

Empowering Environmental Journalists for Climate Action

Monitoring, Documentation, and Analysis of **Threats Against** **Environmental Journalists** in Pakistan

SECOND EDITION (2026)



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Preface

The Global Neighbourhood for Media Innovation (GNMI) is a media development organization committed to strengthening Pakistan's media ecosystem through capacity-building, research, and advocacy that advance ethical, inclusive, and independent journalism. This second quarterly edition of the report "Monitoring, Documentation, and Analysis of Threats Against Environmental Journalists in Pakistan" builds upon the foundation established in the inaugural report and continues our effort to systematically document threats faced by journalists reporting on environmental governance, climate change, and natural resource management. As environmental crises deepen and public scrutiny of governance intensifies, the role of environmental journalists has become ever more vital and increasingly fraught with risk.

The Global Neighbourhood for Media Innovation (GNMI) is a media development organization committed to strengthening Pakistan's media ecosystem through capacity-building, research, and advocacy in support of ethical, inclusive, and independent journalism. This second quarterly edition of the report "Monitoring, Documentation, and Analysis of Threats Against Environmental Journalists in Pakistan" builds on the foundation established in the inaugural report, continuing our effort to systematically document threats faced by journalists who cover environmental governance, climate change, and natural resource management. As environmental pressures mount and public scrutiny of governance grow, the work of environmental journalists has become both more consequential and more vulnerable.

Supported by the UNESCO Global Media Defence Fund (GMDF), this initiative advances GNMI's mission to safeguard press freedom and contribute to international efforts to end impunity for crimes against journalists. The cases documented in this edition reflect a discernible pattern of intimidation: the use of cybercrime legislation against public-interest reporting, prolonged litigation by corporate actors, and direct threats from groups involved in environmental exploitation. These are not isolated incidents. They point to structural vulnerabilities in Pakistan's media environment that warrant serious attention.

The findings also indicate a gradual normalization of legal harassment, reputational attacks, and physical intimidation targeting journalists who report on corruption, environmental degradation, and governance failures. Alongside this, the edition identifies persistent gaps in accountability and enforcement, gaps that sit in tension with Pakistan's stated commitments under international frameworks, including the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity, and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly Sustainable Development Goal 16.

As this quarterly series continues, GNMI remains committed to expanding its documentation, refining its analysis, and contributing to collective advocacy efforts. Protecting environmental journalists is not a narrow concern of media freedom alone, it is a prerequisite for transparency, environmental justice, and informed public discourse in Pakistan and beyond.

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We extend our appreciation to the Sabz Journalism Community, GNMI’s online platform for knowledge exchange and peer support among journalists, and to the members of the GNMI Network, including environmental journalists, researchers, and media professionals, whose insights and experiences have informed and enriched this report.

Acknowledgement is also due to civil society organizations, media institutions, and local partners who contributed to data collection, verification, and advocacy throughout the course of this research.

Finally, GNMI expresses its sincere gratitude to its research and editorial teams, whose dedication, professionalism, and rigorous documentation have ensured the quality and integrity of this publication.

Acronyms

| Acronym | Full Form |
|---------|--|
| AC | Assistant Commissioner |
| BBC | British Broadcasting Corporation |
| CSO | Civil Society Organization |
| FIR | First Information Report |
| GNMI | Global Neighbourhood for Media Innovation |
| GMDF | Global Media Defense Fund |
| LEA | Law Enforcement Agencies |
| NGO | Non-Governmental Organization |
| PECA | Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act |
| PJMP | Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals Act (2021) |
| RSF | Reporters Without Borders (Reporters Sans Frontieres) |
| SDGs | Sustainable Development Goals |
| UN | United Nations |
| UNESCO | United Nations Educational, Scientific |

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Executive Summary

This second quarterly edition of Monitoring, Documentation, and Analysis of Threats Against Environmental Journalists in Pakistan builds on the findings of the inaugural report and deepens the evidence base on risks confronting environmental journalism in the country. Developed by the Global Neighbourhood for Media Innovation (GNMI) with the support of the UNESCO Global Media Defence Fund (GMDF), the publication forms part of a sustained monitoring initiative aimed at documenting patterns of intimidation, strengthening accountability, and advancing journalist safety in line with international press freedom standards.

