Iraqi journalists protest US killing of two Al Arabiya reporters

Mike Head
22 March 2004

Local Iraqi news reporters staged an angry protest at a press conference held by US Secretary of State Colin Powell during his brief, unannounced stopover in Baghdad last Friday. About 25 journalists walked out of the media briefing to register their opposition to the slaying of two TV journalists from the Dubai-based satellite news channel Al-Arabiya by US soldiers the previous night.

Powell's visit, timed to coincide with the anniversary of the US-led invasion of Iraq, was aimed at stemming growing opposition to the occupation. But as the briefing began, Najim al Rubaie of Iraq's *al Dustour* newspaper stood up and read a prepared statement, condemning the killings, demanding an open investigation and calling for security guarantees for journalists. He and others then filed out past the podium, leaving Powell to lamely declare that the shootings would be "looked into".

There is little doubt that the two journalists were killed by US or allied security forces. According to Al-Arabiya, US soldiers at a Baghdad military checkpoint fired on a car carrying a cameraman and correspondent at 10 p.m. on Thursday. Their news team had gone to cover an insurgent rocket attack on the Burj al-Hayat hotel but US forces had cordoned off the area. Cameraman Ali Abdel-Aziz was killed immediately. Reporter Ali al-Khatib died in a hospital within hours.

Al-Arabiya employees said another car drove through the US checkpoint. US troops then opened fire on both cars. The car in which the two reporters were driving was clearly marked "TV".

Ahmed Abdul Amiya, the driver of the Al-Arabiya car, told news agencies: "I stopped in front of the checkpoint and then I saw another car coming fast toward it and I thought it was going to explode. I tried to race away ... and then the Americans started firing at random. They hit the first car and then they started shooting at our car."

Al-Arabiya's editing supervisor in Baghdad, Mohammed Ibrahim, said: "There were a lot of cars in the area. One of them rammed an American Bradley fighting vehicle. American soldiers fired at random, killing Ali Abdel-Aziz and critically wounding Ali al-Khatib." He said both men were filming outside their car at the time, and were shot in the head. The victims were running away because they thought the car that rammed the military vehicle was a suicide bomber, Ibrahim said.

Al-Arabiya has branded the shootings a "horrid crime". A spokesman told Reuters: "We demand an immediate investigation and accountability concerning those who are responsible for this. They were shot when they were going away from the checkpoint, not approaching it, so they were shot from the back. This is what eyewitnesses from the bureau are saying."

From the outset, US military authorities have been hostile to any independent coverage of the invasion and occupation of Iraq. In total, six journalists have been killed at the hands of US soldiers since President George Bush declared an end to major combat last May 1. During the invasion itself, five "non-embedded" reporters died at the hands of US troops. International journalists' organisations also reported numerous instances in which their members were fired upon, detained or roughed up by US soldiers.

US officials have been repeatedly singled out Al-Arabiya for its critical reporting. Last November US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld denounced the channel, along with Al Jazeera, for being "violently anti-coalition" and insinuated that it was collaborating with terrorists. Three days later the US-installed Iraqi Governing Council (ICG) shut down Al Arabiya's

Baghdad bureau on the pretext that it had broadcast an audio tape purportedly of Saddam Hussein.

In response to last week's events, the Pentagon baldly denied responsibility for killing the Al-Arabiya journalists. A military spokesman said as far as the US Army could ascertain its troops only shot and killed the driver of the vehicle that drove through the checkpoint. "There are discrepancies between what has been reported ... and the facts on the ground," Brigadier General Mark Kimmitt, deputy director of operations for the US military in Iraq told a news conference.

Kimmitt implied that the two journalists may have been killed by Iraqi police and paramilitaries who had also been manning the checkpoint. He said several US soldiers and their commander at the checkpoint could not recall any shooting involving a vehicle such as that used by Al-Arabiya. "We are not at this point denying the story," Kimmitt said, but added that more investigation would be needed.

Even if the US military version were true, it would be damning enough about the prevailing conditions on the streets of Baghdad and other Iraqi cities. Jittery US soldiers and Iraqi police, under orders to shoot to kill at the first sign of resistance, are continuing a reign of terror in which innocent residents are shot down.

But the fact that the journalists were from Al-Arabiya and travelling in a marked car points to a more sinister explanation: that the two may have been deliberately killed. The shootings came at a particularly sensitive time for the US, in the midst of a wave of insurgent attacks across Iraq and on the eve of the invasion's anniversary.

The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) warned that the killings raised serious questions as to whether journalists are being targetted and called for a full and open investigation of the circumstances. "These are another two cases where a full explanation must be given about how coalition troops could open fire on a clearly-marked vehicle," IFJ secretary general Aidan White said.

Because of Washington's failure to provide proper reports on the deaths of other journalists, the IFJ has called an international day of mourning on April 8, the anniversary of the day US troops opened fire on the Palestine hotel in Baghdad, which was filled with media workers, killing two and wounding three others.

Two Murders and a Lie, a detailed report released in January by Reporters Without Borders demonstrated that the Pentagon and the Bush administration lied repeatedly about why an American tank deliberately opened fire on the Palestine hotel. The high explosive shell killed Ukrainian cameramen Taras Protsyuk (of Reuters news agency), aged 35, and 37-year-old Spaniard José Couso (of the Spanish TV station Telecinco).

Two hours earlier, Al-Jazeera correspondent Tariq Ayoub, a 34-year-old Palestinian Jordanian, was killed in a missile strike on the broadcaster's Baghdad offices. Surviving Al-Jazeera staff sought shelter in the nearby offices of rival satellite station Abu Dhabi TV, which then also came under US attack.

Last week's killings appear to be the latest in a long series of incidents aimed at intimidating and terrorising journalists and the media in Iraq, making a mockery of the Bush administration's claims to be bringing democracy to the country.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact