

Challenges to Journalism in Bastar

A report by the Fact Finding Team of the Editors Guild of India

The Team:

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Places of Travel:

Jagdalpur, Bastar and Raipur

Dates of Travel:

13th to 15th of March, 2016

Terms of reference:

To verify and assess:

Recent reports of the arrests of journalists in Chhattisgarh

The threats and challenges faced by journalists in the state

The challenges to the profession of journalism

Summary

Bastar division of Chhattisgarh state is fast becoming a conflict zone. There is a constant battle on between the security forces and the Maoists. Journalists, caught in the middle, are under attack by both the state and non-state actors.

Several incidents have been reported over the past few months of attacks on journalists. At least two, according to the reports, were arrested and imprisoned and others threatened and intimidated to a point where they had to leave Bastar for fear of their lives. The residence of at least one journalist, according to the information, was also attacked.

The Editors Guild of India constituted a three member Fact Finding Team to look into these reported incidents. Since Seema Chishti was unable to travel, Prakash Dubey and Vinod Verma travelled to Raipur/Jagdalpur on 13th, 14th and 15th of March, 2016.

The fact finding committee members met a number of journalists and government officials in Jagdalpur. In Raipur the team met Chief Minister Dr. Raman Singh and all top officials of the state, several Editors and some senior journalists.

The team recorded the statements of journalists Malini Subramaniam and Alok Putul. It also visited the central jail to meet journalist Santosh Yadav.

The fact finding team came to the conclusion that the media reports of threats to journalists are true. The media in Chhattisgarh is working under tremendous pressure. In Jagdalpur and the remote tribal areas the journalists find it even more difficult to gather and disseminate news. There is pressure from the state administration, especially the police, on journalists to write what they want or not to publish reports that the administration sees as hostile. There is pressure from Maoists as well on the journalists working in the area. There is a general perception that every single journalist is under the government scanner and all their activities are under surveillance. They hesitate to discuss anything over the phone because, as they say, “the police is listening to every word we speak.”

Several senior journalists confirmed that a controversial citizen group Samajik Ekta Manch’ is funded and run by the police headquarters in Bastar. According to them it is a reincarnation of Salwa Judum.

Challenges to Journalists: Some Cases

Challenges of writing for the newspapers are not new in Bastar division of Chhattisgarh. A journalist Premraj, who was representing the Deshbandhu newspaper in Kanker, was booked under the Terrorist and Disruptive Activity (Prevention) Act (TADA) in the year 1991-92 when the undivided Madhya Pradesh state was ruled by the BJP. He was charged with being close to the Maoists. He was later acquitted by the courts for want of evidence.

In December, 2013 a rural journalist Sai Reddy was killed by the rebels in a village near Bijapur. According to the police, a group of Maoists attacked him with sharp edged weapons near the market and fled from the spot.

Bastar Journalist Association President S. Karimuddin told the fact finding team that in the year 2008, Sai Reddy was arrested by the police and kept in jail under the controversial Chhattisgarh Special Security Act, accusing him of having links with the Maoists. On the other hand, the Maoists suspected him to be loyal to the security forces and set his house ablaze and killed him later.

In February, 2013 one more rural journalist Nemi Chand Jain was also killed by the rebels in Sukma. Rebels were under the impression that he was passing messages to the security forces. 45 days after his murder, the Maoists apologized for his killing.

Last year, in 2015, police arrested two news persons under the same controversial law for allegedly having connections with the Maoists. One of them, Santosh Yadav was arrested in September. He was a stringer for at least two Raipur based newspapers Nav Bharat and Dainik Chhattisgarh. The editors of both the news papers have owned the journalist. The fact finding team met Santosh Yadav in the Jagdalpur Central Jail, where he said that he is also suspected by both the sides of being close to the other side.

A second journalist, Somaru Nag was arrested in July, 2015. He was also a stringer and news agent for a Raipur based newspaper, but that newspaper never came forward to own him as their employee.

Charge sheets in both the cases have been filed and the matter is pending in the courts.

