CHAPTER-VI: Risk Awareness among Media persons in the Armed Conflict Situation in Manipur

6.1 Risk awareness among media persons in Manipur:

The Imphal correspondent of the Hindu Laithangbam Iboyaima once observed: “There are over 500 editors and other journalists in Manipur working for 23 daily newspapers brought out in Manipuri, English and some tribal dialects, nine periodicals and one local cable television channel. Daredevil reporters rush to the spot when encounters take place without bullet proof jackets and without obtaining clearance from the police or the security forces engaged in the gun battles. When a bomb is exploded or a convoy is ambushed, reporters managed to reach the very spot of crime almost immediately. A number of them have been beaten up by the police and the security personnel. This has resulted in the boycott of government and Army functions by the local journalists.”

The former President of the AMWJU Akoijam Sanaton said that it was because of the quest for news that the local journalists were enthusiastic enough to rush to spots where encounters between security personnel and

221 Stop Press, Frontline, 16 November, 2007, p-41
militants were taking place. He added that most of them had little knowledge about how to equip themselves in covering an armed conflict and lack professional training and hence were bound to face professional hazards.\footnote{A Talk with Ak. Sanaton at his home at Singjamei, Imphal, on August 30, 2007.}

However, the Associate Editor of Poknapham and former President of the AMWJU Kakchingtabam Bijoy Sharma opined that academically trained and professionally experienced media persons were also working for media organizations in Manipur. He also said that some of the journalists in the state do have a fair knowledge of the risks the journalists of the armed conflict torn state are exposed to. The AMWJU is also organizing seminars, workshops and training programs from time to time to sensitize the media persons the problems faced by them in the state.\footnote{A Talk with K. Bijoy Sharma at the Manipur Press Club, Imphal on 11 March, 2006.}

Over all, the journalists of the state are aware of the prevailing armed conflict situation in the state. However, most of the media persons in the state are not well equipped and systematically prepared to mitigate the professional hazards which they are bound to face in their tryst to collect and disseminate news.
6.2 Offices journalists on dangerous assignments may contact:

Any independent journalist or media organization may contact the headquarters of the UNESCO whenever they feel the need of the international organization’s assistance, with respect to the considerations of safety and security of journalists in reporting armed conflicts. They may also contact it in connection with problems they faced while contributing on peace building measures in conflict and post-conflict zones of the world. The mailing address of the international organization and its website is given as follows.

UNESCO House,

7 Place de Fontenoy,

75352 Paris 07SP, France.

Website: http://www.unesco.org

Journalists working in hostile environments may also turn to the following organizations for various forms of support.

1. International Committee of the Red Cross

Press Division, Hotline,
19 Avenue de la Paix
1202 Geneva, Switzerland
Telephone: (41) 79 217 32 85, Fax: (41) 22 733 20 57,
e-mail: press.gva@icrc.org.

2. Committee to Protect Journalists
330 Seventh Avenue, 12th floor
New York, NY 10001
Tel. 212-465-1004, Fax: 212-465-9568
e-mail: info@cpj.org

3. Reporters Sans Frontières
5, rue Geoffrey-Marie
75009 Paris, France
Tel: (33) 1 44-84-84-84, Fax: (33) 1 45-23-11-51
e-mail: rsf@rsf.org

6.3 The AMWJU Code of Conduct and
its relevance in covering armed conflict:

The past decade has seen many cases of mayhem to the media
professionals of the state because of the harassments by law enforcing
agencies of the government and its parallel ultra-legal counterparts. In view
of the rising intolerance on the part of state forces and non-state actors which have affected the emergence of a vibrant and free media in the state, the All Manipur Working Journalists Union (AMWJU) has come up with a Code of Conduct to be observed by the working journalists of Manipur. The Code of Conduct is in addition to the guidelines developed by the Press Council of India for the journalists of the whole country. The professional guideline framed by the Union is destined to enable the media persons and media organizations of the state to perform their professional duty smoothly in the armed conflict torn state.

A general body meeting of the AMWJU on 8 October, 2001 had unanimously adopted the Code of Conduct of the working journalists and media organizations of the state. The genesis of the Code of Conduct lies in the armed conflict situation in Manipur. It was designed to better protect the journalists from the pressure of the non-state actors to decide what are to be published and not to be published in the newspapers. The guideline also underscores the efforts of the media to ward off efforts intended to manufacture a guided press. The focal points of the local Code of Conduct, from its inception, are the safety and security, professional integrity and
responsibility of the journalists in the prevailing situation in Manipur. The excerpt of the Code of Conduct of the AMWJU is as under.224

(a) No claims made by unidentified sources/person(s) over telephone will be entertained. In case of identification, editors of all newspapers/periodicals/monthly will decide.