The three cases presented in this edition reveal both an escalation and a diversification of threats. They include the custodial arrest of a journalist under cybercrime legislation following reporting on water governance in Karachi; prolonged strategic litigation and coordinated reputational pressure against an investigative reporter examining land development practices; and direct death threats issued against a regional journalist covering illegal stone-crushing operations in Sindh. Distinct in form yet interconnected in nature, these incidents reflect three converging categories of risk including criminalization, strategic legal harassment, and physical intimidation originating from state-linked actors, corporate entities, and non-state groups engaged in environmental exploitation.

Compared to the first edition, the current findings indicate a shift from episodic harassment toward more structured and institutionalized forms of pressure. The application of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) to cases involving public-interest reporting raises serious concerns about proportionality and the boundary between criminal law and journalistic expression. Prolonged defamation proceedings and coordinated reputational counter-campaigns illustrate how legal and economic tools can be deployed to impose sustained psychological and financial strain without requiring a conviction. The persistence of direct threats in rural contexts, meanwhile, points to entrenched impunity for non-state actors involved in environmental crime.

Across all documented cases, a consistent pattern emerges: little to no evidence of effective institutional protection or timely investigation into threats against journalists. Pakistan has enacted the Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals Act (2021) and remains committed to international frameworks including Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity. Yet implementation gaps remain significant. The cumulative effect of legal uncertainty, surveillance, intimidation, and reputational pressure risks entrenching self-censorship and narrowing the scope of investigative environmental reporting over time.

This report affirms that safeguarding environmental journalists is inseparable from the broader imperatives of climate governance, transparency, and democratic accountability. It calls for strengthened enforcement of journalist protection laws; a critical review of how cybercrime provisions are applied to journalistic activity; procedural safeguards against abusive litigation; and enhanced protection mechanisms for regional reporters operating in high-risk environments.

As part of an ongoing quarterly series, this edition expands GNMI's national documentation database and strengthens comparative analysis of emerging threat patterns and impunity trends. Recommendations addressed to government, media institutions, and civil society are presented in the concluding section of this report.

Chapter 1:

Background and Context

1.1. State of Environmental Journalism in Pakistan

Environmental journalism in Pakistan occupies a significant space at the intersection of climate change, governance, public health, and sustainable development. As the country confronts growing climate pressures like recurrent floods and water scarcity, deforestation, urban environmental stress, and extractive resource exploitation, the demand for accurate, independent, and investigative environmental reporting has increased considerably.

Journalists covering environmental issues serve as important intermediaries between scientific data, policy processes, and affected communities. Their work informs public discourse, subjects governance practices to scrutiny, and documents the human consequences of environmental degradation. Whether examining municipal mismanagement and water distribution failures or investigating illegal extraction networks and corporate environmental misconduct, environmental journalists contribute meaningfully to transparency and accountability.

Yet environmental reporting frequently intersects with entrenched political, economic, and, at times, criminal interests. Coverage of land use, water governance, mining, housing development, and natural resource management often implicates actors with considerable influence. In this context, public-interest reporting can be perceived as adversarial, exposing journalists to pressures that extend beyond professional risk.

Building on the findings of the first edition of this report, it is apparent that environmental journalism in Pakistan continues to face structural vulnerabilities: limited institutional protections, inconsistent enforcement of journalist safety provisions, and a broader pattern of shrinking civic space. These conditions form the backdrop against which the cases in this edition must be understood.

1.2. Challenges and Risks Faced by Environmental Journalists

Environmental journalists in Pakistan are exposed to many of the risks common across the broader media community, including legal harassment, surveillance, intimidation, reputational attacks, and economic pressure. Their work, however, carries additional dimensions of risk, given the financial and political interests frequently at stake in environmental governance and resource management.

The cases documented in this edition reflect an identifiable pattern of threats, including the criminalisation of reporting under cybercrime legislation; strategic litigation and defamation suits intended to exhaust time and resources; coordinated reputational campaigns and the deliberate spread of misleading information; field-level intimidation and obstruction by non-state actors engaged in unlawful environmental activity; and a persistent absence of timely protective or investigative response from relevant authorities.

Legal harassment, particularly through the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), has emerged as a recurrent mechanism of pressure. Arrests, prolonged proceedings, and the threat of criminal liability contribute to an environment in which the legal process itself may serve as a deterrent to investigative reporting, independent of any final judicial outcome.

