Israel carries out violent attacks on journalists

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The Israeli Defence Force (IDF) is employing intimidation and violence against international journalists in an effort to prevent them reporting on its brutal occupation of Palestinian towns.

On April 5, the IDF used stun grenades to prevent journalists travelling to cover the meeting between Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat and US envoy Anthony Zinni. A reporter for Reuters news agency was amongst the 25 foreign journalists in six armoured cars that came under attack. According to his report, the convoy was making its way towards Arafat's compound in Ramallah, where the meeting was to be held, when two Israeli jeeps and an unmarked vehicle blocked the road. The IDF troops then threw six stun grenades into the convoy. As the journalists turned back, their vehicles came under fire by IDF troops with rubber bullets. Attempting to flee on foot, several journalists were pursued by Israeli border police, who then confiscated their identity cards. In a separate incident the same day, Carlos Handal, a cameraman for Eygpt's Nile TV, was wounded by gunfire.

These were only the most recent of several incidents during the past week that indicate a deliberate policy of censorship by force, including potentially murderous attacks on journalists, on the part of the Israeli military.

According to Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF), at least 11 journalists have been fired upon and three wounded since the IDF established a "closed military zone" around the West Bank town of Ramallah, where Arafat is being held captive. Three others have been expelled.

Israel has banned all reporters—except those it considers to be "friendly"—from the city and, according to Agence France Press (AFP), the news blockade was extended to cover Bethlehem on April 2. RSF Secretary-General Robert Ménard denounced the ban as "a serious new attack on press freedom". Pointing out that Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which is ratified by Israel, guarantees the "freedom to seek, receive and impart information," Ménard called for the ban to be lifted immediately and for Israeli authorities to fully investigate the military attacks on journalists.

Other incidents include:

On March 30, a French crew reporting for France 2 TV came under fire by Israeli troops when they attempted to pass a roadblock into the city. The same day, Israeli soldiers stormed The Voice of Palestine TV and radio station headquarters, ordering journalists out of their offices and forcing the station off the air. They then occupied the PA's Ministry of Culture building. Also on March 30, the IDF evicted several Palestinian and foreign journalists, including Reuters correspondents, from the building they were staying in. IDF soldiers later detained four Turkish journalists for several hours at the Ramallah press centre and confiscated their passports.

On March 31, Bengt Norborg and Rickard Collsiöö, special correspondents for Sweden's *SVT*, came under fire when their vehicle was targeted for warning shots by Israeli troops at a roadblock. In another incident, US journalist Anthony Shahid of the *Boston Globe* received a bullet wound to the shoulder, even though he was wearing a vest clearly labelled "Press".

On April 1, Israeli forces fired upon British and US reporters. In Ramallah, Israeli soldiers shot at an armoured car used by NBC correspondent Dana Lewis and his two-person crew, again clearly labelled as a media vehicle.

The same day, Israeli soldiers expelled an American CBS news television team from Ramallah and the authorities threatened legal action against CNN and NBC for continuing to broadcast from the area. A statement by the Government Press Office threatened the US stations, "If they do not stop violating Israeli law, the State of Israel will be compelled to take the

steps to which it is obliged by law."

In another incident the same day, relayed on British TV, Israeli soldiers shot at BBC reporter Orla Guerin and her TV crew while they were covering a peaceful protest in Bethlehem. Fortunately, none of the US and British journalists was injured, although TV pictures showed Guerin being pinned down by Israeli fire. But in Beit Jala a Palestinian journalist working for *Associated Press Television News* was hit in the leg while covering a demonstration and in Bethlehem the following day, Majadi Banura, a cameraman for the Qatari TV station Al-Jazeera was wounded in the head by gunfire.

On April 2, Israel revoked the press credentials of two Arab reporters. Abu Dhabi reporter Leileh Odeh, who is based in Israel, and visiting correspondent Bassam Azawi had their government press cards cancelled after filing a report to one satellite channel that the IDF had executed a group of young men in Ramallah's Islamic club. Although the exact circumstances are unclear, it is known that several Palestinian Authority policemen, who had earlier surrendered to the IDF, were later found shot dead. Israel's government press office complained that Odeh and Azawi were operating "crude anti-Israel propaganda" and had taken a "hostile and combative attitude."

The following day, a French journalist was forced by Israeli troops to strip to his underwear on the roadside.

Reporters for the Israeli media have also been harassed. On April 2 Atta Iwisat, a photographer working for Israel's *Yediot Aharonot*, was arrested for being without proper accreditation. Such instances are far fewer than those involving foreign journalists, because the Israeli media have been banned from the West Bank after Channel 2 aired a report three weeks ago in which Israeli soldiers openly queried their deployment to the occupied territories. Ron Benishai, a correspondent for Israel's Channel 1, said, "We have been warned to stay away, not to come in under any circumstances."

Numerous media organisations have protested to the Israeli authorities. The BBC lodged a protest with the Israeli government earlier this week following the attack on Guerin. A BBC spokesman said its crew had "made the point that they had been on legitimate business, on press business. They were filming a peaceful demonstration." When the soldiers began firing, he continued, the BBC crew put their hands in the air. "People were shooting very close, on either side. She was pinned by the car before they let them go."

SVT made a formal protest to the Israeli embassy in Stockholm over the incident involving its reporters. The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists, the Brussels-based International Federation of Journalists and the Foreign Press Association in Israel also protested Israel's media ban. The Committee to Protect Journalists statement expressed concern at "several incidents in which Israeli troops have fired on working journalists", and described Israeli policy as a "flagrant act of censorship."

Neither NBC nor CNN have so far responded to Israel's threatened legal action. No Western government has protested against the attacks on journalists, even those from national state TV stations. Speaking on condition of anonymity, one Israeli government source made clear that it would disregard all complaints. "This is no game," he said. "You people are in a war zone. The army has no time for journalists to get in its way."