

US military sniper kills Reuters soundman in Baghdad

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A US military sniper fatally shot Waleed Khaled, a Reuters Television soundman, in the Hay Al Adil district of west Baghdad on August 28. Khaled received a bullet to the head and at least four to the chest, making him the eighteenth journalist or media assistant whose death at the hands of US forces in Iraq has been confirmed, according to the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ). Sixty-six reporters in total have been killed during the war, according to Reporters Without Borders.

The cameraman traveling with Khaled, Haider Kadhem, was also wounded in the back during the incident. The two had been dispatched to Hay Al Adil to investigate a shoot-out between Iraqi police and armed men. Khaled leaves a seven-year-old daughter and his wife, who is four months pregnant.

Kadhem told Iraqi colleagues, who arrived shortly afterwards, “I heard shooting, looked up and saw an American sniper on the roof of the shopping centre.” This exchange with the Iraqis was a brief one, as the US military then arrested the wounded cameraman at the scene.

Kadhem’s colleagues, who were also briefly detained, commented: “They treated us like dogs. They made us, ... including Khaled, who was wounded and asking for water, sit in the sun on the road,” one said.

The official US version, couched in military-bureaucratic language, declared: “Task Force Baghdad units responded to a terrorist attack on an Iraqi Police convoy around 11:20 a.m. (0720 GMT) ... which killed and wounded several Iraqi Police. One civilian was killed and another was wounded by small-arms fire during the attack.”

For the first ten hours after the incident and Kadhem’s arrest, US officers claimed they could not locate the Reuters cameraman. Finally, a military

spokesman, Lieutenant Colonel Robert Whetstone, said Kadhem was being held at an unspecified location. His “superficial” wound had been treated “on location,” Whetstone said.

Kadhem was held incommunicado by US forces for three days, until being released Wednesday. The military claimed they were detaining him because of “inconsistencies in his initial testimony.”

Reuters provided this account of the scene following the fatal shooting: “Reuters correspondent Michael Georgy, who arrived at the scene about an hour after the shooting, said the soundman’s body was still in the driver’s seat, his face covered by a cloth.

“Entry and exit wounds could be seen on his face indicating shots from the victim’s right. There were several bullet holes in the windscreen and at least four wounds in his chest.

“His US military and Reuters press cards, clipped to his shirt, were caked in blood. In one, there were two bullet holes. To the right of the scene, a US soldier, apparently a sniper, was posted on the roof of a shopping centre.”

Reuters Global Managing Editor David Schlesinger responded to the slaying by issuing a statement, “This tragic incident must immediately be investigated thoroughly and impartially. A brave journalist has lost his life and another has been wounded and detained when their only actions were as professionals reporting the facts and images of the war. We are deeply saddened at this loss.”

Reuters had not heard from Kadhem when Schlesinger made his statement, and the latter demanded his immediate release. “We fail to understand what reason there can be for his continued detention more than a day after he was the innocent victim of an incident in which his colleague was

killed.”

When asked about the incident, American ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad said: “Sometimes mistakes are made.”

Aidan White, General Secretary of the International Federation of Journalists, commented: “The fact that Iraqi police say that the news team was shot by US soldiers raises serious suspicions of a cover-up by the US military which must be answered immediately.”

So far US troops have killed two Reuters cameramen in Iraq. A third was killed by a sniper in Ramadi last November. The American military refuses to reveal the circumstances of his death.

Three weeks ago, US forces arrested another Reuters cameraman, Ali al-Mashhadani, in the city of Ramadi. He is being held without charge in Abu Ghraib prison, and for 60 days cannot have any visitors. According to Reuters earlier this week, “A U.S. military spokesman said a judicial hearing into his case ‘probably’ took place on Monday at a secret location in Baghdad. No access was available for an attorney or any other interested party and it was not yet clear what the outcome was.”

Various international organizations of reporters responded angrily to the most recent shooting incident.

Reporters Without Borders point out that the total of 66 journalists or media assistants killed in Iraq since the US invasion in March 2003 is three more than the number who died in 20 years of the Vietnam war. The International Federation of Journalists asserts that when all essential media staff, including drivers and translators, are counted, 95 journalists and staff have died in the Iraq conflict.

“The toll is appalling, but the fact that 18 of these deaths are at the hands of US soldiers and that there are still questions to be answered more than two years after some of the incidents is particularly shocking,” said IFJ General Secretary White.

“The number of unexplained media killings by US military personnel is intolerable,” said White. “Media organisations and journalists’ families face a wall of silence and an unfeeling bureaucracy that refuses to give clear and credible answers to questions.”

The IFJ called on the United Nations to establish an independent inquiry into the killings of media staff carried out by US and coalition forces. “The time has come for the UN itself to step in and demand that there

is justice and respect for basic humanitarian rights on the part of democratic countries involved in this conflict.”

In response, without mentioning Iraq, much less a specific investigation, spokeswoman Marie Okabe merely commented that UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan had “repeatedly urged all actors in conflict situations around the world—governments, local authorities and armed forces—to protect the right of all citizens to reliable information and the right of journalists to provide it without fearing for their security.”

A Reuters article seeks to explain the targeted killings: “Journalists for Reuters and other media organizations in Iraq have been wrongly accused in the past by U.S. forces of having prior information of insurgent attacks—suspicions apparently raised by their quick response to news events.”

When Eason Jordan, CNN’s chief news executive, stated the obvious in January 2005, that a number of journalists had been deliberately killed by US forces in Iraq, he was essentially driven out of his job at the cable network by a right-wing witch-hunt. The latest episode and the fact that more members of the media have been killed in two and a half years of war in Iraq than in two decades of conflict in Vietnam lend further credence to Jordan’s claim.



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