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Gendered dimensions of risk also warrant consideration. While this edition documents cases involving both male and female journalists, women journalists continue to face distinct structural barriers including reputational attacks, social stigmatisation, and professional isolation that shape their working conditions and, in some instances, their capacity to report freely. Journalists operating in rural and semi-urban areas face a separate set of vulnerabilities, frequently without institutional support, security provisions, or ready access to legal assistance.

Taken together, these factors create conditions in which environmental reporting may be constrained through overt threats and also through sustained psychological, financial, and professional pressure over time.

1.3 Rationale for the Report

A structured monitoring mechanism is essential to identifying patterns of intimidation, establishing evidentiary records of impunity, and supporting advocacy for systemic reform. Isolated incidents of threats against journalists often fail to generate sustained institutional response. However, when documented collectively and analysed over time, they reveal structural weaknesses that require policy attention.

This quarterly publication forms part of GNMI's national monitoring framework under the project Empowering Environmental Journalists for Climate Action, supported by the UNESCO Global Media Defence Fund (GMDF). The initiative is grounded in relevant international human rights standards, including Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity, and supports Pakistan's obligations under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly Sustainable Development Goal 16 on access to information, justice, and accountable institutions.

By documenting cases across regions and thematic areas, the report contributes to broader efforts to strengthen accountability and reduce impunity for crimes against journalists. Beyond recording violations, it aims to generate evidence-based analysis that can inform legal reform, institutional strengthening, and coordinated advocacy at both national and international levels.

Chapter 2:

Methodology

2.1 Research Approach

This report adopts a qualitative, evidence-based research approach combining primary documentation with secondary verification to ensure accuracy, ethical rigor, and reliability of findings.

Building on the framework established in the first edition, the second edition continues to document verified incidents of threats, harassment, legal intimidation, and obstruction faced by environmental journalists in Pakistan. The research approach emphasizes triangulation of information, careful verification of claims, and adherence to ethical standards, including protection of sources and, where necessary, anonymization of identities.

This mixed-method design enhances the credibility of the findings and allows for a deeper understanding of the working realities of journalists who report on environmental and climate-related issues. The objective is to record individual cases, identify emerging patterns, recurring tactics of intimidation, and systemic weaknesses in accountability and protection mechanisms.

2.2.1 - Primary Data Collection

Primary data for this edition was gathered through direct engagement with affected journalists. In-depth interviews were conducted with media professionals whose experiences form the core case studies of this report. Interviews were structured to gather detailed information regarding:

- The nature and timeline of the incident;
- The actors involved;
- The immediate and longer-term impact on professional activities;
- Legal proceedings or institutional responses;
- Current status and perceived risks.

Where necessary, pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity and security of interviewees. Care was taken to ensure that publication of these cases does not expose individuals to further harm.

Special attention was given to journalists operating in high-risk environments, particularly those reporting on governance failures, environmental crimes, land disputes, and illicit economic networks. The methodology reflects the reality that regional and investigative journalists frequently face heightened vulnerability, compounded by limited institutional support and restricted access to legal or security resources.

2.2.2 - Secondary Data Collection

All documented cases were subjected to a secondary verification process to ensure accuracy and fairness. This included:

- Review of First Information Reports (FIRs), legal notices, or court records where available;
- Examination of publicly accessible judicial proceedings;
- Consultation of credible media coverage;
- Cross-referencing with reports by journalist unions, press clubs, and media rights organizations;
- Review of statements issued by relevant parties where publicly available.

All verified data were incorporated into a centralized database developed specifically for this project. The database was structured to include the following standardized categories:

- Name (or pseudonym) of journalist.
- Date and location of incident.
- Nature of attack or threat.
- Alleged actors or suspected parties.
- Immediate impact and response.
- Outcome or current status.

The verification process seeks to distinguish documented facts from allegations, and to present incidents in a balanced and neutral manner consistent with international reporting standards.

2.2 Ethical Considerations and Limitations

The research process adheres to core principles of confidentiality, informed consent, and risk mitigation. Where public identification could expose journalists to further harm, pseudonyms are used and sensitive details are carefully contextualized to protect those involved.

