Information Commissioner at NIC, Ratna Prasad Mainali, weak data protection mechanism at public bodies is a major challenge of RTI implementation. He however



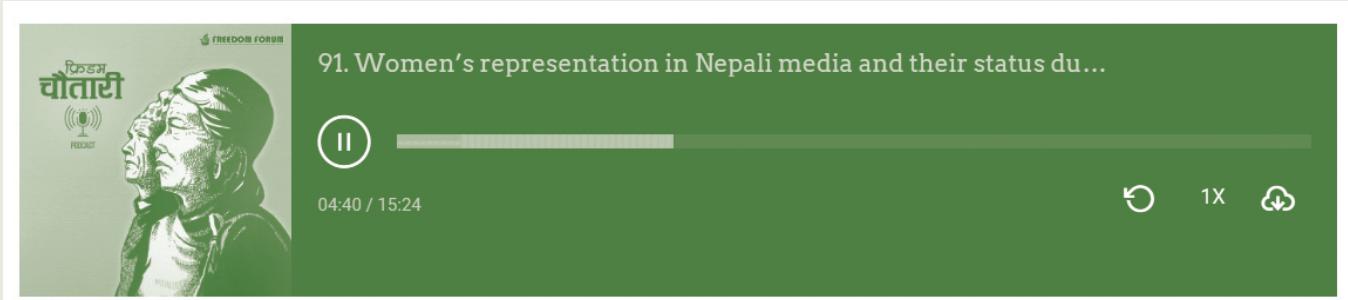
said NIC would augment its activities by working together with networks that work for citizens' rights. Mainali admitted weak proactive disclosure trend among public agencies,

Convener of RTI Network Umid Bagchand stated that he has been very active in filing RTI requests and this campaign had strengthened RTI and his network in this case. Besides this, he focused on the safety and security of RTI activists, collaboration with NIC, and another network to reform and strengthen CSO engagement in RTI mainly in P7 (Dhangadhi, Kailali) as well as at P1 (Biratnagar). The campaign is being done to smoothen and build-up the trust and support to the grassroots level. Chief Executive of Freedom Forum Taranath Dahal reminded that RTI was not only an

effective tool to transparency and accountability but also one of the major components to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). The SDG 16.10 assures citizen's access to information. He further viewed that quality of development pillars as education, health, peace, economic prosperity, justice could be enhanced with the realization of citizen's right to information. "A collaborative approach would help tackle challenges of RTI," he suggested.

Freedom of expression and information expert Sanjeeb Ghimire opined that people-centered governance could be realized with the use of RTI. However, concerted efforts are essential on the effective implementation of RTI. 🌱

Listen to Freedom Forum Podcast- Freedom Chautari



<http://freedomforum.org.np/content/podcast/>

CSO, media parts of audit accountability

Freedom Forum and Office of the Auditor General (OAG) hosted 'Journalists' Training on Audit Accountability'. At the event, Deputy Auditor-General Ramu Prasad Dote said civil society organizations (CSOs) and media could play important role as parts of the broader ecosystem of audit accountability and their engagement in the audit process particularly in performance audit is critical.

Dotel delivered an interactive presentation on 'Audit Accountability & Citizen Engagement Strategy' and shed light on accountability types, ecosystem, and citizen engagement, the role of media as well as reflection of media coverage in the past and present. In response to the queries of economic journalists along with the presentation, he reflected on media coverage of the latest 2077 BS annual report of OAG and how media covered the same. According to him, the coverage was more encouraging and performance audit reports should also have at least or even more coverage. On the occasion, President of Society of Economic Journalists Nepal (SEJON), Bhim Gautam, made presentation on 'Infrastructure and Performance Audit' focusing in light of journalistic aspect and technical aspects.

Twenty topics from the last three performance audit reports of the Office of Auditor General (55th, 56th & 57th) were selected for the training ranging the topics from Performance Audit, Environmental Audit as well as IT Audit. Users' Group, Government Vehicle Management, Big National Projects, Community Schools, Public Corporations, Electronic Government Procurements etc were some topics for the training of journalists vying for larger and multi-discipline coverage of journalists'



views and training on these reports. The participants presented their views on reports as well as raised important issues based on performance reports. Appreciating participants' views, noted journalist Hari Bahadur Thapa and FF Executive Officer Taranath Dahal put forth their observations on the reports. They said much more could be pulled out from the reports and made opinions, and articles.

Similarly, the trainers highlighted how topics are to be reported, ways of further investigation on reports, how other information based on these reports could be garnered. At the event, Assistant AG, Mr. Ashok Karki; Directors Mr. Dhurba Raj Bhusal, and Mr. Rajendra Raj Ojha answered the queries about reports and hoped that the media would circulate it and be proactive on covering performance audit reports extensively. Policy advisor at FF, Mr. Krishna Sapkota, addressed the workshop on how performance audit reports and Right to Information could be utilized together for the

investigative reports as well as further reporting on audit reports findings. According to AG Ashok Karki, the Supreme Audit Institute (SAIs) with Freedom Forum was effective in engaging media and CSOs for promoting audit accountability. He praised the role of FF in this initiative and thanked all participants with the hope of their continuous engagement in the future. The workshop ended with appreciation and word of thanks from Assistant AG after the distribution of certificates to all participants.

