

## Journalists Under Fire: Years of Living Dangerously, Again

By Red Batario

Failure of key Middle East players to broker a peace plan in the Israel-Lebanon conflict is exacting a terrible toll on civilian lives and properties. The continuing exchange of artillery and rocket fire between Israeli troops on the one hand and Hezbollah and Palestinian gunmen on the other has heightened fears of escalating violence in the region. From this maelstrom journalists seek to bring the news to a global audience, underscoring the daily dangers that news media members face in hostile environments.

Every job has its attendant risks, but journalists whose work requires them to bring truth to light face greater risks than most. Lately the risks have become alarmingly high.

Over the last 10 years more than 1,000 journalists and media staff worldwide have been killed in the line of duty. In many parts of the globe coping with threats, harassment, intimidation or worse has become part of the journalist's job description. The dangers increase exponentially when journalists report on wars and other forms of conflict. Some get killed or maimed for life. Others are abducted and held for long periods of time.

The International News Safety Institute (INSI) points out: "As modern warfare, terrorism and crime follow different patterns, journalists reporting these conflicts and events are ever more at risk of being caught in a crossfire or taken hostage. The free flow of information, on which enlightened governments and peoples depend, suffers." Violent attacks on journalists tend to have a chilling effect. Attacks hamper the journalists' ability to probe deeply and report accurately thus depriving the public of its right to know.

Indeed, the world has become an even more dangerous and complicated place for journalists to cover and those who want to keep the truth hidden in the shadows even more ruthless and savage. Fighting between belligerent forces has increased in ferocity and frequency as shown by the conflict in Lebanon and the increasing clashes between the Philippine military and Communist insurgents.

Yet, as pointed out by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), the public gets to read only the more celebrated cases of journalists killed in the line of duty like *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl who was abducted and murdered in Pakistan in 2002; or the killing of Reuters' Kurt Schork and AP's Gil Moreno in Sierra Leone in 2000. According to the IFJ, of the 1,192 journalists killed from 1990 to 2003, more than 90 percent were born or grew up in the land where they died.

Its survival guide for reporters, *Live News*, points out that "foreign correspondents are the high-profile casualties, but most victims are local. When the victim is a journalist working in his or her own community, the news makes little impact elsewhere. Local journalists are at greater risk because they continue to live in the areas from where they report. When the story is over, they cannot board an airplane and fly away."

Compared to international news teams with huge resources, local journalists, camera crews and media workers are often left to fend for themselves. When something goes wrong their families do not receive support. Most local crews, especially freelancers, do not have insurance coverage or proper safety equipment. It is more than likely that none of them have been sent to a safety training.

In the Philippines, for example, reporters, photographers and camera crews are routinely sent out to cover hostilities in Mindanao in the south without benefit of even a pre-deployment

briefing, much less provided with safety gear. As one frontline reporter quipped: "I was told by my editor, 'run when you hear guns firing.'"

## Lessening Risks

Covering wars and conflict can never be completely safe. But journalists and their employers, press associations, media support groups and governments can do so much more to help reduce the risks.

The campaign of the International News Safety Institute and other press organizations for equal rights for regular media staff and freelancers, better equipment, safety gear, insurance, and training may have part of the answer. But much more needs to be done.

For instance, there should be more awareness among journalists, journalists' organizations and media employers about the need for greater protection. Media employers should take more responsibility for the safety of their staff and the welfare of their families. Freelance journalists should have greater legal protection.

On the ground, journalists and media workers can reduce risk and increase safety by looking after each other even if they work for competing news outfits.

While responsible reporting is no guarantee for safety it helps reduce the risk of being targeted. "Journalists need to understand how inflammatory journalism and poor standards of reporting can have consequences for all journalists by souring relations with local groups and institutions. People who target the media with violence do not distinguish between 'good' or 'bad' journalists; they hit out at those they can reach. All journalists have a physical stake in high standards and objective reporting, even if this alone will not guarantee safety," says *Live News*.

The journalist should also tell the story, not become one. Some reporters, correspondents, photographers and camera crews operating in conflict areas sometimes assume a mantle of machismo and disdain safety measures in pursuit of a possible exclusive. Good journalism means getting the story out reliably, not bragging about how it was done by the skin of one's teeth.

The INSI Code says: "The preservation of life and safety is paramount. Staff and freelancers equally should be made aware that unwarranted risks in pursuit of a story are unacceptable and strongly discouraged. News organizations are urged to consider safety first, before competitive advantage, for journalists in hostile environments."

## When Governments Put Journalists at Risk

A few days before this conference, a radio journalist was shot dead by unidentified men in the island of Palawan off the western coast of Luzon in the Philippines. An earlier attempt to kill him failed when two hand grenades thrown at his house did not explode. He was the sixth Filipino journalist killed this year. (Three more journalists were shot dead two months later).

Press freedom groups and media organizations promptly condemned the killing but few are optimistic that it will be investigated thoroughly by the government. To be fair, this lack of concern by governments when journalists or media workers are attacked is not exclusive to the Philippines but is rather a worldwide phenomenon.

Governments have shown time and again some sort of ambivalence towards journalists: media protection obviously is not considered a primary duty. In many instances, as in the case of the Philippines, killers are able to target journalists with impunity.

As *Live News* argues: "Democracy cannot function while journalists are in fear, but many politicians and state officials believe that a frightened journalist will be a submissive journalist. Even governments who pride themselves on their democratic credentials put journalists at risk when they give the police or the courts the right to seize material or pass laws requiring journalists to reveal sources or give up confidential information. Such laws can make journalists appear as quasi forces of the state, so that those involved in a riot or civil disturbance believe that being seen by a journalist is equivalent to being observed by a police officer."

It should be made clear therefore that when journalists are put at risk the very notion of democracy is put to graver peril. No amount of safety training can protect journalists when there is no clear understanding and appreciation of the role of the press to verify and make sense of what is happening around us. When we no longer are able to understand the events unfolding before us nor are able to take corresponding action then we have allowed darkness to rule our lives with consequences so horrendous to contemplate.

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