(b) No press conference called by any individual of organization(s) without official invitation will be accepted.

(c) All press releases of any organization(s) have to be duly signed with seal and on organizational letterhead.

(d) All press releases should be delivered to the press before 8 p.m. for morning dailies, 3 p.m. for eveningers and 4 p.m. for cable (television) news channels.

(e) In case of conflict/controversies between two or more parties, views of parties concerned will be given equal coverage. If the arguments and counter arguments raised become harmful to the state and could claim human lives, the AMWJU reserved the right to censor.

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(f) If any organization(s)/individual would like to retract a press release or handout issued by them for any reason, the said organization(s)/individual should officially approach the editor in person with a duly signed letter by the same person who signed the press release.

(g) If any individual/organization(s) have any grievances (except petty or minor matters which can be solved by the editor) against any newspaper, the concerned should first approach the AMWJU to address the problem.

(h) All newspapers/media persons will follow "the norms of journalistic conduct" as laid down in the Press Council of India (PCI) rules along with AMWJU's code of conduct.

(i) Editors are directed to refrain from sensationalizing the news report and from indulging in sensationalism.

(j) Editors will bear responsibility for mistakes of omission and commission appearing in their newspapers.
(k) All editors have the right to censor/delete any news report of press releases or interviews or press conferences, which could create communal tension or group clashes.

(l) In case of violation of the code of conduct as laid down by the AMWJU by reporter(s)/newspaper(s), the AMWJU will take punitive action against the reporter/newspaper.

6.4 Do’s and Don’ts for the Press: A Censorship of the Government of Manipur:

On 4 October, 1998, the Chief Secretary of the Government of Manipur, issued a list of Do’s and Don’ts for the press in Manipur. It was in response to a Union Home Ministry directive on 10 July, 1998 asking it to take action against seditious publication.\(^{225}\) It prohibited, among others, publication of press releases by underground organizations like objective references about their cadres and ‘boycott’ calls for Independence Day or Republic Day of India. It had the following do’s and don’ts.

Do's:226

1.1 Check the veracity of new items which cast aspersions on the character and reputation of persons/organizations.

1.2 Understand the compulsions and constraints under which persons/organizations being written about operations.

1.3 Inform and seek help of Security Force officials before entering scene of operations/encounters. It is for your safety and well being.

1.4 Display your identity card prominently while entering restricted area/area where operation is being conducted.

1.5 Be patient in case of delay and abide by local restrictions as it involves risk to personal safety.

1.6 Accuracy and Fairness: The Press shall eschew publication of inaccurate, baseless, graceless, misleading or distorted material. All sides of the core issue or subject should be reported. Unjustified rumours and surmises should not be set forth as facts.

1.7 Pre-publication Verifications: On receipt of a report or article of public interest and benefit containing imputations or comments against a citizen, the editor should check with due care and attention

226 Ibid.
its factual accuracy- apart from other authentic sources with the person or the organization concerned to elicit his/her or its version, comments or reaction and publish the same with due amendments in the report where necessary, in the event of lack or absence of response, a footnote to that effect should be appended to the report.

1.8 Right of Reply: The newspaper should promptly and with due prominence publish either in full or with due editing, at the instance of the person affected or feeling aggrieved or concerned by the impugned publication, a contradiction, reply, clarification or rejoinder sent to the editor in the form of a letter or note. If the editor doubts the truth or factual accuracy of the contradiction/reply/clarification or rejoinder, he shall be at liberty to add separately at the end a brief editorial comment doubting its veracity, but only when his doubt is reasonably founded on unimpeachable documentary or other evidential material in his/her possession. This is a concession which has to be availed of sparingly with due discretion and caution in appropriate cases.

1.9 Covering Communal Clashes: Proper verification must be done before publishing reports regarding communal clashes or disputes. The report
should not vitiate the situation. Instead it should aim at soothing the reflected feelings.

1.10 Respect Confidence: If information is received from a source confidentially, the confidence should be respected.

Don’ts.\textsuperscript{227}

2.1 Newspapers should not publish UG releases giving ‘Revolutionary Salutes’ obituaries praising their cadres and covering ceremonies/processions related to UGs killed or alive.