The training workshop was hosted with the collaboration support from the SEJON and with financial assistance of International Budget Partnership (IBP) in Thapathali, Kathmandu on July 28. A total of 21 (7 Female & 14 Male) economic journalists were present along with three officials from the Office of Auditor General in observer capacity in the workshop while Hari Bahadur Thapa and Taranath Dahal were trainers for the workshop.

Senior journo Guragain on hunger strike

Journalist Subid Guragain associated with the Nagarik national daily started a five-day Satyagraha- civil strike- in the office premises from September 21. He started the civil strike following the forced resignation after non-payment of his three months' salary. He forwarded five points demand to be addressed by the media house's management. He also called upon fellow journalists and media organizations to join the movement for protection of working journalists' rights as per Working Journalists Act. Senior journalist Guragain specifically requested the Federation of Nepali

Journalists (FNJ) to initiate a dialogue to address his demands. Following COVID-19 crises, media house resorted to unjust retrenchment in Nepal. Freedom Forum's recent assessment report also showed that 38 percent of active journalists were jobless and thousands others were unpaid. Many journalists and their association paid solidarity to agitating journalist Guragain. Freedom Forum expressed solidarity to the journalist's civil strike and stood for the right of journalists. Together, FF strongly urged the concerned media house to immediately address the rights of agitating journalists by paying him on time.



Photo: <https://www.nepaliviralnews.com/archives/20005>

Improved budget openness, participation for accountable spending

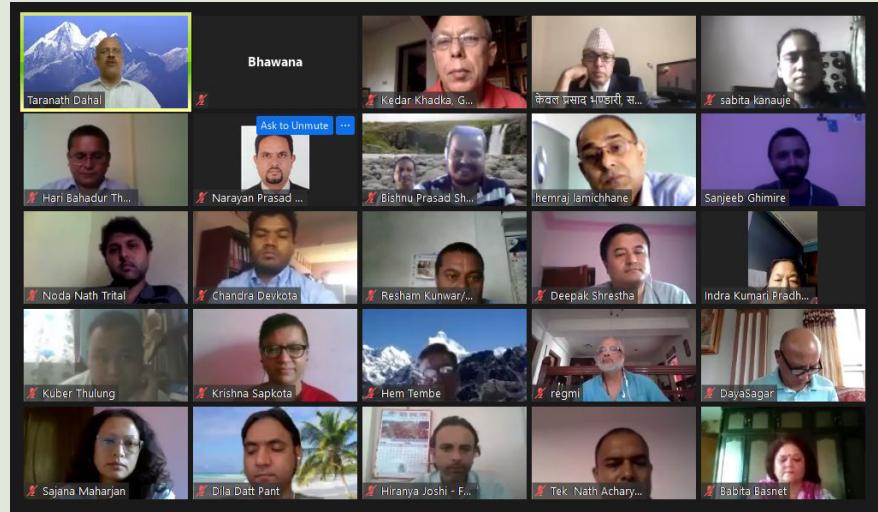
Reforms in budget transparency and citizen engagement and oversight in the budgetary process of the country has been stressed for the effective and efficient mobilization of public resources.

The experts addressing a virtual dialogue on 'Fiscal openness practices, challenges and opportunities in Nepal' made such observation. At the event organized by Freedom Forum on August 30, the keynote speaker and Secretary at the National Planning Commission (NPC) Kewal Prasad Bhandari said, "There are several rooms for reforms in public financial management system of the country with budget transparency score of 41/100 in the Open Budget Survey (OBS-2019)." He underscored the openness of budgetary systems of the country while noting that Nepal has a public participation score of 22/100 and a composite oversight score of 48/100.

"Relationship between public institutions and the people meant to be served could be strengthened by ensuring transparency in budget planning and implementation", he said, hoping it helps decision-makers prioritize the use of scarce public funds.

Moreover, Bhandari mentioned that fiscal transparency bears significance for effective fiscal management and accountability, knowing accurate pictures of their finances including the costs and benefits of policy changes and potential risks of public finances and improving the reliability of the country's fiscal plans.

In reference to Nepal's OBS-report, he stressed the availability of budget documents and information in a timely and comprehensive manner and production of a pre-budget statement and a citizen budget in the internationally-accepted standards. "In order to improve budget oversight by parliament, the legislative committee should examine the budget proposal and publish the report with their analysis", he recommended



CSOs can press govt for robust monitoring practice

Similarly, Acting Auditor General Sukadev Khatri pointed out the gaps in flow of critical budgetary information limiting citizen engagement in the budgetary process. Khatri viewed that the Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) could press the government to place strong monitoring practices in raising revenues curbing leakages.

