



Members of the International Press Freedom and Freedom of Expression mission to Nepal participate in a protest in Kathmandu calling for press freedom on March 22, 2006. Federation of Nepalese Journalists president Bishnu Nishhuri addresses the protest meeting. Photo by Sagar Shrestha, courtesy FNJ.

charge for a further nine days by the National Security department. Similarly, journalists with al Jazeera TV were arrested by US forces and then handed over to Afghan national police and put in a lockup for five hours.

In **Pakistan**, independent coverage of military operations in the tribal areas is next to impossible due to threats and intimidation. The tribal areas have become 'no go areas' for foreign correspondents, and with the absence of local stringers it has become almost impossible to get factual reports about military operations and militants' activities.

The Pakistani media lost three lives as a result of the October 8, 2005 earthquake that devastated the Kashmir region. The earthquake killed more than 87,000 people, mostly in Pakistan-administered areas of the disputed Kashmir region. Approximately 50 journalists based in Balakot, Muzzafarabad, Karachi and Islamabad have been identified as killed, missing, injured, or directly affected by the earthquake through the loss of family members, their homes or in many cases both.

In **Bangladesh**, intimidation and harassment from politicians, the police, criminals and religious fundamentalists continued to dominate the country's media landscape. The impunity and lack of accountability of those who committed grave violations of journalists' rights is symptomatic of widespread lawlessness and lack of governance. Disturbingly, those who attempt to expose corruption and criminal activities often fall victim to these very elements.

In **India** too, journalists in the conflict-affected areas of Kashmir and the northeast bore the brunt of attacks by insurgent groups unhappy with their reports. Besides these politically volatile 'hot spots', Indian journalists were also targeted by right-wing fundamentalist groups unhappy with their reportage.

As many as 20 journalists in South Asia were killed in the line

of duty from May 2005 - April 2006. Four in Afghanistan, two in Bangladesh, five in India, one in Nepal, four in Pakistan and four in Sri Lanka.

### Pressure through policy and law

The media came under fire not only through direct attacks, but also through policy changes aimed at throttling free speech.

Governments across South Asia tightened legislative and policy level controls over the media, in an attempt to legitimise the suppression of media freedoms. In May 2005, the National Assembly in Pakistan passed the *Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority Amendment Bill (2004)* (PEMRA). The PEMRA can impose a ban on channels in the name of 'national interest', 'national security', 'ideology of Pakistan' and 'vulgarity' – all of which are subjective notions.

In January 2006 the Pakistani Government introduced amendments to the press council legislation, which changed the press council from an independent and voluntary body to a 'special court' that could be used against the press.

King Gyanendra of Nepal, in October 2005, promulgated an Ordinance amending six of Nepal's key pieces of media-related legislation, which increased government control over the media. The Ordinance was renewed in April 2006 amidst protests from national and international organisations.

The *Terrorist and Disruptive Activities Ordinance (TADO)* in Nepal was extended in April 2005. In addition, the *Public Security Act* continues to be used to arbitrarily detain journalists who dare to express pro-democracy views.

The global trend of enacting tougher anti-terrorism and public security laws was also seen in India, with the passing of the *Chattisgarh Special Public Security Act, 2005*, in March 2006. The controversial Act prohibits the media from reporting any activities that can be termed as 'unlawful activities'. In effect, it