

Protest planned over US killing of journalists in Iraq

Harvey Thompson
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The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) has declared April 8—the anniversary of the attack by the US military on a Baghdad hotel filled with foreign journalists—a day of mourning and protest. The IFJ denounced the killing of journalists during the Iraq war and the “abject failure” of the Pentagon to adequately explain why the journalists died.

The unprovoked attack on the Palestine Hotel, where the journalists were staying, sparked outrage among journalists and media groups around the world. Two journalists, Taras Protsiuk working for Reuters and José Couso, a cameraman for the Spanish network Telecinco, were killed in the attack which occurred the day before Baghdad fell. US authorities claimed that troops had been fired on from the hotel. Although there was no evidence of this, a closed US investigation later cleared the military of any responsibility.

IFJ General Secretary Aidan White said, “The attack on the Palestine Hotel was a shameful incident made worse by US misinformation circulated after the event and the failure to take responsibility for this attack. The families and colleagues of the victims demand justice and a proper explanation about what happened.”

The IFJ’s renewed protest comes as Reuters news agency has criticised the US military’s investigation into the detention and treatment of its staff in Iraq in January this year, and the journalists are strongly backing the agency’s call for the US to withdraw statements suggesting, without evidence, that combatants posing as journalists had fired on US forces.

“These statements pose a serious threat to journalists everywhere,” said White. “They reflect the sense of impunity that exists within the US military that they can say what they like and do what they like when it comes to dealing with journalists, no matter what the

consequences may be for the lives of our colleagues.”

The IFJ has published a detailed report, *Justice Denied on the Road to Baghdad*, outlining dissatisfaction within the journalistic profession about the failure of the US to properly investigate incidents in which seven journalists died during the war.

In addition to the Palestine Hotel deaths, journalists are also raising questions about the deaths of Tareq Ayyoub, a journalist killed during a US air-strike on the offices of Al-Jazeera in Baghdad; the deaths of British ITN reporter Terry Lloyd and his colleagues Fred Nérac and Hussein Osman, whose bodies are still missing, in a fire fight between US and Iraqi troops near Basra; and the shooting by US troops of Reuters cameramen Mazen Dana in August.

The Reuters complaint concerns the maltreatment of two journalists and their driver who were arrested and detained for 72 hours by US troops who mistook them for enemy combatants.

“The US investigation of the mistreatment of Reuters staff was predictably inadequate,” said White. “It fits in with the pattern of willful disregard of available evidence, a rush to exonerate US soldiers and their commanders, and a complete lack of seriousness over the complaints of journalists and media.”

“The impact of the US failure to take the rights of media staff seriously is felt around the world,” White added. “It undermines the campaign by press freedom groups to challenge impunity in the treatment of journalists and sends out an appalling signal to governments everywhere that the legitimate right to report freely, even in war zones, can be set aside to suit political and military convenience.”



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