

# "FREE AND INDEPENDENT VOICES ARE BEING SILENCED." BEING A FREELANCE JOURNALIST IN 2017



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For World Press Freedom Day, the Trust's Programme team give us a snapshot of what it's like to work as a freelancer in their region in 2017.

From the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa to Asia and the Americas, they describe the risks and threats that freelancers are currently facing and what we're doing to help.

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## The Americas

by Catalina Cortes

***"In Mexico this year, there has been an unprecedented wave of violence against the press."***

We've had a significant increase in requests for assistance from freelance journalists in the USA - and there have been numerous cases of freelancers who have been arrested covering demonstrations. Many have also had their equipment confiscated which is causing real concerns around the security of their networks and contacts.

For instance, Tracie Williams, a freelance photographer who has contributed to The New York Times and The Nation, was arrested in February as she was covering the Standing Rock protests against the Dakota crude oil access pipeline. She has since been charged with "Obstruction of Government Function", a Class A misdemeanor, and now faces up to one year in jail and/or a £3,000 fine. We hope that our support will enable her to find legal assistance and help her back to work.

Meanwhile in Mexico this year, there has been an unprecedented wave of violence against the press. Five journalists have been killed so far - four in March alone. One of them was Cecilio Pineda, a freelance reporter who published stories about crime, corruption and more on social media. He was fatally shot in Guerrero state by two gunmen on a motorcycle. His assailants have yet to be brought to justice while his devastated family continue to grieve. The Trust is supporting Cecilio's family with subsistence costs to cover their rent bills and food.

## Asia

by Qurratulain Zaman

### ***"Free and independent voices are being silenced."***

Space for independent newsgathering is shrinking in Asia. As in so many other regions, journalists are now targeted by both state and non-state actors. Over the past year, more and more free and independent voices are being silenced by a range of methods: from false convictions to internet blocks and other forms of government-sponsored censorship across countries including Afghanistan, India, Pakistan and the Maldives.

For example, journalists reporting on protests in India-administered Kashmir have been harassed and attacked by both demonstrators and security forces. Two of our beneficiaries were recently injured while covering a peaceful protest in Srinagar.

One of them was 30 year old freelancer Zuhaib Maqbool Bhatt, who told RPT that despite showing his camera and identifying himself, he was hit by bird pellets and suffered wounds to his left eye and around the chest and abdomen. He had gone through four surgeries in three months and his left eye was even left blinded. With our support, including grants to help his family cover basic subsistence costs, he is now on the road to recovery.

But things continue to deteriorate in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Officials just recently blocked all access to social media services for a month - in a country where the internet is crucial to getting information out, it's a pernicious form of media censorship.

In another part of the region, award-winning Pakistani freelance filmmaker Shad Khan was on assignment when he was stopped and questioned by security agencies. Despite having all the right paperwork to film in the area, he was interrogated for 68 hours before being forcibly deported to the UK.

Crucially, all of his equipment, including his camera and phones, were confiscated. Worried for his safety and that of his family, he has not been able to go back to Pakistan. To get him back to work, RPT has helped Khan buy a new laptop and will continue to monitor his situation.

Stories like this are why Pakistan ranks a lowly 139th on [RSF's World Press Freedom Index](#), making it one of the most dangerous countries for journalists in Asia. Sadly, if current trends continue, the worst could be yet to come.

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## Middle East and North Africa

by Austin Cooper

### ***"Crisis has become the norm."***

The most worrying sign, when trying to describe the conditions for freelancers in the Middle East and North Africa is that you feel stuck on repeat.

Crisis has become the norm. As civil conflicts stagnate across the region, freelancers are continually the first in the line of fire for oppressive governments, armed groups and local populations who have a closely nurtured suspicion of independent journalism.

The reality is that, by and large, freelance journalists are unable to work. In Egypt, our beneficiaries are imprisoned, banned from reporting and barred from leaving the country. Two journalists we've helped did manage to escape Egypt, and are beginning life in exile with our support for language learning and basic subsistence.

Across Yemen, the resilient freelance community has barely anywhere left to report for, as media outlets face threats and buckle under the financial pressure of war. Many freelancers we've helped have found themselves on blacklists published by the Houthis calling on members of the public to detain, attack and even kill journalists.

[Our resource for Syrian journalists](#) remains as relevant as ever to help independent journalists report safely in the region. But with so many Syrian freelancers also scattered across the diaspora, providing meaningful support to those in exile struggling to find work remains a huge challenge to overcome.

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## Sub-Saharan Africa

by Valentine Gavard

### ***"Our work is a drop in the ocean - but it is still vital to those who need it."***

Local freelance journalists pay a very heavy price for reporting across Sub-Saharan Africa. From exposing local political corruption to covering environmental stories in their regions, their work often mean they are targeted by governments, mafias, corporations, armed groups and many others.

Life for Burundian journalists has been particularly difficult. Since June 2015, we have supported nearly 30 freelancers forced to flee their homes. Take the case of Jean Bigirimana, a Burundian freelance journalist who vanished under mysterious circumstances last year. At the time, he was reportedly working on a story on the lives of Burundian journalists in Rwanda and had travelled between the two countries.

His case is just one example of a disturbing new trend - enforced disappearances are becoming increasingly common in Burundi. While his whereabouts remains unknown, we have taken steps to ensure his family's safety and security.

Well over 150 Burundian journalists have been forced into exile since 2015. One of them, Arianne (not her real name)\*, an experienced freelance radio journalist, was attacked by security forces in Burundi's capital, Bujumbura, while interviewing people for a segment. The country was in the midst of a unsuccessful military coup at the time and journalists were being aggressively targeted.

Arianne was forced to find refuge in another country, but she struggled to get work and was raising her children with almost no support. After taking part in a professional integration project organised and funded by RPT, she is now able to earn an income as a visiting journalist at a radio station set up by exiled Burundian journalists.

Our work is a drop in the ocean - but it is still vital to those who need it. Because of widespread threats, freelancers across Sub-Saharan Africa have been forced to live in exile or are internally displaced, which brings huge professional challenges. Many of our beneficiaries from Somalia live in overcrowded camps in Kenya. Others have to survive as refugees in very expensive cities, such as Kigali in Rwanda.

[Our resource for East African freelancers in exile](#) aims not only to help them develop a support network but more importantly, to do their jobs again.