On February 8, 2016, the residence of Malini Subramaniam was attacked by some unidentified people. She is a contributor for Scroll.in and former head of International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC). As Malini told the fact finding team, her house was attacked in the early hours of the morning. Malini found stones scattered around her Jagdalpur residence and the window of her car shattered. According to her around 20 men gathered around her house a few hours before the attack, shouting slogans like "Naxali Samarthak Bastar Chhoro", "Malini Subramaniam Murdabad". She suspected that the same people must have been involved in the attack. According to the local administration, "her writing is one sided and she always sympathizes with the Maoists." The same allegation was made by the Samajik Ekta

Manch. According to the local administration the Manch is being run by citizens opposed to the Maoists. However, the journalists in Jagdalpur and Raipur said that it was supported and financed by the police. A few of them said that the Inspector General of Police Mr. SRP Kalluri is directly involved in this.

The latest case was reported by BBC Hindi journalist, Alok Putul who was forced to leave Bastar after he received threats. According to his statement, recorded by the FFT (fact finding team), before these threats Alok received messages from the IG and SP who refused to meet him maintaining that they preferred to deal with “nationalist and patriotic journalists.”

Fear Factors

FFT could not find a single journalist who could claim with confidence that he/she was working without fear or pressure. The journalists posted in Bastar and the journalists working in Raipur, all of them spoke of pressure from both sides.

They said that the journalists have to work between the security forces and the Maoists, and both sides do not trust journalists at all.

All of them complained about their phone calls being tapped by the administration, and being kept under undeclared surveillance. The government officials categorically denied these charges. Principal Secretary (Home) BVK Sumbramiam said, *“I have to sanction every single request for surveillance and I can say this with authority that no govt. department has been authorized to tap phone calls of any of the journalists.”*

The journalists posted in Bastar said that they cannot dare to travel to the conflict zone to report because they cannot report the facts on the ground. Although collector Jagdalpur, Amit Kataria told the fact finding team that the whole of Bastar is now open for everyone, including journalists.

The President of Divisional Journalists Association of Bastar, S. Karimuddin said, “I have not visited any place outside Jagdalpur for the last six years, simply because I am not supposed to write the truth and if one cannot write what one sees then there is no point going out to gather information.” He represents UNI in Bastar for more than three decades.

A similar claim was made by the Editor of a local newspaper Dilshad Niyazi who said that he had not visited the neighboring district Bijapur for the last eight years out of fear. Another senior local journalist, Hemant Kashyap, well travelled in the area said he knew Bastar like the back of his hand but that now journalists had stopped travelling. “All the journalists have now stopped going inside the forests because of the fear of police as well as Maoists,” he said. “Now we ask Maoist organizations to send photographs and press releases. We publish them as we receive them because we don’t want to explain every single line we are writing to them. Similarly the police expect us to publish its version so most of the journalists print their press releases as well without asking any questions,” Kashyap said.

Malini Subramaniam told FFT that even if someone dares to go out to gather information, one is not supposed to talk to the people. She said, "Police officials expect journalists to believe and publish whatever they claim. They don't like it if someone wants to walk an extra mile for finding the facts. In one case of surrender, when I tried talking to a couple of people, they asked me to identify the persons I wished to talk and then they briefed them before I could reach them."

The fact finding team found that this fear is not confined to the tribal areas only, but is there in the capital city Raipur too, 280 kilometers away from Jagdalpur. All the reporters working in Raipur also said that their telephones were tapped. Some of them shared incidents that confirmed this. A very senior journalist, who is considered to have a cordial relationship with the Raman Singh govt. said, "No one is spared, not even me. They have been tapping my phone calls too." Government officials denied this charge as reported earlier and claimed that not a single journalist is under surveillance. They said that there was a perception gap and they would try to change this.

Chief Editor of an old and reputed newspaper Lalit Surjan said that it had become extremely difficult for a journalist to do his/her job. During his meeting with the FFT he said, "If you want to analyze anything independently, you cannot do it because they can question your intentions and can ask bluntly, 'Are you with the government for with the Maoists?'" He admitted that this problem was not only with the government, but also with the Maoists. He said, "Both sides feel that what you are writing is wrong."

Surjan said that it was becoming increasingly difficult to work in areas like Bastar as the journalists cannot avoid meeting Maoists, and the government is not prepared to give them even the benefit of the doubt. "The government should respect democratic rights and should give benefit of doubt to the journalists," he said. He questioned the arrest of the two journalists Santosh Yadav and Somaru Nag and remembers Sai Reddy, who was killed by the Naxals, as a fine reporter.

