US military kills another journalist in Iraq

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21 August 2003

In the latest in a series of killings of media workers by the US military in Iraq, two US tanks opened fire at close range on a Palestinian-born Reuters cameraman outside a notorious US-run jail in Baghdad on August 17. Mazen Dana, 43, a highly respected and award-winning media representative, was fatally wounded in the chest and bled to death on the spot.

All the surrounding circumstances point to the killing resulting from a renewed campaign to intimidate journalists and suppress independent coverage of the ongoing war crimes and gross violations of democratic rights occurring under the US occupation of Iraq.

The videotape in Dana's camera, retrieved after his death, showed two American tanks heading toward him. Six shots could be heard; the camera seemed to tilt and drop to the ground after the first shot. No hostilities were taking place in the vicinity, yet US troops opened fire on Dana without warning.

Dana was with a group of journalists in clearly marked vehicles. Colleagues who witnessed the killing immediately rejected US military command claims that its soldiers mistook the camera Dana was holding for a rocket-propelled grenade launcher.

"We were all there, for at least half an hour. They knew we were journalists," Stephan Breitner of France 2 television said. "After they shot Mazen, they aimed their guns at us. I don't think it was an accident. They are very tense. They are crazy. They are young soldiers and they don't understand what is happening."

Dana's colleagues said the tank was 30 metres from him when it opened fire. They said television cameras did not look like RPG launchers. In broad daylight at such close range, it would have been impossible to confuse the two.

Media crews had gone to the Abu Ghraib prison, on the western outskirts of Baghdad, to investigate a suspicious incident reported the day before, in which US authorities claimed that three mortar bombs fired at the prison had killed six prisoners and wounded some 60 others.

The Reuters team identified themselves to American soldiers guarding the perimeter of the prison. They were refused permission to enter or film inside the prison, but were told they could film an overview of the prison from a nearby bridge.

Nael al-Shyouki, a Reuters soundman working with Dana, said: "After we filmed, we went into the car and prepared to go when a convoy led by a tank arrived and Mazen stepped out of the car to film. I followed him and Mazen walked three to four metres. We were noted and seen clearly." He said the American soldiers "saw us and they knew about our identities and mission".

Dana, married with four children, was highly experienced in working in dangerous conditions under military occupation. During 14 years working for Reuters in Palestine, he survived countless bullet wounds and beatings inflicted by Israeli authorities, who sought to block reportage of attacks on Palestinians. In 2001, he won the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) International Press Freedom Award for his courageous work in Hebron, where he was shot three times and seriously beaten twice by Israeli troops, police and settlers during 2000.

In an interview after accepting his award, Dana denounced the Israeli military for deliberately shooting at and attacking reporters, as well as banning them from areas under Israeli siege. He recounted that he had been injured three times by live ammunition, 70 to 80 times by rubber bullets and about 100 times by beatings.

"Two times my hands were broken for uncovering my stories in Hebron. Always you are harassed, always you are attacked from soldiers because of the bad situation in Hebron. So all the time they do not want you to publish a picture... And this is the democracy that the Israelis claim, with freedom of journalists."

Dana's death provoked an outpouring of grief and protests among Palestinians, international media organisations and ordinary people. Dana's personal website was flooded with 12,000 condolence messages and Palestinian newspapers published pages filled with memorial tributes from groups ranging from relief agencies to Palestinian organisations.

On August 19, hundreds of mourners, including politicians and journalists from around the world, crowded under a tent at his family home in the West Bank city of Hebron. Banned by Israel from the West Bank ceremonies, around 150 Palestinian journalists in the Gaza Strip held a symbolic funeral for Dana, bearing a camera atop a bier. "Mazen is a hero, his killer is a zero," they chanted.

Dana's widow Suzanne, 36, called for a high-level investigation of his death. "He was intentionally killed as he was doing his job," she told Reuters. "I demand that President Bush personally order his soldiers to stop killing journalists." Dana's oldest brother Nathmy said: "An investigation is not enough. The wrongdoers must be put on trial and sent to jail."

Reuters' chief executive Tom Glocer and international media rights groups issued calls for a full public inquiry. The Paris-based Reporters Without Borders wrote to US Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld, demanding an investigation that would be "honest, rapid and designed to shed full light on this tragedy, not whitewash the US Army". In New York, the Committee to Protect Journalists called for "a full investigation into the shooting and a public accounting of the circumstances".

The Pentagon has dismissed these calls, announcing that its own, unspecified investigation is underway. A senior US Army spokesman offered sympathy to Dana's family, but added that soldiers were under instructions not to fire warning shots when they believed they were under threat. Lieutenant-Colonel Guy Shields said: "I can't give you details on the rules of engagement, but the enemy is not in formations, they are not wearing uniforms. During wartime, firing a warning shot is not a necessity."

