

Iraq: Violence against journalists at record high last year

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A December report released by the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) details the unprecedented levels of violence in 2006 against journalists in war-torn Iraq.

The CPJ records began in 1981, but its latest report states that the total of the 32 journalists killed in Iraq represents “the deadliest year for the press in a single country that the CPJ has ever recorded.” It brings the overall death toll of journalists since the US-led invasion began in March 2003 to 92 in 41 different media outlets. This figure rises to 129 when media support workers are included.

Four journalists are also being held hostage in Iraq. Afghanistan and the Philippines were named as the next most dangerous places for journalists.

“The deaths in Iraq this year reflect the utter deterioration in reporters’ traditional status as neutral observers in wartime,” said CPJ Executive Director Joel Simon.

Another report documenting media deaths between March 2005 and 2006 paints a similar picture. Reporters Without Borders state, “The war in Iraq has proved to be the deadliest for journalists since World War II,” exceeding those killed during the Vietnam and Algerian wars.

The vast majority of media workers killed this year were Iraqis. The only foreign victims were the London-based CBS cameraman Paul Douglas and soundman James Brolan.

Whereas in the first two years of the war, crossfire and combat-related incidents were the source of most killings, now many are targeted assassinations.

An increasing proportion of the deaths appear to be the result of militias targeting reporters and stations aligned to the Pentagon-created “Iraq Media Network”—mostly television channels that serve as

propaganda outlets for the US-led occupation. The worst-hit has been the national TV station *Al-Iraqiya*, which was created and funded by the Pentagon. Twelve of its journalists and media assistants have been killed in the past three years.

But news agencies critical of the occupation have also been repeatedly attacked. The result is that what little reporting does take place is severely restricted—reporters fear all sides in the conflict, and many are too frightened to undertake serious investigations.

The deadliest single attack this year took place on October 12. Gunmen attacked the Baghdad offices of the TV channel *Al-Shaabia*—a network comprised of Sunnis, Shias and Kurds—and murdered 11 people, five of them journalists. According to eyewitnesses, some of the gunmen were dressed in local police uniforms and the gunmen’s cars resembled police vehicles.

One of the few independent journalists who has dared venture outside the confines of the hotels in central Baghdad is the British *Independent* newspaper journalist, Robert Fisk.

In his book *The Great War for Civilization: The Conquest of the Middle East* (Knopf 2005) he paints a vivid picture of the perilous dangers faced by reporters:

“One of the delights of the occupying powers is that the journalists cannot move. When I travel outside Baghdad by road it takes me two weeks to plan it, because the roads are infested with insurgents, checkpoints, hooded men and throat-cutters. That’s what it’s like. It is almost impossible to get access to free information outside Baghdad or Basra. Most of the reporters who can travel are doing so as members of military convoys with armour to protect them. The last time I travelled to Najaf, the road was littered with burned-out American vehicles, smashed police

vehicles, abandoned checkpoints and armed men.”

Responsibility for contravention of the Geneva Conventions—which states that journalists must be considered civilians under conditions of war—and the suppression of freedom of speech flows inexorably from the decisions made by the upper echelons of the Bush administration. If reporters are not allowed to move freely around the country without fear of attack, if they are prevented from speaking the truth of what they see through intimidation and threats, then the public is denied the right to know what crimes are being committed in the name of democracy and freedom.

On the day the regime of Saddam Hussein fell on April 8, 2003, the media offices of *Al-Jazeera* and *Abu-Dhabi* came under attack by US forces, despite the fact that their GPS coordinates were provided to the Pentagon. They were given assurances in the run-up to the invasion that they would not be targeted.

On the same day the Palestine Hotel, where most of the international journalists were housed, was struck by a tank shell, resulting in the deaths of two journalists and injuries to several others. The Pentagon’s initial response was that the tank was returning fire from the direction of the hotel. When this version of events was quickly contradicted by dozens of witnesses and video footage of the incident, the Pentagon changed their initial statement, saying a “hunter killer” unit (an enemy spotter directing artillery or mortar attacks) had been spotted on the balcony. The tank crew claim that intelligence relating to the press corps location had not been passed down to them, and that the journalist carrying binoculars, Jose Couso, was mistaken for a spotter guiding in hostile fire.

During the several hours that the tank brigade was stationed on the bridge prior to the attack, the hotel had been bristling with journalists filming and watching the tanks from the roof and the many balconies. Hostile fire from Iraqi forces on the other side of the river had ceased. Nonetheless, the killing on a hotel balcony of the two cameramen—Couso and Taras Portsyuk—has been described by an official Pentagon inquiry as legitimate “self-defence.”

Jon Sistiaga, Couso’s colleague at Spanish TV channel Tele 5, said, “I think they deliberately fired on the journalists’ hotel. First they take out *Al-Jazeera*, then *Abu-Dhabi* a half hour later, and a half hour after

that—why not?—with the same tank they shoot at the hotel housing the rest of the international media.”

The Spanish Supreme Court has accepted the appeal by Couso’s family to reopen the case that had been dropped in early 2006, calling for the extradition of the three US personnel directly involved and starting a fresh investigation into the shelling of the Palestine hotel. Without the cooperation of the US authorities, however, it is highly unlikely that a request for extradition will be successful.

Despite such brazen efforts at suppression, reports have nonetheless leaked out that indicate mass incarcerations, torture and collective punishments are meted out against communities perceived to be sympathetic to insurgents in Iraq.

Some of the most disturbing stories emerged after a US assault against the city of Fallujah in 2004—these included graphic images of bodies that had been exposed to white phosphorous, a chemical weapon that causes flesh to melt to the bone. These “unembedded” reports, which journalists made at great risk to their own lives, forced the US government to admit that white phosphorous had been used as an offensive weapon in contravention of the Geneva Conventions, and exposed the levels to which it had sunk in a desperate bid to subdue the Iraqi people.



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