2.2 Newspapers should not give prominence to the press releases given by UG groups/anti national/anti-social elements.

2.3 Newspapers should not publish ‘Boycott Calls’ for our national events like Independence Day or Republic Day.

2.4 Newspapers should not publish sensational news without verification. Such news are often sponsored by anti national/social elements and may be false or highly exaggerated.

\textsuperscript{227}Ibid.
2.5 Newspapers should not get offended when checked by soldiers on duty. They are just performing their duty

2.6 Newspapers should not take photographs within defence establishments without obtaining permission.

2.7 Eschew Obscenity/Vulgarity: Newspapers/journalists shall not publish anything which is obscene, vulgar or offensive to public good taste.

2.8 Eschew Suggestive Guilt: Newspapers should not name or identify the family or relatives or associates of persons convicted or accused of a crime when they are totally innocent and reference to them is not relevant to the matter reported.

2.9 Newspapers should not publish the following class of items which may be held to attract provisions of Sec. 95 of Cr. Pc.:

i) All items directly attributed to terrorists and terrorist related organizations considered to be subversive,

ii) Obituary notices which contain names of known terrorists and terrorist related organizations,
iii) Publication of threats of any sort by terrorist organization to any person of class or persons,

iv) Publication of any code of behavior or social decree by terrorist or terrorist related organizations,

v) Publication of any justification of killing made by terrorist,

vi) Publication of any justification of killing made by terrorists,

The Order also elaborated a number of actions to be taken against publication of seditious matters as approved by the State Cabinet on 25 May, 1993. They are as follows:

i) For publication of blatant anti-national, seditious, communal materials, etc. action under the relevant provisions of the IPC may be taken by the police. The Publicity Department may simultaneously recommend to the Registrar of Newspapers of India for cancellation/suspension of their registration.

ii) For publication which does not fall within the provisions of the IPC but are nevertheless mischievously anti-national, seditious,
communal etc. the Publicity Department. May also recommend such cases for cancellation/suspension of their registration.

iii) The newspapers/journals which have indulged in the aforementioned things also violate the State Advertisement Policy. Such publications may be blacklisted, and Government advertisement may not be given to them.

6.5 Covering militancy and the PCI observations:

In a bid to curtail propaganda of the proscribed secessionists' organizations through local print and electronic media and curb their oxygen of publicity, the government of Manipur clamped an official order on August 2, 2007 under Section 95 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973. The order says that any printed material, i.e. either newspapers or books and document whether printed or in electronic form shall be forfeited to the state government if they contain any material which are directly attributed to unlawful organizations, organized gangs, terrorists and terrorists related
organizations considered to be subversive and a threat to the integrity of the state and the country.\textsuperscript{228}

The order of the State Home Department further forbids obituary notices of slain militants that glorify them as martyrs of a freedom struggle. Publication of threats of any sort by terrorist organizations or unlawful organizations, publication of any code of behavior, dress code of social practice decreed by such organizations, publication of any justification for killings, causing injury, assault, kidnapping, imposition of fines or warnings by such organizations, publication of notices for payment to terrorists related organizations or unlawful outfits in cash or kind and publication of items in the form of invitation to the aforementioned organizations to settle or solve disputes are also altogether banned by the official order.\textsuperscript{229}

Opposing the move vehemently, the All Manipur Working Journalists Union (AMWJU) served an ultimatum to the state administration demanding it to withdraw the suppressing order on or before 9 August, 2007. In a memorandum addressed to the Chief Minister, Okram Ibobi Singh, the

\textsuperscript{228} Home Department, Govt. of Manipur, Order No. 2/0(10)/2007-H, 2 August, 2007.

\textsuperscript{229} Ibid.
Union flayed the government of trying to gag the freedom of expression in democratic India by clamping a stringent restriction.\textsuperscript{230} The Union further argued that if the order is allowed to prevail, the national level television news channels would have to be banned from airing in Manipur and national level newspapers are to be stopped from circulating in the state, and the state will suffer a total cut-off of communication from other parts of the country.

The order has not only interfered with the freedom of the press but also restrained the only means of communication on which the people of Manipur depend to bring about an amicable resolution to the armed conflict in the state.\textsuperscript{231} The Manipur Government refused to withdraw the Order. This meant that the ultimatum of the AMWJU to withdraw the gagging order had no takers in the state administration. The state government was firm on controlling editorial content on the ground that there is more than enough militant propaganda in local media and it was not going to tolerate it any more.