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Many questions remain unanswered about the events at Abu Ghraib prison. It was unclear who mounted the mortar attack that Dana went to investigate, or what its motives were. A US Army spokesman simply said: “Three prisoners died on impact, and three others died in the hospital.” No other details were provided and no media entry was permitted.

But US occupying authorities are clearly anxious to avoid public scrutiny of the conditions inside the prison. Infamous as a torture chamber for hundreds of political prisoners under Saddam Hussein’s administration, the US has pressed the prison back into service. It currently holds an estimated 500 detainees, including Baath Party members, suspected guerilla fighters, political opponents of the US occupation and prisoners of war.

It is one of 18 US military jails throughout Iraq, where about 5,000 people are being held in atrocious conditions and denied all basic democratic rights. Many have been picked up in violent house raids, and held on the flimsiest of pretexts, without any charge or trial. They are denied contact with their families and refused access to lawyers, in breach of international law.

At Abu Ghraib, prisoners are held in tents within razor-wire pens, under 50-degree centigrade (122-degree Fahrenheit) heat. A recent report by Amnesty International, based on interviews with detainees who were later freed, raised concerns about “inhumane” conditions, excessive force by US troops and lack of information given to prisoners’ families. Tactics reportedly included prolonged sleep deprivation, restraint in painful positions, loud music and bright lights, and the use of tight hoods over prisoners’ heads.

Amnesty said it had received several reports of detainees dying in custody, “mostly as a result of shooting by members of the coalition forces.” It said 22-year-old Alaa Jassem was killed when soldiers fired on detainees during a riot on June 13 at Abu Ghraib. Demonstrators threw bricks and poles at the soldiers. “According to eyewitnesses, Alaa Jassem was in a tent when he was shot. Seven other detainees were wounded.”

On the only occasion that reporters have been allowed into the prison, for an orchestrated inspection on August 4, hundreds of detainees pushed up against the razor-wire fence, chanting “Freedom, freedom” into the faces of US troops.

Dana was killed just five days after international media groups rejected a Pentagon report that completely exonerated US troops of all blame for the April 8 shelling of the Palestine Hotel, which served as the unofficial headquarters for the world’s press during the invasion of Iraq. The attack killed two journalists—including another Reuters cameraman, Ukrainian-born Taras Protsyuk—and wounded three others.

Spanish cameraman Jose Cuoso was killed alongside Protsyuk. On the same day, a US missile attack on the Baghdad offices of *Al Jazeera* and Abu Dhabi TV killed reporter Tariq Ayoub, a Palestinian Jordanian. The deaths prompted protests worldwide and led to several international journalists denouncing the US actions as tantamount to murder.

The Pentagon inquiry, the full report of which has not even been released to the public, is a blatant cover-up. The United States Central Command simply issued a media statement announcing that the soldiers responsible had determined that an Iraqi “hunter-killer” team was using a spotter in the hotel to fire at them and were well within the rules of military engagement in responding.

The media release did not explain why senior US commanders failed to inform their troops that the hotel was a media centre, where reporters and camera crew were viewing the fighting through binoculars and long-range lenses. It glossed over the false claims by US officials and press staff immediately after the attack that troops were fired upon from the hotel. This version was revised only after dozens of journalists on the spot denied there was any shooting from the hotel.

The International Federation of Journalists dismissed the Pentagon report as a “cynical whitewash”. IFJ general secretary Aidan White said: “This whole event from the very beginning has been shrouded in lies and deceit and shows the continuing failure of the military and political authorities to take responsibility for what happened.”

Since the US-led war began in March, an unmistakable pattern has emerged of Pentagon efforts to prevent accurate coverage of the criminal character of the US operation.

Dana has become the 17th journalist killed in Iraq, 12 of them in action. Of that number, five were killed by US fire. The first victim was British ITN News correspondent Terry Lloyd, who was shot down by US soldiers on March 22 while trying to report the killing of surrendering Iraqis near Basra. Two of Lloyd’s team, cameramen Fred Nerac and translator Hussein Osman, are officially still missing.

The International Federation of Journalists, Reporters Without Borders and the European Broadcasting Union have condemned numerous other instances in which journalists have been fired upon, detained or roughed up by US soldiers. These occurrences have become more frequent as popular resistance to US rule has grown, the collapse of basic services has worsened and US military reprisals against the population have intensified. Over the past month alone, reporters from Iran, Turkey and Japan have been manhandled and threatened.

During the same month, US authorities have banned an Iraqi newspaper, violently raided and impounded copies of another newspaper, and shut down a Baghdad radio station, accusing them of inciting hostility to the American occupation. Meanwhile, the main US media networks are acting as official propaganda arms of the White House and Pentagon, providing content for a US military-controlled television service in Iraq.

The common thread is that the media victims were attempting to operate independently of the Pentagon, outside the system of “embedded” journalists that Washington and the media conglomerates adopted in order to present a sanitised and censored version of the war. This system of favouring a select group of reporters, heavily dependent on US military protection, has been maintained long after President Bush declared hostilities over.

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