

Demonstration held at Australian Broadcasting Corporation headquarters after silence on Israeli killing of journalist in Gaza

Our reporters
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More than 100 people yesterday attended a protest-vigil outside the central Melbourne headquarters of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), for Palestinian journalist Roshdi Sarraj.

The freelance reporter, 31-years-old, was killed on October 22 by an Israeli missile, along with 32 other Palestinians in the Gaza City neighbourhood of Tel al-Hawa. Sarraj was struck by shrapnel as he tried to protect his wife Shuruk and one-year-old daughter Dania, both of whom survived with injuries. He was one of at least thirty journalists murdered by Israeli attacks on Gaza in less than a month.

For more than a week, the ABC, which previously used Sarraj's work, disgracefully refused to report on his death. This silence represented an aspect of the pro-Israeli bias and censorship that has dominated mainstream Australian news coverage, both commercial and public broadcasters, amid the Netanyahu government's genocidal assault on Gaza.

The ABC, along with all the corporate media outlets, has uncritically relayed war propaganda of the Israeli military and the US government. They are all complicit in the unfolding genocide of the Palestinian people.

On October 18, the ABC screened Sarraj's on the spot report after the Israeli bombing of the Al Ahli hospital, which killed hundreds of Palestinians. The journalist submitted another report on an Israeli bombing of an orphanage in Gaza, which the ABC never screened, without explanation. This story had been prepared with the assistance of Amin Abbas, who is involved in a charity called Olive Kids that supports Palestinian orphans.

Abbas organised yesterday's protest-vigil after seeing days of silence on the ABC about Sarraj's killing.

He told those assembled outside the ABC offices:

"Media here and around the world are heavily dependent for their coverage on Israeli officialdom—a party to the conflict which treats information as one more battlefield—and for their human stories on accessible Israelis. For the people on the ground in Gaza, with each new outbreak of mass destruction, the place where they live and dream becomes—in journalistic terms—a black hole: no light escapes and no Israeli or international reporters can enter and report freely. While the hollow formulas of former prime ministers echo across the media landscape, the crucial testimony of those at ground zero of Israel's violent spree of revenge cannot be heard."

Abbas referred to a very brief pro-forma announcement of Sarraj's death, lasting just 16 seconds, read out the previous evening on the ABC's "7.30" current affairs programme, by presenter Sarah Ferguson.

He explained: "I don't know what kind of arrangement the ABC had with him, what duty of care they assumed, if any, but having engaged him, they at the very least had a duty not to pass over his death in silence. The tokenistic way in which "7.30," which used his work, acknowledged him last night was a wholly inadequate attempt to head off this protest. No footage or even a photo of Roshdi was shown, no tribute was paid to his work, no mention was made of the mysterious force that kills Palestinians without ever being named. It was shameful. The ABC and Sarah Ferguson should hang their heads. In such a context, all talk of condolences to his family is empty.

"Such absences and silences raise questions about what else the ABC might be willing to remain silent about to please their political masters. We already know the editorial contortions they go through in order to avoid calling Israel's apartheid by its name. Now we are told that even the word 'Palestine' is to be avoided."

He concluded: “We are here to lift Roshdi’s name up and honour the work for which he gave his life. Holding up his name, his words, is no more than a first step. The ABC has its work cut out for it. It needs to show some spine and work to bring Palestinian voices and analysis to its audience, and to call out Israeli crimes. We hope our vigil today sends an unmistakable message—we are watching.”

Abbas spoke with *World Socialist Web Site* reporters at the protest-vigil. He elaborated on his motivations for organising the action: “We learned about Roshdi getting killed on October 22, and to our surprise, the ABC did not pay tribute to Roshdi at all. So I emailed the producer asking if this can be done, and I had no response. With a lack of any response from the ABC, I organised a media release, and I thought that at the very least we would pay tribute to Roshdi ourselves if the ABC failed to do it.”

He continued: “After the media release was produced, the ABC yesterday had a very short acknowledgement, but no photo, no video, no reflection of his work. It was very hollow, very cold, very brief, and I think the only reason they did this is after we issued the media release.”

Asked what he thought of the role of the corporate media and the ABC, Abbas said, “Honestly, I think the media in this country are starting to use Israeli army talking points. I would expect better, particularly from our national broadcaster. They should be giving us the truth as much as possible.... Unless they ask and demand the Australian government put pressure on the Israeli government to have international reporters on the ground, to ensure that the Palestinian and the international journalists are protected, we will never get the truth from Gaza. This genocide we are seeing in 2023 in front of our own eyes will continue unchecked, will continue getting unreported. War crimes being committed, without any reporting.”

Abbas added: “It’s really a shame that the media are actually driven by the politicians, as opposed to doing what their job is all about, which is reflecting the truth and giving us the news. The people on the street are seeing through this. When you see 50,000 people in Melbourne protesting and this is not being reported on the 6 p.m. news, this tells you the media in this country has an agenda unfortunately. We ask for all journalists to do their jobs, they need to do better on Palestine. This is the time—when we are witnessing genocide—for everybody to do their job, and this is what we are asking for.”

Several participants at the demonstration also spoke with the WSW.

Ezme and Nat are acrobatic performers who heard about the vigil on social media. Ezme said “We have been watching the news come out of Gaza, and the heroism of the Palestinian journalists to report what’s going on there has been truly inspiring, and we owe them so much.”

Nat said, “The ABC is not being honest about what’s actually happening in Gaza and with the material that they do use, and the reporters they have in Gaza, they are not even honouring the sacrifice those reporters are making, when they die doing the work they do for the ABC. When you compare it to other news agencies, like Al Jazeera, or CGTN or just what you can find on social media from people in Gaza sharing news, the ABC is just not showing what’s actually happening. They’re just not informing the Australian public in an honest, productive way.”

A participant at the vigil who did not want to be named explained how he also heard about the vigil on social media. He said, “I think lots of people are turning to social media to find out what is really taking place in Gaza. When the internet was cut last weekend in Gaza this was in order to hide what is being carried out. Governments are obviously worried about showing the reality of what is occurring in Gaza. Why do governments want to hide what is going on? There are clearly terrible things, crimes that are happening to an entire population that they want to hide.”

He added: “When Israel talks about dropping bombs on hospitals because supposedly there are Hamas tunnels underneath, this is crazy. If a shooter goes into a school and takes children as hostage, they don’t consider dropping a bomb on the school, killing all the children, but that is what the Israelis are doing. This is genocide and my family know what that is like—my family are Tamils from Sri Lanka, and similar things happened to us. We now need collective actions from around the world, and the numbers are growing.”



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