Transparency advocate Raghav Raj Regmi also called for CSOs to undertake independent budget analysis and evaluation to find out accountability weaknesses in the budgetary process. CSOs should carry out study to establish evidence on the budgetary flow and spending, according to him. SUSASAN Project team leader Hem Tembe stressed the identification of area for civic engagement in the development and governance process at local level and advocacy for new law and policy for widening the space based on the empirical evidence. "Ward is the authorized mechanism for initiating the planning process, so capacity building interventions should also be designed targeting people's representatives there. It helps ensure effective planning and implementation," he observed.

Moreover, climate finance expert Madhukar Upadhyay pointed out the need of more transparent and accountable spending of public money when the post-COVID-19 situation of the country seems to dent heavily the revenue resources, mainly remittance and tourism. "Development of citizen budget of every sector is

imperative to help spend the scarce public money in an efficient way", he said, urging the CSOs to question prevailing unauthorized expenditure.

Freedom Forum Executive Chief and OBS researcher Taranath Dahal stressed the need of CSO working groups for continuous analysis of budgets and advocacy for forwarding budget openness reforms so that country's dream of open and accountable governance could be realized. Taking part in the discussion, Media Advocacy Group's Executive Director Babita Basnet suggested that the budget transparency narratives could be reached to the grassroots level as it has the power to transform people's lives.

Various other speakers including Anjali Thakali from the World Bank, Sajana Maharjan from The Asia Foundation, OBS researcher Krishna Sapkota, Tanka Aryal from FHI360, Kedar Khadka from GoGo Foundation, PFM expert Krishna Awasthi, Dila Dutta Pant from Parliament Support Programme/UNDP, open budget researcher Anirudra Neupane, political scientist Sanjeeb Ghimire, Deepak Shrestha from SOLVE-Nepal, Right to Information campaigner Nodanath Trital and accountability activist Posta KC shed light on setting up independent fiscal institution for continuing routine studies on budgetary affairs and also coordinating citizens' inputs throughout the budget ecosystem. 

Citizen engagement in law making stressed

Freedom Forum organized a virtual dialogue on 'Citizen Engagement in Law-Making Process' on the occasion of the Constitution Day- Ashoj 3 (18 September). On the occasion, former Chief Secretary at Parliament Secretariat Surya Kiran Gurung stressed that citizens' groups, stakeholders and experts must be engaged from the process of identifying the scope of new law or reforms.

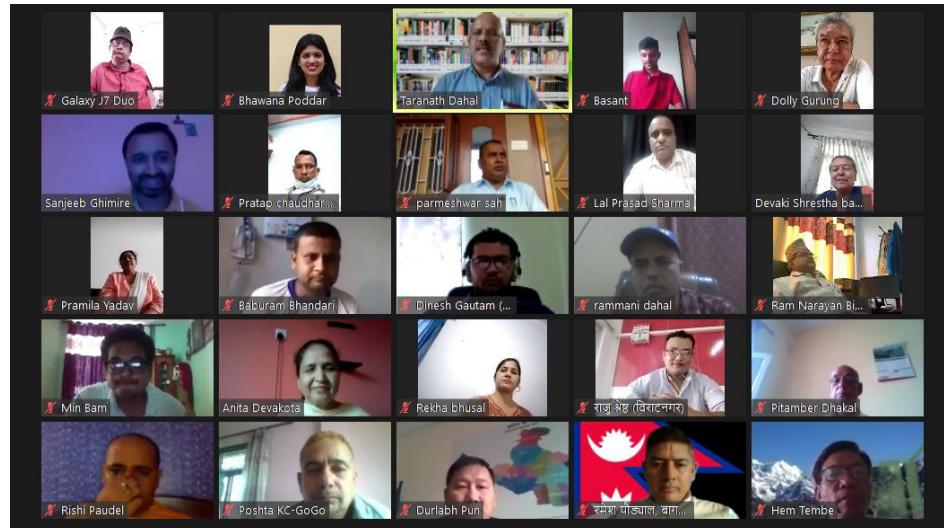
Gurung argued if the line ministries were brought under the parliamentary purview in the law-making and amending process right from the beginning, it would help bring change in a meaningful way. The people's representatives could also receive people's inputs and aspirations collected throughout the country. He argued especially in terms of delegation of statutorily federated authorities would enfeeble the very foundation of federal democratic republic set by the constitution.

Similarly, National Assembly Member Ram Narayan Bidari viewed laws and policies should be formulated in line with the constitutional provision and taking into account the views/inputs from the stakeholders and citizens. "The provision of political parties' whip to their lawmakers during the deliberations on particular bill should be amended so that it would broaden the scope of citizen engagement in the law-making process."