Challenges faced by Journalism

A journalist working in Bastar expects to be asked “Which side of journalism?” This question appears a bit odd but in Bastar it comes naturally. As the local journalists put it, there are three categories of journalists in Bastar. 1. Pro-government, 2. Not so pro government and 3. Pro Maoists or Maoist sympathizers.

The FFT found that there are nearly 125 journalists working in Jagdalpur alone. They can be divided in four categories:

Journalist by profession: There are only a few in this category. They are generally representatives of the Newspapers published from Raipur. Some newspapers have editions in Bastar, so heads of those editions can also be counted in this category. Journalists of this category are on the pay roll of the newspaper or news agency.

Part time journalists: Dozens of journalists belong to this category in Jagdalpur (or in other cities of tribal division of Bastar.) Journalism is not their main occupation. They have to take govt. contracts, work as builders or property dealers, traders, hoteliers or directors of NGOs etc. Apart from their business interests they have become printers and publishers of a newspaper or a periodical magazine, work as correspondent of some unknown or little known publication. Journalism is not their principal vocation. So called journalists of this category did not seem to be at all concerned about the salary they received from the publication they were working for, they don't bother about circulation of the publication they own and least bothered about the reputation of the same. Their money comes from somewhere else. The fact finding team was told that many of them use journalistic influence for getting business, govt. contract, advertisements and some time extortion money from government officials and businessmen. Most of the time they are pro government for obvious reasons and senior journalists sitting in Raipur introduce/identify them as journalists on the 'government pay roll'. Since corruption is rampant in Bastar, they are earning more money for not publishing a news item, than for publishing it. In a conflict zone like Bastar, they are the favorites of the local police and other officials.

Stringers and News agents: They are the backbone of journalism in Bastar. Posted in remote areas of the conflict zone known as stringers, newsagents or even hawkers. They collect news and send it to Jagdalpur bureau or to the head office directly. They don't have any formal appointment with the newspaper nor do they get remuneration for their work. They get a letter from the newspapers or news agencies they represent, that authorises them to collect news and advertisements. Some might have been issued a press card, that the organisation rarely bothers to renew after it has expired. To the surprise of the FFT many of the stringers in the remote areas are carrying a press card issued by some national television channels too. Their money either comes from advertisement commission or from some other business they are involved in. In case of television sometimes they get paid if the video footage is used, but it happens very rarely and the payment is very low.

Visiting Journalists: They are the journalists representing national or international media. They come from either Raipur, where they are generally posted or from the head offices like Delhi and Mumbai. Police and local administration dislike them the most because they ask many questions, insist on getting the facts and try to visit the affected areas. They are generally seen as Maoist sympathizers or pro-Maoists. As one senior editor in Raipur puts it, “their reports seems pro Maoist because they go inside and talk to the people and anything coming from the people usually contradicts the government’s version and hence it is labeled as pro Maoists or anti government. ” The problem with this lot is, they cannot stay for a long time in Bastar so their reportage is not sustained. Secondly they came with an assignment and they end up looking for a particular story. Third, they cannot access most of Bastar because they are not allowed to visit many parts of the tribal areas, on the grounds that it is not ‘safe’. Four, they don’t understand the local language/dialect and hence are dependent on what the interpreter is telling them. It could be a local journalist from the above described category no. 2. There are some exceptions like Scroll contributor Malini Subramanian who was staying in Jagdalpur and visiting remote places for gathering news, but she could not stay there for a long time for obvious reasons.

Language and Class:

There are only a few journalists who can understand the language/dialect tribal people speak, whether it is Gondi or Halbi or some other dialect. There is not a single full time journalist who comes from one the tribes. Most of the journalists belong to a different class and speak some other language. Their mother tongue could be Chhattisgarhi, Marwari, Hindi, Telugu, Bangla or Hindi but not the one in which local villagers speak. Language constraints are a problem.

Difficult Terrain:

Major part of the conflict zone is in Abujhmarh, which means ‘unknown hills’. It is hilly forest area which is home for many tribes. The population in this area is very thin. According to the 2011 census India’s average population density is 382 persons per square kilometers but in this part of the country the population density is 10 persons only. Then it is one of those areas of the country where Malaria is common. Because it is also the so called liberated zone of the Maoists, it is very difficult to go inside the jungle to gather reports.