This report draws on documented evidence and verified testimony. Certain limitations, however, should be acknowledged. Underreporting remains a significant concern, as journalists may choose not to disclose incidents due to fear of retaliation, limited access to legal documentation, or distrust of institutional mechanisms. Ongoing legal proceedings also restricted access to complete records at the time of publication.

Despite these constraints, the methodology is designed to produce a credible and considered account of the risks faced by environmental journalists in Pakistan, one that contributes to a broader national and international understanding of entrenched patterns of intimidation and impunity.

Chapter 3:

Case Studies

3.1 – Selection Criteria

The cases included in this second quarterly edition were selected through GNMI's established monitoring and verification mechanism. Each case meets the following criteria:

- The journalist was engaged in environmental, civic, governance, or public-interest reporting linked to environmental issues;
- The incident involved a credible allegation of threat, harassment, legal intimidation, obstruction, or physical risk;
- The case was verified through direct engagement with the journalist and supported, where possible, by documentary or secondary evidence;
- The incident reflects broader patterns of risk relevant to environmental journalism in Pakistan.

In selecting cases for this edition, efforts were made to ensure thematic and geographic diversity. The three case studies represent different regions of Sindh and illustrate varied forms of intimidation, including criminalisation under cybercrime law, sustained strategic litigation and reputational pressure, and direct threats from non-state actors engaged in environmental exploitation. Cases were drawn from both urban and rural contexts, with particular attention to under-reported regions where institutional support is limited.

3.2 – Types of Case Studies Included

The following categories outline the types of incidents included in this and future editions of the publication. The categories highlighted in tan colour represent those shortlisted for inclusion in the first edition, reflecting the principal forms of threats and violations documented through GNMI's monitoring mechanism.

Physical Attacks and Harassment

Incidents involving physical assault, detention, or intimidation of journalists during field reporting on environmental or climate-related issues.

Legal Harassment and Intimidation

Cases where journalists have been subjected to legal notices, defamation suits, or judicial actions designed to restrict environmental reporting or inquiries or discourage public scrutiny.



Online Threats and Digital Harassment

Instances of cyberbullying, hacking, surveillance, and online abuse, particularly gender-based digital harassment, aimed at discouraging or deterring journalists through intimidation and reputational harm



Cases from Conflict or Sensitive Zones

Reports from environmentally and administratively sensitive regions, such as areas affected by illegal logging, mining, wildlife trafficking, or industrial pollution, where journalists face increased risk exposure and limited access to remedies.



Workplace and Institutional Pressures

Situations where journalists have faced editorial censorship, employment loss, or indirect editorial or economic pressure within media institutions to withhold or alter coverage of sensitive environmental stories.

3.3 - Introduction to the Case Studies (Second Edition)

The following case studies represent verified incidents of threats and harassment encountered by environmental journalists during the current reporting period. Each case was documented through direct interviews and corroborated through independent verification with local and international press-freedom bodies. These narratives exemplify the complex realities of reporting on environmental issues in Pakistan, where journalists confront both visible and structural risks in their pursuit of public-interest reporting.

Case Study 04: Criminalisation of Civic Reporting on Water Governance in Karachi

| | |
|---|--|
| Name/Pseudonym: | <i>“Journalist D”</i> Investigative Reporter |
| Date and Location: | January 2026, Karachi, Sindh, Pakistan |
| Nature of Attack/Threat: | Arrest under cybercrime law for alleged “defamation through social media” following investigative reporting on civic governance, municipal mismanagement, and corruption linked to the Karachi Water and Sewerage Board (KWSB) and related actors. |
| Perpetrator(s) or Suspected Parties: | Complaint filed by a civil servant affiliated with the Karachi Water and Sewerage Corporation (KWSC), the administrative arm tied to the water board whose practices were subject to critique. |
| Immediate Impact: | The journalist was arrested by the National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency (NCCIA) on charges registered under Sections 20 and 24 of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) , taken into judicial custody, and remanded before court. The arrest interrupted his reporting and generated a climate of legal intimidation against independent civic scrutiny. |
| Legal/Advocacy Follow-Up: | A bail application was filed; the court granted bail with surety bonds after several days of detention. Media organisations and press-freedom advocates criticised the use of PECA against journalistic activity and called for protection of press freedom. |
| Current Status/Outcome: | The journalist has been released on bail but continues to face legal consequences and pressure that may affect future reporting. The case has raised concerns about the criminalisation of investigative journalism and the perceived use of digital crime laws in ways that may restrict civic accountability reporting |

Narrative

In early January 2026, Journalist C, a Karachi-based reporter specialising in governance and civic affairs, was arrested by the National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency (NCCIA) on allegations of “defamation through social media.” His reporting, which critically examined corruption, mismanagement and the opaque water-tanker economy affecting millions in the city, had placed him at odds with officials tied to the Karachi Water and Sewerage Corporation (KWSC). The complaint that triggered his arrest was filed by a civil servant associated with the corporation, alleging that the journalist’s social-media posts contained “false and baseless allegations” and abusive language that damaged reputations.

The NCCIA registered the case under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) and presented the journalist before a judicial magistrate, where he was remanded into custody pending further proceedings. His detention interrupted his investigative work and illustrated growing concerns over the use of cybercrime legislation in cases involving journalistic activity.

Within days of his arrest, legal counsel filed a bail application. On January 14 2026, the journalist was granted bail by a judicial magistrate upon submission of surety bonds, with journalists present in court and legal representatives highlighting his decades of professional experience and arguing that the case was lodged with malafide intent to stifle criticism.

The reporter’s body of work—spanning extensive investigations into the “tanker mafia,” civic corruption and failures in municipal services—has documented systemic water-distribution issues that negatively impact residents’ access to water in a city beset by chronic shortages and alleged profiteering. His 2023 collaborative investigation into Karachi’s “tanker mafias” and water theft revealed complex patterns of economic and governance challenges involving various stakeholders, including public officials and private actors.

Although released on bail, Journalist C continues to face a legal climate where journalistic investigation into governance and corruption may invite criminal charges, especially under broadly framed cybercrime legislation. The case highlights the importance of strengthened legal safeguards that distinguish legitimate public-interest reporting from criminal defamation or “propaganda,” to protect press freedom and civic accountability in Pakistan

Case Study 05: Sustained Legal and Physical Intimidation Following Investigative Reporting on Land Grabbing

| | |
|---|--|
| Name/Pseudonym: | <i>“Journalist E”</i> Senior Investigative Journalist (National Daily) |
| Date and Location: | 2016–2024, Karachi, Sindh, Pakistan |
| Nature of Attack/Threat: | Strategic legal harassment, surveillance, intimidation in the field, and coordinated reputational attacks through disinformation. |
| Perpetrator(s) or Suspected Parties: | A major private real-estate developer; associated legal representatives; unidentified security personnel; complicit sections of the media |
| Immediate Impact: | Prolonged legal pressure, psychological stress, obstruction of field reporting, and targeted attempts to undermine professional credibility. |
| Legal/Advocacy Follow-Up: | Multiple defamation notices responded to by the journalist’s employer; court rejection of a pre-publication gag order; ongoing litigation since 2016; no accountability for intimidation or disinformation campaigns. |
| Current Status/Outcome: | The journalist remains professionally active but continues to face sustained legal and reputational pressure, underscoring the risks confronted by investigative journalists who scrutinize powerful corporate actors, including a perceived sense of abandonment by the media fraternity. |

Narrative

Journalist D, a senior investigative reporter with a leading national newspaper, has conducted extensive investigations into alleged land grabbing, forced displacement, and regulatory violations linked to a major private housing developer in Karachi. Her first major investigation, published in 2016, followed standard journalistic practice: repeated requests for comment were sent to the company's senior management prior to publication. Rather than responding to the allegations, the company sought a pre-emptive gag order to block publication. The court rejected the request, allowing the story to proceed.

Following publication, the company filed a defamation suit against the newspaper, naming Journalist D as a respondent. That case, initiated in 2016, remains unresolved years later. According to the journalist, this pattern has repeated with every subsequent investigation: refusal to engage with substantive questions, followed by legal notices that drain time and financial resources while imposing sustained psychological pressure.

Beyond legal harassment, Journalist D faced direct intimidation during field reporting. While visiting the housing development to interview affected communities and conduct satellite mapping, she and her team frequently encountered apparent surveillance. On multiple occasions, unidentified individuals on motorbikes followed them. In one incident, a security vehicle forced the team to stop, ordered them to leave, and escorted them off the premises—effectively obstructing lawful newsgathering.