He wondered why three-month long discussion was required on the fiscal bills in the parliament if the proposed laws were not subject to change with inputs and deliberations from the lawmakers. Another National Assembly Member Anita Devkota said it was important to secure people's ownership on amending and implementing the constitution. According to her, the amendment time of 72 hours provided to lawmakers to study and prepare amendment notes after the bill(s) are tabled was inadequate and it needs revision.

Another Member of the National Assembly, Pramila Kumari Yadav suggested aware citizens and their organizations to exert pressure on parliament so that they would formulate laws as per the constitution. Moreover, Province-2 Assembly Member Parameswor Saha expressed worry over not making transparent the process of engaging citizens in law-making process. The law-making is influenced badly by partisan division, he added.

Bagmati Province Assembly Member Ramesh Poudyal expressed concern over hasty and fast



track approach of tabling bill and passing it, which, he argued had undermined the role of elected representatives.

On the occasion, Chairperson of Civic Concern Association, Pitambar Dhakal, also echoed over non-existent engagement of the general public beyond Kathmandu in the federal law-making process. Karnali Province Assembly Member Sita Nepali viewed shrinking role of lawmakers at province and local levels was matter of huge concern. As lawmakers themselves have little role, citizens' voices and aspirations are almost unheard on the law-making process, she stressed.

Journalist Ganesh Lamsal said the lawmakers need to garner public views even out from the parliament and incorporate their concern while drafting bills. It is also one of the effective methods to make law-making inclusive, he added. Undersecretary at Province-1 Rishi Poudel asserted that adoption of rule of law would mend many flaws in the law-making process. Team Leader of Parliamentary Support Programme/UNDP, Dila Dutta Pant also stressed the need to enhance orientation to the parliament secretariat employees and also set up

a legislative consultation branch to coordinate and reflect the citizens' inputs in law-making.

Provincec-5 Assembly Secretary Durlav Kumar Purja Magar said the secretariat could ensure change by providing expert service. Collection of public inputs and feedback in regard to law formulation has huge significance. Team Leader of Data for Development Project of The Asia Foundation Sajana Maharjan underlined the deliberative engagement of the citizens in the process of law-making while team Leader of SUSASAN Project Hem Tembe demanded parliamentarians' commitment on how they would convince the general public on their participation in law making.

Freedom Forum Executive Chief Tara Nath Dahal suggested that lawmakers could visit their constituencies and garner input from the people and CSO representatives before beginning any legal process. Government's proactive disclosure on the need and scope of bringing new laws or amendments was another systematic way of making law making convincing. As many as 65 participants including lawmakers, experts, CSO representatives, and media persons attended the event.

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RTI circle seeks strategic collaboration

A thematic discussion was organized on 'Use of Right to Information, its Challenges, and Opportunities' on July 24. The main objective of the event was to bring together the representatives of CSOs, RTI activists and experts from across the country to build the agenda and strategy of RTI, taking this as part of the open government partnership (OGP). Linking RTI to OGP is believed to ensure governance transparency and accountability.

This event was held under a part of the series of OGP thematic workshop. The dialogue was also expected to strengthen joint efforts of CSO's, National Information Commission and RTI activists to strategically forward the use, challenges and opportunities of RTI in present context of Nepal. The speakers stressed the proper implementation of RTI by all public bodies highlighting the importance of proactive disclosure and easy access to information alo in the wake of crisis and pandemic, which is itself a huge public concern.

At the event, Chief Information Commissioner at National Information Commission (NIC), Mahendraman Gurung, delivered the keynote speech on importance of RTI, its status, challenges and opportunities along with future strategy. He also shared information about recent web-based study of NIC among 120 public bodies of federal government including ministries. Approximately 75% of public agencies have appointed Information Officer and only 25% have been practicing the legal obligations of proactive disclosure on time. Besides the weak proactive disclosure trend of public agencies, low level of awareness in both demand and supply side about RTI, information hiding culture, weak data protection mechanism in public bodies, no proper use of information technology, incentives to all RTI stakeholders and no classification of information are among the major challenges of RTI, he said referring to the study.

RTI as a multi-dimensional concept having strong legal backup, association with sustainable development goals, good global rating of RTI in Nepal, and the proactive verdict of

Supreme Court of Nepal including others have however set landmark achievement in Nepal. Participants of the event stressed that strategic and innovative methods of RTI must be developed to assure transparency in governance along with its structure in federal context. Adding to this, the arrangement of e-court and video conferencing should be followed to deepen NIC role and RTI movement; proactive disclosure audit of public bodies are other issues to be addressed. Moreover the strategic collaboration between CSOs, RTI practitioner and NIC is must for better result.

Major idea and opinion in discussion raised by Chief Executive of Freedom Forum Taranath Dahal, senior journalist Dharmendra Jha, Krishna Pathak, Tanka Aryal, Krishna Sapkota, Umid Bagchand, Ajay Shah, Raju Shrestha, Deepak Acharya and others. The virtual meeting was held as part of the program "Civil Society Mutual Accountability Project (CS: MAP)" with the support of FHI 360 and attended by 53 participants. Out of 53 participants, there were 8 females in the event.

