Nepal's National Interests Project - Part VI
"Seeking Free and Responsible Media"

The final paper on "High Time for Media to become Responsive" by Anil Giri, Senior Sub-Editor of The Kathmandu Post daily said, that concentration of media ownership in the hands of large corporate groups is increasing reliance on advertising revenue leading to a frenzied quest for ever-higher ratings; an exaggerated focus on "breaking news", so-called "exclusive" stories and the use of "anything goes" tactics; a restriction of topics to those that will interest the affluent middle class (the most profitable targets for advertisers), an increasingly uncomfortable closeness between marketing and editorial departments, and the transformation of news into a commodity. Furthermore, Mr. Giri said that the nexus between politicians and media persons is not a new thing in Nepali media. It can often be seen manifested while reporting, particularly in government-owned media.

During discussions, participants queried the presenters with a host of serious questions on the rise of yellow journalism, growing influence of foreign powers in the Nepali media sector, irresponsible reporting creating confusion in the society leading to low level of trust of what is written in the media amongst the public.

In continuation of the Nepal's National Interests project, the Centre for South Asian Studies (CSAS) in cooperation with the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) organized a conference on 'Seeking Free and Responsible Media' on Aug. 4, 2011. This was sixth in series of the conferences under the main theme held in Kathmandu. At first, Director of the CSAS Nishchal N. Pandey said that media is a critical component of democracy building which was why it was rightfully called the 'fourth estate.' Stating that although the media in our country is the freest in South Asia, there is threat to the security of journalists and murder has become common which has contributed to self-censorship.

Mr. Tomislav Delinic, Head of the KAS for Regional Program SAARC informed that the media is one of the main pillars of the KAS work from the last half a century and that in every continent of the world, the KAS has been having a media program. There are several programs for working journalists such as scholarships, taking part in visits for which a separate Asia News Network (ANN) has been established under which many Nepali journalists have already benefitted.

The first paper of the conference, "Between the Media Agenda and the Public Agenda" by Dr. Dharma Adhikari, Co-initiator of Media Foundation highlighted that critics...
tend to see media as generally “anti-intellectual”, focusing much on the mundane, and rarely on substantial issues of the country. They say the media underestimates the general public’s capabilities to appreciate such issues and engage in them. Even the President Dr. Ram Baran Yadav commented that media people in Nepal seem “superficial”; they do not go deep into issues and urge reporters to write about “national interest,” suggesting that now is the time to help people understand about the Constitution, the CPA and the Special Committee on PLA Integration-the guidelines for completing the peace process.

Dr. Adhikari outlined that in the recent years, there has been a resurgence of interest in public policymaking. A number of non-governmental organizations, academic programs, youth initiatives and a few journals devoted to public policy have given a new impetus to the debate on public-focused policy making in Nepal. While chalking out major issues before the free media in the contemporary Nepal, he pointed out that firstly most news outlets or journalists (scarcely the government press) have pursued a revolutionary agenda, focusing on political change inspired by one ideology or another. Secondly, commercial agenda forms the overriding factor for many private outlets with significant investments. Thirdly, some investors and public figures who run media outlets for social or political influence have the status agenda as their guiding force. Fourthly, identity agenda offers the motivation and purpose of journalism for some individuals and groups. This may also include partisan journalism. Finally, a section of the media, including some government outlets, reflects the public good agenda.

In the second paper “From Conflict to Peace: Changing Face of Danger for Nepalese Journalists” by Sanjaya Dhakal, of the BBC Nepali Service said, that as the Maoist conflict flared up, the incidents of journalists getting killed by either the state or the rebels became commonplace. Quoting statistics compiled by the Federation of Nepalese Journalists (FNJ), 31 journalists have been killed in the first decade of 21st century as a direct consequence of their work. Hundreds were routinely harassed, threatened, intimidated and even physically assaulted. Dozens of journalists were displaced from their working place after they could not stand the level of intimidation and threat to their lives. Even after the change of 2006, Nepalese journalists have been subjected to new and more dangerous challenges that underscore the changing face of dangers that face them. The recent case of attack against Biratnagar-based journalist Khilanath Dhakal is a case in point. The assassinations of woman journalist Uma Singh, and media entrepreneur Arun Singhania are high profile cases that received wide coverage.

Mr. Dhakal said that free and responsible journalism has been tried, tested and found as the most vital pillar that sustains democracy and pluralism. Therefore, this issue cannot be neglected. The constitution, media laws and press council act, all aim to strengthen the hand of free media - with best of intentions. But there have been incidents (that demand at least a second look in order to introduce a culture of responsiveness in Nepalese media. Mr. Dhakal also put forth a set of recommendations. Some of them are listed below:
1. The immediate need is the consolidation of democratic system of governance with a constitution that guarantees press freedom and freedom of expressions.
2. There should be firm political will to promote press freedom.
3. The situation of law and order must be improved to create minimum conducive environment to allow the free media to flourish.
4. The culture of impunity that has been haunting Nepalese media for years must be ended and perpetrators of acts against press freedom must be brought to justice.
5. Free media must be recognized as a part and parcel not only of democratic system of governance but also of vital national interest.
6. The remnants of political conflict found in Terai region must be ended preferably by the application of political negotiations.
7. State security apparatus in Terai region must be strengthened to ensure an environment where journalists can work without fear.
8. Media responsiveness must be dealt by the media fraternity as an important issue.
9. Code of conduct of journalists must be adhered to and its monitoring must be stringent.
10. Bodies like Press Council Nepal or the Federation of Nepalese Journalists should have more teeth in dealing with atrocities committed by media.

The fourth paper on “Security Challenges on Journalists in Nepal” by Chandra Shekhar Adhikari, Senior Reporter of the Annapurna Post daily shared the wide-spread concern amongst working journalists registered with Department of Information. Of them, 860 are being published regularly. Likewise, 380 FM radios and 28 televisions have acquired broadcast licences. Altogether 319 FM radios and 19 TV stations are currently in operation. Nepali press is currently undergoing heavy self-censorship as journalists risk their lives if they dared to raise critical, but important issues. Indeed, the rising level of impunity has put a serious question mark over the sustainability of democracy in the country. What is sad to note is that political parties themselves are found giving protection to criminals and thugs that attack journalists.

Koirala felt that it was good that the number of media houses in Nepal is growing despite all these adversities. But unfortunately the country is yet to see the growth of quality media houses. Despite having secured a law that protects their entitlements, journalists are forced to work for minimum wages. Investment in quality and skills remain low or non-existent. Most journalists feel that they do not have their future in journalism. Majority of media houses do not provide salary to journalists on time. Even if they provide salary on time it is meagre.

Third paper on ‘Media Situation in Post-Conflict Nepal’ by Kosh Raj Koirala, Senior Correspondent of Republica daily informed that altogether 5,873 newspapers have been