Government's response

The FFT met Chief Minister of Chhattisgarh Dr. Raman Singh at his residence. All top bureaucrats of the state were also present in the meeting. Editors Guild's executive committee member Ruchir Garg and editor of a local daily Sunil Kumar were also present in the meeting.

The Chief Minister said that he is aware of most of the incidents and he is concerned about it. He said that his government is in favor of free and fair media. He informed the fact finding team that after the controversy over the arrest of journalist Santosh Yadav he had called a meeting of top officials and some editors and formed a monitoring committee which will be consulted for any cases related to the media and journalists.

About the phone tapping and surveillance allegations, the principal secretary (home) assured the team that he is the authority for sanctioning surveillance and he could say that not a single journalist is under surveillance. The principal secretary to the CM admitted that there is a perception gap and said it was the government's responsibility to change this perception.

The attitude of Bastar IG Mr. SRP Kalluri towards the press also came up in the meeting. The CM instructed the officials that the behavior of one officer should not take away all the credits of the good job the government is doing in Maoist area. Some senior police official with credibility should be authorized to talk to the press, he said. Principal Secretary (Home) should visit Jagdalpur and interact with the media, the Chief Minister instructed.

CM Dr Singh assured the FFT that his government has no prejudice against any one and he will personally take all necessary steps required to make media free of any kind of fear.

Samajik Ekta Manch

This is an informal but controversial organization in Jagdalpur. The administration calls it a citizen's forum and claims that people from all walks of life are members of this organization. The collector of Jagdalpur, Amit Kataria said that many religious organizations are also part of it and they are against the Maoists. But many journalists call it the urban version of Salwa Judum. They, however, did not want to oppose it openly. They said off the record, that the Manch is sponsored by the police and it takes its orders from the police headquarters.

The FFT met one of the coordinators of this organization Subba Rao to understand the working of the Samajik Ekta Manch.

He introduced himself as editor of two dailies, one morning and the other published in the evening. When asked, whether his main occupation is journalism, Subba Rao was candid enough to explain that he is basically a civil contractor and he is working on some government contracts. The FFT met more than a dozen journalists in Jagdalpur, but he was the only (so called) journalist who claimed that he had never experienced any pressure from the administration.

His statements about the arrested journalists were the same as the administrations. He termed Santosh Yadav and Somaru Nag as informer for the Maoists. He said that what Malini Subramaniam was reporting was very biased. "Malini was glorifying Maoists and painting a picture of police like exploiter", he said. He denied that Samajik Ekta Manch was behind the attack at Malini's residence.

Cases and the findings

Santosh Yadav/ Somaru Nag

Santosh was arrested by the police on September 29, 2015. Police charged him for working as a courier for the Maoists and taking money from them.

Government officials claim that Santosh Yadav is not a journalist and they don't know which newspaper he was working for. The FFT met Santosh Yadav in the Central Jail in Jagdalpur and discussed the case with him. He claimed that he had been working for at least two newspapers Navbharat and Chhattisgarh. (Editors of both the newspapers confirmed that Santosh Yadav was working for them and they own him as a journalist working for their newspapers).

Santosh Yadav admitted that he had been attending calls from the Maoist leaders because of the nature of his job but he had never passed any information to them. He also admitted that he had been occasionally dropping packets between Darbha and Jagdalpur. Sometimes it was bundle of newspapers or magazines and sometimes some other papers he did not know anything about. He said that anyone who lives in remote area of conflict zone cannot risk his life by refusing the Maoists to carry a bundle of papers from one place to another.

The Chief Editor of the newspaper group the Deshbandhu, Mr. Lalit Surjan said during his discussion with the fact finding team, "Santosh Yadav and many other journalists working in remote area of Bastar should be given the benefit of doubt because they have been talking to Maoists as part of their job. They don't have any choice." He said that journalists of those remote areas are also talking to the police as part of their jobs and become victims of Maoist anger.

Santosh Yadav told the FFT that he had been given money by a senior police officer and he was expected to pass information about the Maoists movements around the area, but did not do so. He claimed that after some news items published in the newspapers, he was called by the local police station and was tortured for three days.

Somaru Nag was also arrested last year. He was basically a newspaper agent for a newspaper and also gathering news for the same. But the newspaper doesn't own him now. Charges are same for him too.