Province-2 passes regressive media bills

Freedom Forum organized a virtual discussion on 'Media Bills of Province-2 and Stakeholder Concerns' on 14 July where representatives of FNJ Chapter of Province-2, media persons including others showed their concern, saying it was passed by the Province Assembly without hearing the demand and protest against the provisions in the bills.

The assembly passed two bills i.e. 1) 'Management and Regulation of Province Communication'; and 2) 'Operation of Provincial FM, Radio, and Television', contain regressive provisions on freedom of expression and inconsistent with the international as well as constitutional standard and best practices. The major objective of the event was to seek common understanding regarding conflicting provisions of the bills and press the government and the Province Assembly to amend those regressive provision sooner.

Most of the participants of the event questioned the government for not organizing prior consultation with stakeholders on the

bill and its provision and even not hearing the demand of province based stakeholders including FNJ chapter among others. Speakers stressed that the enshrined provision of the bill restricted the constitutionally enshrined freedom of expression, media freedom and right to information along with other sorts of fundamental rights. It is not in line with the constitutional list of the division of province power and the provision of article 17 and article 19 of the Constitution of Nepal.

The speakers showed their concern that the bill did not follow the basic guideline of drafting legal document, the sequence, structure and procedure. It created numerous structures and every structure had the multiple presence of minister and ministry officials holding most of the positions. All structure were formed for allocating particular positions to the ministry officials and it seemed another unit of ministry and line agencies for executing government order rather than playing independent and autonomous role.

The bill compelled everyone to register for all sorts of media outlets and compulsory press pass for journalists and had the provision regulating

foreign reporter. It however did not talk about the media accountable to the people and people's representatives.

The regressive bills are protested by the group of media persons for asking to withdraw the bill and accommodate the genuine demand of the protesters and journalists. Major highlights of the flawed bill were raised by senior journalist Dharmendra Jha, Executive Chief at FF Taranath Dahal, Deependra Chauhan President of FNJ Province-2 along with his team member and other media persons. Most of the participants asked FF for support in regards to rights of working journalists and law making process by providing policy inputs.

The virtual workshop was moderated by Sanjeeb Ghimire, Project Manager at Freedom Forum which was held as part of the "Civil Society Mutual Accountability Project (CS: MAP)" with the support of FHI360, and was attended by 21 participants. Out of 21 participants, there were 3 females in the event.

CSO's deep concern over govt intrusion of FoA

A virtual dialogue was organized on 'Freedom of Association (FoA): Present Status, Challenges, and Way Forward' on August 10. The dialogue was attended by 21 participants representing CSO, practitioners, academia, researchers, lawyers and writers including freedom of association and expression defenders.

The main objective of the discussion was to develop uniformed conceptual understanding and perception on FoA at practical level when the government was introducing tough measures and actions against the civil society organizations in the country. The major issues discussed were the fundamentals of FoA and its linkage with expression along with other fundamental freedoms

and democracy, establishment and creation of the association, expansion of networking and membership, exploration and mobilization of fund, functional and performance autonomy, internal governance and external intervention, continuity and voluntary dissolution among others.

The participants agreed to continue the series of specific dialogues on FoA fundamentals for creating mutual and uninformed understanding. All the participants expressed deep concern over the government's recent excessive intervention on the longstanding humanitarian organization- Nepal Red Cross Society dubbing it a severe move and serious breach of the FoA. Mutual solidarity and collaboration among CSOs was stressed while rejecting unnecessary intervention by the government.

Though Nepal has strong constitutional framework for freedom of association, but the independence and autonomy of Nepali CSO is intentionally tampered by government through useless regulatory measures and practices. As CSO leaders with certain political inclination are awarded with government appointments, it is believed that government would wield highhandedness over the CSO freedom.

Critical voices are unheard and peaceful protests are intimidated by government. Another worrying fact is that even a section of CSO community is seeking a guardian role of government to some extent rather than healing internal governance problem through self-regulatory measures.

RTI campaigners share problems, seek safety

An RTI campaigner from Birgunj, a business hub in State-2, Manoj Rauniyar, expressed worry over growing hostility meted out to the RTI campaigners in the changed system of governance- federalism where, he argued, the local governments were believed to provide public service at people's door step in a convenient and transparent ways. "We have an effective tool to control corruption, the RTI Act, for over a decade but good governance is not realized as per the expectation at local level. Only discouragement and harassment is continued from public offices to information seekers and registration of the application rejected and information denied," he shared the problem in his district.

Rauniyar further said his efforts as good governance campaigners in the district and province are futile but he was not disheartened because transparency and accountability, the public offices could not ensure smooth public delivery and forward development which are aspired for long. The RTI campaigners from different parts of the country exchanged their experiences of RTI use in a virtual programme organized by Freedom Forum on September 23. One of the common concerns they showed was their safety.

