

The rain had fallen for days before the torrents finally broke, roaring through the valleys of northern Pakistan. In Buner, a schoolteacher was left as the only survivor of his family. Only a day earlier, his home had been alive with celebration as they prepared for a wedding. The walls were freshly whitewashed, jewelry and clothes carefully set aside, children’s laughter filled the courtyard, and neighbors gathered to share in the joy. By Friday, a flash flood swept through the village and in a matter of minutes, the sound of happiness was replaced by silence and grief.



A journalist in Buner listens to a survivor recount his loss after flash floods destroyed his home. For many local reporters, the act of documenting tragedy also means living through it themselves.

When a young journalist, Anwarzeb, arrived to speak with the man, he found him sitting among the ruins, unable to hold back his tears. “We are human first,” the reporter reflected later. “When you witness people losing their families, homes, and entire lives, it overwhelms you. Sometimes, you don’t even know where to begin your work.”

This moment—half interview, half mourning—captures the unspoken burden of disaster reporting in Pakistan. Journalists walk through the mud and grief not as distant observers but as neighbors, cousins, and witnesses themselves. And in a country where climate change now fuels floods, landslides, and storms with

frightening frequency, the journalists' role has never been more vital—or more painful.

The Scale of the Floods

By late August 2025, Pakistan's monsoon floods had already claimed more than 800 lives nationwide. In Punjab, 1.2 million people were affected and about 250,000 displaced as rivers burst their banks and farmlands vanished underwater. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa bore a heavy toll: 396 deaths, nearly 200 injured, more than 2,000 homes destroyed, and hundreds of schools washed away. Districts like Buner, Swat, and Bajaur saw entire villages flattened, roads and bridges severed, and families left searching through the rubble for loved ones.

The destruction revived memories of the 2022 mega-floods, when 33 million Pakistanis were affected, 1,700 killed, and losses exceeded 30 billion US dollars. Scientists had warned then—and continue to warn now—that climate change is amplifying monsoon extremes. Heavier rains collide with melting glaciers in the north; unchecked deforestation strips the land of protection; and reckless construction in floodplains magnifies the risk.

But behind each statistic is a family like the one in Bajaur who had been preparing for a wedding before the waters came. Behind every official death toll is a father sitting silently on the ruins of his collapsed home, or a mother clutching a photograph of the child who never came back.

When Reporting Hurts

For journalists, covering such tragedies is a professional task but also a deeply personal ordeal. Many describe the same haunting dilemma: how can they ask grieving parents about their loss when the wound is still fresh? And yet, if they do not ask, the story is never told.

“The hardest part is asking questions of those who have lost loved ones,” one journalist explained. “In those moments, I think to myself: how can I ask about their feelings when they are already drowning in grief? Yet I also know their voices must be heard.”

The toll lingers after the camera is turned off. During editing, when interviews and images replay repeatedly, the emotional weight grows. “Each time I listen again, I

wonder what kind of future awaits those families,” another reporter reflected. “Their stories become part of you.”

Memories That Do Not Leave

For Aziz Buneri, a freelance journalist from Buner, the recent floods were more than a headline—they were a personal nightmare. His community was among the hardest hit. Over 200 lives were lost in a single flash flood, with at least ten people still missing. Aziz’s greatest obstacle was emotional and logistical: roads washed away, communication networks collapsed, and access became nearly impossible. “For a journalist, reaching the site and establishing communication is everything,” he said. “Mobility and communication are always the two biggest challenges.”



Children play near flood debris in Bajaur as a journalist quietly photographs them. Even amid destruction, stories of resilience remind us that hope endures.

But even when he reached site, the stories refused to let go of him. One encounter still haunts him: a young man who had lost almost his entire family—parents, siblings, uncles, and grandmother—all swept away. “His words replay in my mind

every time I think of floods,” Aziz admitted quietly. “Even today, recalling that interview brings tears to my eyes.”

For Shah Khalid in Bajaur, the challenge was reporting on his own people. “We are journalists, but we are also human,” he said. “When it is your own community suffering, the weight is heavier.” One man he interviewed had lost four immediate family members and many relatives. “His voice was trembling, full of grief. As a journalist, it is very difficult to listen and still hold yourself together.” Shah worked three sleepless nights to file his report. “Disaster reporting does not only affect the survivors—it also affects us.”

In Swat, reporter Irfan Khwaja interviewed a father of four disabled children who had been preparing for his daughter’s wedding. The floods not only destroyed his home but also stole the dream of marrying her. “I tried to control my emotions during the interview, but deep inside, I was broken,” Irfan said. “Even today, I still think of him and his family.”