The intimidation intensified through reputational attacks in sections of the media. After her 2019 investigation, a prominent national English-language newspaper published a lengthy report containing claims that the journalist described as inaccurate and inconsistent with her documented findings that contradicted her extensively documented findings—what the journalist describes as what the journalist characterised as a coordinated attempt to challenge her reporting through alternative narratives. Following a 2021 televised interview on the subject, she received another legal notice from the developer.

The most aggressive response came in March 2024, after publication of a two-part investigation. Within days, at least three leading English-language newspapers ran identical full-page advertorials—two on front pages—denouncing the investigation and advancing a misleading counter-narrative. The campaign sought to undermine both the newspaper's credibility and Journalist D's professional integrity, despite reporting supported by extensive documentation and verifiable evidence.

This case illustrates how powerful corporate actors deploy legal harassment, surveillance, and media manipulation to suppress investigative journalism. It also exposes the serious ethical concerns when media outlets participate in coordinated media campaigns that challenged the journalist's work and professional credibility. Journalist D's experience underscores the urgent need for protections against Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs), safeguards for field reporters, and stronger accountability mechanisms to defend journalistic independence in Pakistan.

Case Study 06: Threats Against a Journalist Reporting on Illegal Crushing Plants in Sindh

| | |
|---|--|
| Name/Pseudonym: | <i>“Journalist F”</i> Television Reporter (Regional Correspondent, private news channel) |
| Date and Location: | 04 March 2023, District Khairpur, Sindh, Pakistan |
| Nature of Attack/Threat: | Verbal death threats, obstruction of reporting, intimidation by criminal networks and illegal stone crushing mafia |
| Perpetrator(s) or Suspected Parties: | Members of the local groups linked to illegal stone crushing operations involved in illegal extraction of sand and stone |
| Immediate Impact: | Forced cessation of on-site reporting, heightened fear for personal safety, restriction of journalistic movement in the area |
| Legal/Advocacy Follow-Up: | No formal protection provided; lack of enforcement of Sindh High Court orders against illegal crushing plants; no reported investigation into threats against the journalist |
| Current Status/Outcome: | The journalist remains at risk while reporting on environmental and governance issues, reflecting ongoing impunity for non-state actors threatening media professionals |

Narrative

On 04 March 2023, Journalist F, a regional television reporter based in small town near District Khairpur, Sindh, was directly threatened and prevented from performing his professional duties while reporting on illegal crushing plants operating in violation of a Sindh High Court order. The journalist was covering continued extraction of sand and stone despite judicial directives mandating the sealing of all crushing plants and requiring the local administration to submit a compliance report.

While conducting field reporting, Journalist E was confronted by individuals linked to the local crushing plant mafia. He was explicitly threatened with death and warned that he would be “shot” if he continued his coverage. The threats were aimed at forcing him to abandon reporting on the issue and silencing further media scrutiny of illegal environmental exploitation and administrative non-compliance.

The incident highlights a broader pattern in which non-state actors engaged in illicit economic activities appear to operate with limited accountability, often emboldened by weak enforcement of court orders and administrative inaction. Despite the gravity of the threats, there is no indication that law enforcement initiated an investigation into the intimidation faced by the journalist, nor were protective measures extended to ensure his safety.

The case underscores the significant risks faced by regional journalists reporting on environmental crimes and governance failures in Pakistan, particularly in rural and semi-rural areas where criminal networks exert influence and accountability mechanisms remain ineffective.

Chapter 4:

Analysis

4.1 Emerging Trends and Evolving Patterns

The cases documented in this second edition reveal both an escalation and a diversification of threats against environmental journalists in Pakistan. Where the first edition identified patterns of legal harassment, digital intimidation, and social pressure, the current cases point to something more entrenched: the normalization of criminalization, prolonged strategic litigation, and direct field-level threats.

Perhaps the most concerning development is the growing use of legal mechanisms as instruments of pressure. The arrest of a journalist under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) marks a significant shift from the filing of complaints or First Information Reports (FIRs) to the initiation of custodial criminal proceedings. The application of cybercrime provisions to public-interest reporting raises serious questions about the scope and interpretation of digital laws as they relate to freedom of expression.