In this connection, Bishwojeet Tiwari from Nepalganj city viewed that incorporation of

the provision of safety of RTI campaigners in the amendment of RTI Act could be huge achievement to curb the harassment and attack on information seekers across the country.

"I faced much hassles and harassment in continuing my campaign of RTI. It was nearly a decade ago, I was forced out of a public office in the Kathmandu Valley itself while seeking information. Even the threat and lure were shown to me to suppress my right to information," said RTI campaigner Sharada Bhushal. According to her, the safety of RTI requesters must be included in the RTI training now. Role of National Information Commission should also be more active for protecting and promoting the rights of citizens

Senior journalist and RTI campaigner Umid Bagchand from Dhangadhi informed that an RTI requester was misbehaved while requesting information at the Office of the Chief Minister of Sudurpaschim State. Cooperation among various sides is imperative to ensure the safety of RTI campaigners, according to him. "The network of RTI campaigners was expanding at the local, district and State levels. Such networks also help in settling disputes between information requesters and public office bearers," said Ajay Saha from Udayapur.

However, Basanta Banjade from Kapilvastu district said the harassment and discouragement to information campaigners was decreased in the recent time in his district. He credited this

development to continued RTI campaign despite adverse situation. Banjade recalled that it took time in the beginning to convince public officers about the importance of RTI. He expressed worry why the friends in the same campaign of RTI in the beginning were denying information after they were elected people's representatives.

On the occasion, freedom of expression and information expert Sanjeeb Ghimire argued that if RTI requests were filed jointly it could help lessen the threats at local levels. "Making legal the postal and digital requests and information receipt could also contribute to decreasing harassment and physical attacks on RTI requesters," he observed. Executive Chief at FF Taranath Dahal believed the RTI campaigners had significant role on practically expanding RTI regime in Nepal. The exchange of ideas and experience on exercise of RTI across the country prepared conducive atmosphere to build good governance. Such campaigns are necessary to root out the corruption which has plagued the local levels. He stressed the collaboration and cooperation to minimize the threat to RTI campaigners and create safe environment.

The program was organized by marking September as the RTI month. September 28 is marked as the International Day of the Universal Access to Information across the globe.

121 features of public concern on FF support

In the news regarding allocation of budget Province-2, investigative journalist Ajay Anuragi brings the facts that how the sitting ministers allocated budget randomly and in a biased manner. It is the sheer undue influence of the ministers to allocate most of the budget to their district and electoral constituencies. Anuragi writes the news in Lokaantar online portal that the 'projects of Rs 810 million were selected on minister's interest; entire district has lesser budget than that of minister's village'. The ministers flatly ignored the principle of inclusive, proportional and balanced allocation of budget in the province, while they used to decry the federal government for the same. There are eight districts in Province-2, but two ministers concentrated huge budget in Sarlahi and Siraha districts. Anuragi wrote dozens of such stories that have exposed irregularities in public offices including ministries. He has written how the development activities are marred by political and personal interest in Province-2.

Similarly, the plight of the industrialists in the wake of COVID-19 has been featured in a news story from Province-5. The story written by

Narayan Oli for hamrakura.com news portal tells how the industrialists and entrepreneurs have been suffering in the face of crisis. They have said the industries were in disarray; banks were prodding for loan. With the crisis, the enterprises stopped production and services. Rupandehi is the industrial districts but if the industrialists were facing shortage of labour and raw materials. They were requesting the ministers in province and federal government to address their problems and help revive industries.

Moreover, another news portal himaldainik.com brings the story with expert's views on government failed to prevent and control the spread of deadly coronavirus on time. The virus which had already taken toll across the world began spreading in Nepal where the preparedness was so poor. Lockdown was enforced since March 24 only as the ultimate measure to prevent and control the coronavirus, while the border management was a mess. Quarantine, set up to isolate people for safety, too were so mismanaged that they were infected there itself. For long, the government continued RDT which was decried many experts.

These are just some examples. The feature stories were produced with the support of Freedom Forum at dozens of media. Why did FF support media? Yes, because they were badly hit by the coronavirus resulting into no reporting and under-reporting of pressing issues in the crisis. The COVID-19 not only hit national economy adversely but shrank the government and non-government activities which resulted in hardship to common people for their daily livelihood. But such issues were underreported. As millions of people working in different sectors were bound to stay indoors development activities were slowed, stopped obstructed; public service delivery disrupted and irregularities rife in the efforts to contain COVID-19. Moreover, the education and social activities came to full stop, public concern mounted. People were in severe need of right news and updates on these issues in addition to the health crisis, safety and preventive measures. Considering this very situation- the crisis itself is a huge public concern, FF believed people must be provided credible and timely information. So, nearly two dozens of media were supported by FF. They produced as many as 121 stories that were of huge concern in the crisis.