For Azhar Ullah, a seasoned correspondent covering disasters across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the lessons are painfully consistent. One memory stands out: a woman who had lost everything but told him under the open sky, “Everything has been washed away, but I thank God my sons survived.” For Azhar, moments like this shape how stories are told—with empathy, with sensitivity, with care.

Invisible Trauma of Journalism

Trauma, psychologists explain, is caused by overwhelming or life-threatening events. Its impact may appear immediately or much later as people begin to understand what they have been through. For journalists, the harm often begins the moment they step into a disaster zone or listen to survivors share their stories. The cycle deepens while reporting the story itself, with every rewrite, edit, and broadcast forcing them to re-live the tragedy.

If such reactions continue, whether through flashbacks, sleeplessness, or avoidance, they may signal Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Research reveals a disturbing pattern: nearly three in ten journalists worldwide show PTSD symptoms, and five percent suffer from depression. In Pakistan, the situation is especially severe. A 2020 study in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa found that 48.6 percent of local journalists were experiencing PTSD symptoms, one of the highest rates ever recorded.

Local journalists face a unique challenge. While foreign correspondents can leave once their work is done, local reporters remain in their own communities. The victims are not strangers but relatives, neighbors, and in some cases, childhood friends. “The victim in Pakistan may not be a stranger,” said psychologist Dr. Asha Bedar. “He may be a cousin, a neighbor, or even a childhood friend. That makes detachment impossible. The grief is shared.”

This vulnerability exists far beyond Pakistan. Journalists covering the flash floods in Libya in 2023 spoke of nightmares that refused to end. In the United States, reporters haunted by hurricanes in Florida and Louisiana admitted that the trauma stayed with them for months. In Australia, correspondents who witnessed the devastating bushfires of 2019 and 2020 said they could still smell the smoke years later. In Turkey, those who reported on the 2023 earthquake felt guilt that their role as witnesses stopped them from helping victims directly.

For many, the trauma of journalism is not just about what is reported. It is about what is carried home and how deeply it ties them to the communities they serve.

Silence in the Newsroom

Despite the evidence, Pakistan’s newsrooms offer little support for emotional health. Few provide trauma training to prepare journalists for difficult work; counseling is almost nonexistent. Freelancers—who make up much of the rural press—work without contracts, insurance, or institutional backing. “Even the largest media houses do not train their reporters on how to handle such situations,” Aziz lamented.



In Swat Valley, a father sits on the ruins of his home, holding a broken photo frame as a reporter records his story. Behind every headline are journalists who carry both the grief of others and their own silent burdens.

The silence mirrors a global pattern. In many countries, especially in South Asia and Africa, disaster reporters face extreme conditions without psychological safety nets.

In press clubs and editorial meetings, mental health remains taboo. Reporters fear that admitting struggles will be seen as weakness. The result is a culture where journalists bear the burden alone, even as they continue to record devastation.

Moral Injury

Reporters often carry invisible scars. Moral injury happens when they witness suffering and feel torn between the duty to report and the instinct to protect. Reporting from a grieving family in the aftermath of a disaster or snapping a photo of a person thrashed at a rally might lead them to ask whether the story has been reported at the cost of another person's dignity.

These decisions linger with them long after the news has passed into history. The agony of wondering "could I have done more?" is a quiet burden. Reporters require support in order to deal with such moments and places where they may grapple with the ache that follows. Without it, moral injury wears them down – in quiet fashion – both in terms of well-being and faith in the importance of their contribution.

Seeds of Change

There are glimmers of hope. In Peshawar, Professor Altaf Ullah Khan helped establish Pakistan's first Competence and Trauma Centre for Journalists, offering confidential counseling for the first time. Breaking long-held stigma, even senior reporters began attending sessions. Internationally, the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma at Columbia University in USA has championed trauma-aware practices: briefing reporters before assignments, debriefing them afterward, and giving them time to rest. UNESCO has echoed these calls, urging newsrooms to redefine safety as not only helmets and flak jackets, but also emotional resilience.

Peer support may be the strongest shield. Reporters who check in on each other, share experiences, and take short breaks after assignments are far less likely to feel isolated. "Telling stories heals," one trainer said. "But storytellers need healing too."

Protecting the Storytellers

As climate crises accelerate, disasters will come more often, and the people who bear witness will face greater risks. Protecting journalists is no longer just about

safety vests or satellite phones. It is about survival of the spirit.

For Anwarzeb, the lesson is clear: “We must show what still stands, not only what has been destroyed. People need facts, but they also need hope.”

Pakistan’s floods remind us that climate change is reshaping landscapes and livelihoods and the lives of those who tell the stories. Journalists absorb the grief they record. They carry it in their notebooks, in their cameras, and in their hearts long after the floodwaters recede.

Their survival depends on more than courage. It requires spaces to rest, to grieve, and to heal. Protecting them is not charity. It is an investment in truth itself.