Malini Subramaniam

Malini is a contributor for the website the Scroll.in. She was living in Jagdalpur and collecting news for the website. She was working for the Scroll for nearly one year. Before that she was head of

International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC). She was first threatened by a group of people then her house was attacked in the wee hours of February 8, 2016. Then she was compelled to vacate her rented accommodation in Jagdalpur.

When the team was in Jagdalpur she was in Hyderabad. The FFT discussed the case with her over the phone.

The local authorities claim that they were not aware that someone is contributing for the Scroll from Jagdalpur. As the collector of Jagdalpur put it, "which is not even mainstream media"

Local journalists say that even they were not aware that Malini Subramaniam was writing for Scroll before the whole controversy came up. Malini admitted that she never bothered to enroll herself as a journalist with the local govt. public relations department, as she was not covering day to day events.

The govt. officials admit that they are not happy with Malini's writing because 'it is always one sided and sympathises with the Maoists.' The Collector of Jagdalpur, Amit Kataria told the FFT- "Even her questions in the press conferences used to be pro Maoist." Malini in her testimony to the FFT, denied this and said, "Despite my limitations, I have been travelling to remote areas, meeting local people and writing about them. That is something the police don't want any journalist to do. They want journalists to write what they say of what their press release say." (Malini told the team that when she was trying to meet some tribal people, the police objected to it and they picked up a couple of tribal people briefed them first then only did the police allow her to interact with them.)

Malini said that objection on her writings came from a newly formed organisation 'Samajik Ekta Manch'. Her impression is that this organization is supported by the local police and they take orders from the police only. She told the team that during the day a few dozen people gathered in front of her house and shouting slogan against her and then after mid night her house was attacked.

The fact finding team asked many government officials if they have issued any denial for contradiction notice against the Scroll report, the answer was negative.

Malini said that the local police is becoming intolerant and doesn't want any voice of dissent to be present in Bastar.

Alok Putul

He is a contributor for BBC Hindi from Chhattisgarh. He was in Bastar for gathering news and was trying to meet the Bastar IG Mr. SRP Kalluri and SP Mr. Narayan Das. After many attempts he received this reply from the IG, "Your reporting is highly prejudiced and biased. There is no point in wasting my time in journalists like you. I have a nationalist and patriotic section of media with and press which staunchly supports me. I would rather spend time with them. Thanks."

The SP sent a similar message, "Hi, Alok, I have lot of things to do for the cause of nation. I have no time for journalist like you who report in biased way. Do not wait for me."

In his testimony before the team Alok Putul explained that this message was unexpected from the police officers from whom he was trying to take their quotes on the Naxal surrender and law and order situation story he was trying to do.

As Alok explains, "This message was the beginning. After these messages, one local person, known to me, came and advised me to leave the area as some people were looking for me. Initially I was taking it lightly and travelled to another area, there one more person came to me to give me same information. Then I had no other choice but to leave the area immediately."

Alok told the FTT, "First thing I did was to inform the BBC office in Delhi and some journalist friends in Raipur and then I came back to Raipur."

The Jagdalpur collector, Amit Kataria when asked about this by the team, laughed and then said, "There was some communication gap between Alok Putul and IG, nothing else."

After several messages and phone calls, the team could not get a chance to meet IG SRP Kalluri. When the team left Delhi, he had assured that he would give an appointment, but stopped responding when the FTT reached there.