Publications

Right to Information Booklet

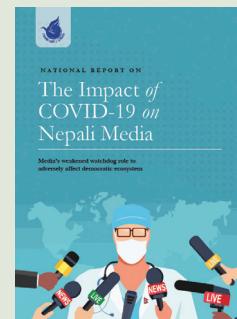
The booklet 'Right to Information' was developed with the aim to improve citizen engagement, especially by WMG and to strengthen public sector accountability and responsiveness in all local levels. The RTI booklet illustrates a comprehensive process how a citizen can seek information and use proactively disclosed information in line with the constitutionally and legally guaranteed right. This booklet is useful to all local representatives, government officials, parliamentarians, CSOs, journalists as well as other general public.

Link: <http://freedomforum.org.np/download/right-to-information-booklet?wpdmdl=4396&refresh=5f80287ad778c1602234490>



Report on Impact of COVID-19 in Nepali Media

FF produced an assessment report on 'The Impact of COVID-19 in Nepali Media'. It is a result of the FF's continuous watch on freedom of expression and information, press freedom, journalists' rights and media industry in the wake of COVID-19 pandemic that began showing its effects in Nepal since the beginning of 2020. The report has tried to capture the current scenario of Nepali media, is expected to be helpful for the working journalists, policy makers, researchers and advocacy organizations, rights defenders, and academia to create and foster knowledge on how the working journalists and media houses suffered at the hand of global crisis. It has concluded that media's weakened watchdog role will adversely affect democratic ecosystem in Nepal. Out of the total active journalists, 38 percent lost jobs in Nepal owing to the pandemic.



The assessment report makes observations, projections and recommendations on the pressing issues of Nepali media in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic. It has projected that with withered investigative reporting and non-payment, transfer and low payment to professional journalists, corruption, mismanagement and irregularities will continue unabated.

Read full report: <http://freedomforum.org.np/download/covid-19-impact-on-nepali-media/?wpdmdl=4445&refresh=5f8af4de3c3b41602942174>

Self disclosure update

Type and Nature of Organization	NGO working for Democracy, Right to Information, Freedom of Expression, Fiscal Transparency and Open Data, Media Policy and Law, Internet Freedom		
Legal Status	Registered at District Administration Office Kathmandu. DAO Registration Number: 127/062/63, SWC Affiliation Number: 18518		
Location	Adarsa Marga, Prasuti Griha Road, Thapathali, Kathmandu		
Staffs and Roles	<p>Taranath Dahal: Executive Chief, coordinates overall organizational and administrative affairs</p> <p>Aruna Adhikari: Finance and Administration Officer, looks after accounting and administrative affairs and performs responsibilities as the Information Officer.</p> <p>Nanu Maiya Khadka: Gender Monitoring Officer, responsible for monitoring media content on gender perspectives</p> <p>Manju Ojha: Front Desk Assistant, Kamal Poudel: Driver, Ganga Kumari Gurung: Office Assistant</p>		
Projects	<p>Krishna Sapkota- SUSASAN (CONSULTANT), Narayan Ghimire- CAFIFIR (CONSULTANT), Pramod Bhattarai- SUSASAN, Sanjeeb Ghimire- EEMIR, Bhawana Poddar- EEMIR, Bobbish Dhakal- EEMIR, Aditya Dahal- EEMIR, Dikchya Raut- CAFIFIR, Deepa Adhikari- CAFIFIR, Shanti Chaulagain- CAFIFIR, Subash Dahal - DAA</p>		
Ongoing Project Information	Project Name	Supporting Agency	Date of Signing the Contract
	Enable Environment for Media Law Reforms and Improved RTI Practice (EEMIR) (CS-MAP)	FHI 360	30th Dec 2016
	“Contributing to the atmosphere favourable to Improved FoE and Information Regime (CAFIFIR)- in Nepal” For 2020	Free Press Unlimited (FPU)	19th March 2020
	Sustainable use of Technology for Public Sector Accountability in Nepal (SUSASAN)	CECI	17th April 2017
	Legal Defense Fund	FPU	27th May 2020
Services Offered/ Activities Carried Out	Driving Audit Accountability : Audit Reports for Collective Action to Strengthen Government Responsiveness (DAA)	IBP	30th September 2019
	Research, capacity development and policy advocacy including media monitoring, trainings on RTI and journalism, meetings, workshops, seminars and other campaigns to promote issues of democracy, RTI, FoE, fiscal transparency, human rights, local governance. It also provides legal aid to journalists, media and information seekers.		
Responsible Authority	Chairperson: Hari Binod Adhikari, Executive Chief: Tara Nath Dahal		
Decision Making Process	<p>General Assembly: Making policies, rules and regulations of organization</p> <p>Executive committee: Formulation of action plans as per constitution of organization, rules and regulation</p> <p>Management team: Running projects and daily operational affairs and reporting timely to the Executive Committee.</p>		
Past and Current Activities	Please follow the link: http://freedomforum.org.np/content/category/activities/		
Information Officer	Aruna Adhikari		
Financial Information	Freedom Forum received grants announcing Rs. 5,891485 (July to September 2020)		
Official Website	www.freedomforum.org.np		
Publications of Freedom Forum	Freedom Forum has over 50 Publications (printed) Please Follow the Link: http://freedomforum.org.np/content/publications/		
Annual Report	http://freedomforum.org.np/content/publications/reports/annual-reports/		
Mechanism for Information Dissemination	Websites- http://www.freedomforum.org.np/ ; www.nepalpressfreedom.org , and Newsletter-Free Expression		

