

Iraq: Reporters Without Borders condemns US report on killing of journalists

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27 November 2004

The global press organisation, Reporters Without Borders, has condemned a final US report on the killing of two cameramen—Jose Couso of the Spanish TV station *Telecinco* and Taras Protsyuk, a Ukrainian working for Reuters news agency—and the wounding of three other journalists on April 8, 2003.

The cameramen died when US tanks opened fire on the Palestine Hotel in Baghdad, where journalists were staying at the height of the war against Iraq.

The organisation said it was “extremely disappointed” that the report, consisting of an initial investigation on April 11, 2003 and a revised version the following month, found that “no fault or negligence” could be attributed to the US army.

The report, provided by the Coalition Forces Land Component Command, was only made available after a year-long legal battle by Reporters Without Borders, which petitioned for its release under the Freedom of Information Act. In its own investigation in January, Reporters Without Borders established that the attack could have been avoided if the A 4-64 troops attached to the 4th battalion of the 3rd Infantry Division had been told by the Pentagon and the army command that the hotel, on the opposite side of the Tigris river, was full of journalists.

That investigation found that the shelling of the hotel was “not a deliberate attack” on journalists and the media, but the result of a breakdown of communications.

The US army’s second report of May 2003 revealed that the army had known since April 11 that the soldiers had tried to neutralise one or two people with binoculars, taken for enemy “observers”, and that the order to fire was given with “no knowledge that the building was a hotel or that the journalists had been moved into it”.

The sworn testimony of a soldier on May 26 said that “at no time was there any discussion” of no-fire areas or protected sites on the other side of the river, yet the lieutenant-general in charge of the May investigation made no separate inquiry into this and it was omitted from the final conclusions. The officer’s name, along with those of two others, has been censored in the text of the report.

Following the report’s endorsement by a military lawyer on June 5, 2003, the US army said the shelling was targeted at “what was believed to be an enemy firing platform and observation point”. It added that the soldiers “understood the rules of engagement specifically as it applied to the right to self-defence” and that it was “clearly a proportionate and justifiable measured response”.

There was “no violation of the Uniformed Code of Military Justice and disciplinary or administrative action required,” the report said. After praising the “magnificent courage and restraint” of the combat operations, the lieutenant-general said that “responsibility for the incident rests with an enemy that chose to fight in a city, needlessly exposing the civilian population, including journalists, to the hazards of war”.

The report then reiterated the “recommendation” that “non-embedded media personnel routinely inform the proper military and civilian authorities of their locations during combat operations”.

Reporters Without Borders says the conclusion “is very hard to swallow when many journalists in the hotel had done exactly that during the fighting... several had informed their employers, some of them in the United States, of the hotel’s GPS location. The pan-Arab TV station *Al-Jazeera* had consistently told the Pentagon of the composition and location of its crews,

but its Baghdad offices were nonetheless bombed, killing a reporter.”

The organisation is still waiting the results of US army investigations into the deaths of four journalists killed in three separate incidents:

* Tarek Ayyoub, an *Al-Jazeera* correspondent killed when US warplanes bombed the station’s offices on April 8, 2003.

* Ali Al-Khatib and Ali Abdel Aziz of the pan-Arab TV station *Al-Arabiya*, shot dead by US troops at a checkpoint on March 18, 2003 while covering a rocket attack on a Baghdad hotel.

* Mazen Dana, a Reuters cameraman shot dead by US troops in front of the notorious Abu Ghraib prison on August 17, 2003.

The Reporters Without Borders website carries an annual report on Iraq dated May 5, 2004 which lists 12 journalists killed, at least five of these by US forces, with at least 17 wounded and two missing. Some 25 journalists and assistants have been arrested by the occupying powers and many physically assaulted by US troops. The report also documents systematic harassment and obstruction of journalists by the occupying powers.

Given this background, it is not possible to accept the finding of Reporters Without Borders’ own investigation, that the shelling of the Palestine Hotel was “not a deliberate attack.”

As the *World Socialist Web Site* said at the time, “The claim by the Pentagon that the attack on three separate sources of independent journalism in one day was accidental is beneath contempt. The Bush administration has done everything it can to prevent any honest reporting of the war against Iraq and in the process has mounted repeated bombings of media installations, arrested and physically beaten reporters and had already been accused of deliberately killing reporters prior to April 8.”



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