Conclusions

1. Santosh Yadav is a journalist and he has been writing for at least two news papers of Raipur. Both the newspapers have owned him. So the government's claim that he is not a journalist is baseless.
2. Authorities claim that they have enough evidence about Yadav's links with the Maoists. It is now for the court of law to decide where these evidences will be produced. But senior journalists in Raipur feel that he has been a victim of circumstances and he should be given benefit of doubt.
3. It is clear from the on record statements made by the authorities that the administration was not comfortable with the reports Malini Subramaniam was sending to Scroll.in. And instead of putting their side of the story, the so called citizen's forum 'Samajik Ekta Munch' was incited to attack Malini's house and compelled her to leave the city and even the state.
4. Alok Putul was in Bastar to gather some news about the law and order situation for the BBC. Instead of meeting him or talking to him, the two top officials of Bastar sent him messages questioning his nationalism and patriotism. Later he came to know that a few people were looking for him, so he had to leave the place to save himself. Police officials were not available to meet the FFT. The DM dismissed the threats to the journalist as a "communication gap."
5. There is a sense of fear in Bastar. Every journalist who is working in Bastar feels that he/she is not safe. On one hand they have to deal with Maoists who are becoming more and more sensitive about the reports appearing in the media and on the other hand, the police wants the media to report as and what they want.
6. As one Senior Editor Mr. Lalit Surjan puts it, "If you wish to analyze anything independently then you can be judged whether you are with the government or with the Maoists. The democratic space for journalism is shrinking."
7. There is a general feeling (in government) in Chhattisgarh that a large section of the national media is pro Maoist. One senior editor, who is perceived as close to the government, said this.
8. Newspapers and other media houses are appointing journalists as stringers in the remote areas without any formalities. These journalists gather news, collect advertisements and arrange the distribution of the newspapers too. They generally survive on the commission they get from advertisement collections or they rely on other professions for the same. A separate and detailed report on stringers is recommended.
9. There is no mechanism in place for accreditation of those journalists who are working beyond the district head quarters. So when the question of identity arises government conveniently denies that someone is/was a journalist. Media houses also disown them because they see them as liability beyond a point.

10. The state government wants the media to see its fight with the Maoists as a fight for the nation and expects the media to treat it as a national security issue, and not raise any questions about it.
11. Chief Minister instructed the administration for better coordination and co operation. A journalist was arrested shortly after the FFT meeting with him, suggesting that there is no shift in policy.
12. FFT is of the view that news paper organizations should take care while appointing stringers and give them adequate protection.

Vinod Verma

Seema Chisti

Prakash Dubey

Member Executive Committee

Member Executive Committee

General Secretary

EDITORS GUILD OF INDIA

List of people the fact finding team met

1. CM Dr. Raman Singh
2. Leader of Opposition T.S. Singhdeo
3. Pradesh Congress Committee Chief Bhupesh Baghel
4. ACS, Baijendra Kumar
5. Special DG (Naxal Oprations) D.M. Awasthy
6. Principal Secretary to CM, Aman Singh
7. Principal Secretary (Home) B.V.R. Subramaniam
8. DG Upadhyay
9. ADG, Intelligence, Ashok Juneja
10. DPR, Rajesh Toppo
11. Collector Jagdalpur, Amit Kataria
12. President, Bastar Divisional Journalist Association and UNI correspondent S. Kareemuddin
13. Subba Rao, coordinator of Samajik Ekta Manch, Jagdalpur
14. Manish Gupta, Chief of Bureau, Navbharat, Jagdalpur
15. Hemant Kashyap, Nai Dunia, Jagdalpur
16. Satyanarayan Pathak, Bhaskar, Jagdalpur
17. Naresh Mishra, reporter, IBC24
18. Santosh Singh, Navbharat, Jagdalpur
19. Lalit Surjan, Chief Editor, The Deshbandhu, Raipur
20. Ramesh Nayyar, Former Editor, Raipur
21. Sunil Kumar, Editor, Chhattisgarh
22. Alok Putul, Contributor, BBC Hindi, Raipur
23. Malini Subramaniam, Contributor Scroll.in (Over phone from Hyderabad)
24. Santosh Yadav, Arrested journalist, in Central Jail, Jagdalpur

Reports etc.

Sai Reddy Killed: <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bhopal/Maoists-kill-journalist-in-Bastar/articleshow/26966563.cms>

Nemichand Jain Killed: (apology by Maoists): <http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/maoists-say-sorry-for-killing-bastar-journalist/1095462/>

Two Journalists Arrested : <http://www.thehoot.org/free-speech/media-freedom/arrested-tortured-jailed-in-south-bastar-8956>

Malini Subramaniam house was attacked: <http://www.catchnews.com/national-news/scroll-in-writer-former-red-cross-head-malini-subramaniam-attacked-in-chhattisgarh-raman-singh-naxal-maoist-kotwali-bastar-bjp-yuva-morcha-samajik-ekta-manch-1454937036.html>

Alok Putul was forced to leave Bastar: <http://www.thequint.com/india/2016/02/23/bbc-journalist-forced-to-leave-bastar-after-he-receives-threat>