The case involving sustained corporate litigation reflects a pattern widely recognized in international contexts as Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs). Prolonged defamation proceedings, attempts to secure pre-publication injunctions, and coordinated reputational counter-campaigns may rarely result in conviction, yet they impose considerable financial, psychological, and professional costs. Cumulatively, such strategies risk deterring investigative scrutiny of powerful economic interests.

Field-level intimidation, meanwhile, remains a persistent and underacknowledged threat — particularly for regional journalists. Direct death threats linked to illegal stone-crushing operations illustrate the dangers faced by reporters covering environmental crimes in rural and semi-urban settings. Weak enforcement of court orders and limited protective response from authorities further entrench a perception of impunity among non-state actors.

These cases suggest that threats against environmental journalists are no longer isolated or episodic, but increasingly systemic. Legal, economic, and physical pressures operate in concert in ways that discourage scrutiny of governance failures, environmental degradation, and resource exploitation.

4.2 Geographic and Institutional Dimensions

The cases in this edition are concentrated in Sindh, spanning both metropolitan Karachi and rural districts, highlighting the complex intersection of environmental governance, urban infrastructure, real estate development, and extractive activity within the province.

Urban environments present risks tied to institutional power and corporate influence, where legal tools and reputational campaigns tend to follow investigative reporting. Rural environments, by contrast, expose journalists to more direct physical threats from actors engaged in illicit environmental practices. In both settings, the absence of timely and effective institutional response remains a defining and recurring concern.

These cases also suggest that environmental reporting particularly on water governance, land development, and resource extraction tends to implicate actors with significant political or economic leverage, increasing the likelihood of retaliation and underscoring the need for more robust institutional safeguards.

4.3 Accountability and Legal Protections

Despite the existence of legal frameworks designed to protect journalists, including the Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals Act (2021), significant implementation gaps persist. None of the cases documented in this edition reflect a proactive protective response or a transparent investigation into threats faced by journalists.

Where legal proceedings were initiated, they targeted journalists rather than those alleged to have carried out intimidation. The use of cybercrime provisions against journalistic expression raises important questions about proportionality and the boundary between legitimate defamation claims and criminal prosecution wielded as a silencing tool.

The prolonged nature of defamation litigation further reflects the absence of procedural safeguards against abusive legal actions. Without mechanisms to deter vexatious suits or ensure timely resolution, legal processes risk functioning as instruments of deterrence rather than channels of justice. The absence of investigations into field-level threats further reinforces a perception of limited accountability for non-state actors engaged in environmental exploitation. This gap not only endangers journalists but may also undermine enforcement of environmental regulations and judicial directives.

4.4 Impact on Journalism and Public Discourse

The cumulative effect of criminal charges, prolonged litigation, surveillance, reputational attacks, and physical threats extends beyond individual journalists. Such pressures may contribute to self-censorship, editorial caution, and a narrowing of investigative focus, particularly on issues involving powerful political or economic interests.

Environmental journalism plays a critical role in informing the public about climate change, natural resource governance, urban planning, and environmental justice. When journalists face sustained intimidation, the public's right to access information on these matters may be compromised.

The normalization of legal and reputational pressure may also discourage younger journalists from pursuing investigative environmental reporting, especially in regions where institutional support mechanisms are weak. Over time, this may result in reduced scrutiny of environmental governance and diminished transparency in sectors central to sustainable development.

4.5 Comparative Observations: Edition I and Edition II

Read alongside the first edition, the cases in this report indicate several emerging patterns:

- A shift from threats and complaints toward custodial legal action under cybercrime legislation;
- Continued and increasingly strategic use of legal harassment;
- Persistent impunity for non-state actors issuing direct physical threats;
- Limited evidence of effective enforcement of journalist protection laws.

These developments raising red flags that with the increased awareness of journalist safety, the structural vulnerabilities underpinning it remain largely unaddressed. The second edition accordingly reinforces the case for sustained monitoring, cumulative documentation, and evidence-based advocacy as essential tools for systemic change.

Chapter 5:

Conclusions & Recommendations

5.1 Conclusions

The cases documented in this second quarterly edition signaling a concerning trajectory: threats against environmental journalists in Pakistan are becoming more structured, diversified, and institutionalized. While the first edition identified patterns of intimidation and legal harassment, this edition reveals an escalation that includes custodial arrest under cybercrime legislation, prolonged strategic litigation by corporate actors, coordinated reputational campaigns, and direct physical threats from non-state groups involved in environmental exploitation.

These developments point to a broader pattern in which environmental reporting, particularly when it addresses governance failures, land use, water management, and extractive industries, intersects with powerful political, corporate, and criminal interests. In such contexts, legal frameworks, economic leverage, and informal intimidation may converge to restrict scrutiny and discourage investigative journalism.

The analysis further highlights persistent accountability gaps. In the cases documented, protective legal instruments were not effectively activated, and investigations into threats against journalists were either absent or not publicly evident. The reliance on criminal law provisions in response to journalistic expression raises important questions regarding proportionality, due process, and the safeguarding of public-interest reporting.

Environmental journalism is intrinsically linked to democratic accountability and sustainable development. When journalists face sustained legal uncertainty, financial pressure, or physical threats, the impact extends beyond individual reporters. It affects the public's right to information, weakens environmental governance, and undermines efforts toward climate resilience and transparency.

The cumulative findings of this second edition underscore the need for structural reforms and coordinated action to ensure that environmental journalists can carry out their work without fear of retaliation.

5.2 Recommendations

In light of the findings and analysis presented across the first and second editions of this publication, the following recommendations are proposed:

5.2.1 - For Government and Law Enforcement

1. Strengthen Implementation of Journalist Protection Frameworks

- Ensure full operationalization of the Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals Act (2021), including functional complaint mechanisms and rapid-response protocols.
- Establish clear procedures for reporting threats and ensuring timely, transparent investigations.
- Enhance coordination between federal and provincial authorities to address cases involving both state and non-state actors.

2. Safeguard Public-Interest Reporting from Criminalisation

- Review the application of cybercrime legislation, particularly provisions of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), to ensure alignment with constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression and international human rights standards.
- Promote clear guidelines distinguishing legitimate public-interest journalism from criminal conduct.
- Encourage proportionality in the use of criminal law in cases involving alleged defamation linked to journalistic activity.

3. Introduce Safeguards Against Strategic Litigation (SLAPPs)

- Consider procedural reforms to discourage vexatious or abusive litigation intended to silence public participation.
- Encourage expedited judicial review of cases involving journalists engaged in public-interest reporting.
- Promote dialogue within the legal community on international best practices to prevent misuse of defamation law.

5.2.2 - For Media Institutions and Journalist Associations

4. Enhance Protection for Regional and Field Journalists

- Develop risk-assessment and safety protocols tailored for journalists reporting from rural or high-risk areas, particularly on environmental crimes and resource extraction.
- Strengthen enforcement of court orders related to environmental protection to reduce exposure of journalists confronting non-state actors.
- Encourage media organizations to adopt internal safety policies, including legal support and security guidance for field reporting.

5. Strengthen Media Solidarity and Ethical Standards

- Promote ethical standards within media institutions to prevent participation in reputational or disinformation campaigns targeting fellow journalists.
- Encourage professional associations to provide coordinated support in cases of legal or physical intimidation.
- Facilitate dialogue between media houses to reinforce collective commitment to press freedom and journalistic integrity.

5.2.3 - For Civil Society and International Partners

6. Expand Monitoring and Data Collection

- Support sustained documentation of threats against environmental journalists at the national level.
- Encourage collaboration between civil society organizations, press bodies, and academic institutions to build a comprehensive evidence base.
- Integrate findings into broader policy discussions on media freedom, environmental governance, and rule of law.

5.3 The Way Forward

This second edition strengthens the foundation of GNMI's national monitoring initiative under the project Empowering Environmental Journalists for Climate Action, supported by the UNESCO Global Media Defence Fund (GMDF). As the database expands, future editions will deepen comparative analysis, identify recurring patterns, and track institutional responses over time.

Through sustained documentation and evidence-based advocacy, this publication seeks to contribute to a safer and more enabling environment for environmental journalism in Pakistan. Protecting journalists is not solely a media-sector concern; it is integral to ensuring transparency in environmental governance, advancing climate action, and upholding democratic accountability.

The continuation of this quarterly series reflects a long-term commitment: transforming journalists' accounts of intimidation into collective momentum for reform and ensuring that those who report on environmental challenges can do so freely, responsibly, and without fear.



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