The order of the Government of Manipur is not in tune with the Press Council of India (PCI)'s adopted reports on media in insurgency prone

\textsuperscript{230} Media under Siege in the Armed Conflict Situation in Manipur, \texttt{www.newswatchindia.com}
\textsuperscript{231} Ibid.
regions of the country. Thereafter, the Council sent one of its members to study and address the genuine grievances of the local journalists of the state in the first week of October, 2007. The PCI member discussed the issue with the AMWJU. However, these efforts had so far not produced the desired results.

Acknowledging the gravity of the pressure journalists faced in Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab (during the height of Khalistan movement) and the Northeast states, the Council conducted an enquiry in 1991 into the pressure the press in Punjab was facing. A special committee was constituted to examine the problems and its report "Overcoming Fear" was adopted by the Council.\textsuperscript{232} It extended full support to the press in Punjab in its effort to inform the people truthfully and impartially of the events taking place in their state by reflecting all parties of an event with due care and self censorship and in resisting any diktats from terrorist groups.\textsuperscript{233}

In Kashmir also, the Council conducted more than one enquiry. In one enquiry in 1991 that covered both Kashmir and Punjab, the Council accepting its special committee's report "Crisis and Credibility", said the


critical importance of information and communication in the complex and
difficult situation in the state had not been adequately appreciated either by
the government or the media.\textsuperscript{234} It suggested a series of measures to respond
effectively to the complex situation. In 1993-94, the Council conducted
another enquiry into the problems facing the press in Kashmir and adopted a
report entitled “Threats to the media from militant organizations”. In this
report, the Council asked the government to provide institutional and area
security to media personnel who faced threat from the militants for taking an
independent stand.\textsuperscript{235}

Arising out of a complaint against publication by a newspaper of
Assam of some press handouts and threat notes issued by the United
Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), the PCI enunciated some general
The guiding principles say that diktats or press notes commanding
newspapers to publish them under duress or threats of dire consequences,
emanating from elements wedded to violence constitute the gravest assault
on the freedom of the press which is one of the surest guarantors of a
democratic and plural society. Generally, such diktats or press notes are not

\textsuperscript{234} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{235} Op cit, p-158.
newsworthy *per se*. Publication of such contents not only compromises the freedom and independent functioning of the concerned newspaper but also constitutes an offence against the standard of professional ethics and responsibility of the fourth estate of democracy.  

The guiding principles further add that if there is anything newsworthy in a press note emanating from any source, it should not be blacked out altogether as self censorship may be no less dangerous than being insidious. The bottom line is that editors must exercise due caution and circumspection while considering the dissemination of such press notes. If the whole content of the proscribed outfit's press communiqué is not pernicious, then it may be edited, its objectionable portions removed and language toned down so that whatever is really newsworthy gets disseminated in an impartial and balanced manner.  

As per guiding principles of the Council, the fundamental criteria for selecting editorial content should be its newsworthiness and not where it emanates from. The Council advises to withhold the publication of a press

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note released by militants only when the newsworthy and the objectionable portions are inextricably mixed up.

According to the findings and recommendations of the "Crisis and Credibility" report on Kashmir, "...The media cannot therefore turn away from critical situations entailing danger or retreat to safe havens, depending on handouts from any quarter. The people have right to know and to seek authentic, objective and wherever possible eyewitnesses or well documented information." It further says, "Newsmen and newspapers should report all sides and aspects of events fairly and objectively, citing sources, verifying facts, providing necessary contextual background and where possible, offering their own eyewitness observations, analysis of interpretation without editorializing."\(^{238}\)

As per the recommendations of the report, the most horrific events can be narrated with moderation and should be portrayed or displayed with sobriety so as not to exacerbate tensions. The concept of objectionable writing must be clearly defined and understood. If genuinely objectionable matter is to be curbed, pre-censorship is not the answer. This should be scrupulously avoided. The remedy lies in taking action under the ordinary law of the land

with suitable appellate procedures. It would be desirable if the PCI were to be informed of all such cases. In the PCI report on the media crisis in Punjab, the Council recommended that the bandh notices and press notes from ultras should be edited and played down while positive developments should be mentioned and even highlighted as the occasion demands. While exercising due caution in disseminating press notes issued by terrorist groups, the press must also be vigilant against the possibility of its being used by the government. The media cannot be anybody's handmaiden or cat's paw, because its credibility is vital.