Fundamental rights under siege in Romania

The regulations and practices adopted by the Romanian authorities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic have created dangerous antecedents in crisis management that could affect democracy.

The Covid-19 health crisis placed freedom of the press between brackets. A number of measures taken by state institutions have affected fundamental rights such as freedom of expression and information and have called into question the observance of journalistic principles.

The report "Fundamental rights under siege. Exceptional circumstances create dangerous antecedents for the Romanian press" published by the Center for Independent Journalism, with the support of IFEX, analyzes these measures and their effects. For the first time, the report presents the findings of the monitoring of procurement of media and advertising services between March and July 2020 and presents how the authorities used public funds to promote their image.

Decisions of the authorities during the state of emergency and alert with direct effect on freedom of expression include the non-transparent suspension of some sites and of the right to information, by strictly controlling the flow of information, but also by restricting the right to assembly.

Furthermore, the financial interventions of the state through public procurement of media services and through an advertising fund presented as a form of support for the vulnerable press during the state of alert questioned the media's neutrality.

The lack of transparency of the authorities and the precarious state of the press even before the outbreak of the pandemic added to these circumstances.

The regulations and practices adopted by the Romanian authorities during the state of emergency and alert have created dangerous antecedents in crisis management that could affect democracy.

The report will show:

The legislative and historical context of the regulations regarding the state of emergency and alert but also the non-transparent way in which the crisis management authorities worked.

How wording in a paragraph of the presidential decree on the state of emergency allowed the possibility of blocking the content of online publications. During the state of emergency, 15 websites were suspended and two others were forced to take down articles published on their platforms. The measures seem to point towards a reflex that makes censorship the first choice in crisis communication.

How freedom of information was affected by the presidential decree by doubling the response time of public institutions to requests for public information. Documented examples of the refusal of local and central authorities to respond to requests for information are provided.

The importance to formulate integrity warnings to disclose irregularities in the health crisis management process, as a de facto limited right in a state of emergency. Examples from the study show how whistleblowers are still stigmatized and discouraged from disclosing known irregularities.

Examples showing that, during the analyzed period, attacks on the right to free speech also came from the Police. There have been cases of people being fined for criticizing the way the authorities handled the health crisis.

How the right to strike and the right to freedom of assembly were affected. Unclear regulations, messages from the authorities and the fear of fines have made these fundamental rights impossible to practice. Under these conditions, social networks became one of the few spaces where protests could be voiced, but this space was also monitored and restricted by the authorities.

Why the written press was most affected by the health crisis and the measures taken by the authorities and what were the losses recorded by the media. However, not all the money disappeared from the market – public money advertising continued to be allocated, putting the media business in a position to be dependent on this source of income.

How, through advertising contracts or newspaper subscriptions purchased by the authorities, not only advertising or newspaper copies are bought, but access to editorial content as well. Other identified practices include: offering contracts to all local media institutions, in each county, without audience criteria and advertising purchases during the pandemic for the promotion of events or actions whose development is uncertain.

Findings two months after the controversial state advertising campaign as a means of supporting the press, a measure challenged by CJI Romania: the allocation of public advertising in a discretionary manner, without impact criteria imposed on the campaign contradicts public procurement legislation; the main beneficiaries of the ordinance are large televisions and radios, with a measured audience, while the local press, which has been most affected by the financial effects of the medical crisis, received the least support. Also, the mechanisms through which the amounts are allocated reward clickbaiting practices, the pursuit of traffic and audiences, to the detriment of quality journalism.

Source: <https://ifex.org/fundamental-rights-under-siege-in-romania/>



Freedom Forum is an independent, non-governmental and not-for-profit civil society organization working for the cause of social accountability, democracy and human rights focused on press freedom, freedom of expression and right to information in Nepal. Incepted in 2005, Freedom Forum has emerged as a prominent national organization in promoting access to information and freedom of expression through dialogue, research, training, public advocacy and campaign and programme implementation. Currently, the organization is working on the issues of public finance management, budget transparency, open data and aid governance, political and parliamentary accountability, freedom of expression online and open government partnership (OGP) based on its on-hand experience and learning.

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Design and Processed by: Spandan Design Communication, 5535884



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