6.6 Mitigating the professional hazards:

The spurt of ethnic and civil conflicts in the recent years has drawn attention of the media professionals all over the world to look into the ways and means to remove the impending threats and sometimes when the circumstances compel to mitigate the looming dangers while they are covering in dangerous locations of armed conflict. With each conflict, the price paid by local journalists and foreign correspondents is getting heavier. In the past decade, around 250 journalists have been killed in armed conflict zones of the world.
Although there can be no total security for journalists in such locations, the quantum of the professional hazards may be alleviated if the journalists working in such areas systematically prepare and meticulously follow the guiding principles of safety and security for the working journalists in such areas.

Surinder Singh Oberoi, Communication Officer, ICRC, Regional Delegation for South Asia, New Delhi, who had also served as a correspondent of the Agence France Presse (AFP) said: "While a journalist is covering either an international or an internal armed conflict situation, he/she needs to know the background history of the conflict, socio-cultural values of the two warring groups, law of the land, the clout of the conflicting nations or influence of state and non-state actors. The media persons working in such areas have to assess the possible implications of a news, if the same is critical to any of the parties who have stake in the conflict, before it is being filed to his/her newspaper or broadcast media. His/her personal safety and security is also a crucial factor to look into. If a media
person works without the above considerations in an armed conflict zone, his/her life is looming in danger.”

Commenting upon mitigating the professional hazards - murders, attempted murders, assaults, humiliations, arrests, detentions, reprimands, kidnaps, hostages etc. by either state or non-state actors or by unknown miscreants; the Associate Editor of Poknapham K. Bijoy said that the major share of the problems faced by media persons in Manipur is due to the prevailing armed conflict situation in Manipur. Until and unless the genesis of the problem is diagnosed and resolved for once and all, the media persons of the state would face similar problems in future also. The people of Manipur are also facing the same problem. Being in the same environs, journalists of the state are also at the receiving end of the problem. So, local media need to contribute towards solving not only the problems faced by media persons in the state but also the half century old armed violence in the state so that the entire people of the state will also be free from the problem. Once the bigger problem is rooted out, the smaller one will automatically vanish from the scene.

239 Lecture given by S S Oberoi, Communication Officer, ICRC, New Delhi, at Hotel Vishwaratna, Guwahati, Aug. 29, 2006 at the Teachers Training Workshop on International Humanitarian Law.
The PRO of the IGP, Assam Rifles (South) Colonel L. M. Pant suggested that media persons, at their best, should try to avoid altercations with security personnel in an area where the security forces are under combat operations or major search operations. Pressmen should introduce themselves to security forces at the first instance in such situations and try to meet with the head of the check post or commander of the operation. They need a soft start, positive stories and constructive criticism.\(^{240}\)

The former Additional Superintendent of Police, Imphal West M. A. Jalil said that the editors and senior journalists should brief their reporters about the nature of duty and problems they are likely to face before giving an assignment to cover news of military/police operations. At the same time, security personnel should also be briefed well by their commanders so that they do not commit excesses to anybody else including journalists in any situation of their duty.\(^{241}\)

6.7 Concluding remarks:

The Government of Manipur is trying to curtail media freedom by issuing “do’s and don’ts for the press” as directed by the Government of

\(^{240}\) A Talk with Col. L. M. Pant, PRO, IGP/AR (South), at his office in Imphal on 3 August, 2008.

\(^{241}\) A Talk with M. A. Jalil, Deputy Commandant, 1\(^{st}\) MR, at his office in Imphal on 3 August, 2008.
India. In a bid to curb the “oxygen of publicity” of the militants, the state administration has also issued official orders to ban publication of news and photographs emanating from armed outfits.

Media persons have been booked on the flimsy ground of either having nexus with the militants or publishing seditious news reports and comments. They have also been harassed at reporting sites by the personnel of the law enforcing agencies of the state. At the same time, they have also been under constant pressure from proscribed underground organizations, which have been relentlessly trying to arm-twist them into becoming their propaganda machinery.

Media persons who are working in such situations should be sensitized about the problems they are bound to face at any point of time. The local media persons also need to be aware of the local code of conduct for the working journalists in Manipur and the restrictions imposed by the government from time to time. Over and above, both the state and non-state actors should allow the local journalists to enjoy the professional independence which the Press Council of India envisions to, so that the local media can provide an effective democratic forum.