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Reporters Without Borders
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Contribution of Reporters Without Borders (a non-governmental organisation in special consultative status) about press freedom in ISRAEL

Introduction: Overview of press freedom situation

Israeli journalists have a freedom of expression unmatched elsewhere in the Middle East but are up against censorship by the armed forces. Prior censorship offices have been abolished in Western democracies but Israel says it needs such control to protect its military interests. All media in Israel, including correspondents of foreign media outlets and Palestinian newspapers in East Jerusalem, are subject to this censorship. The list of topics they cannot report are regularly updated by Israeli military intelligence and journalists have to get approval for anything they say about army movements. Some leeway is allowed about certain incursions by the Israeli army, such as in September 2007 after Israel's bombing of Syria.

Israeli Defence Force soldiers are also responsible each year for dozens of physical attacks on journalists and other media workers in the Palestinian Territories. Journalists reporting on demonstrations against the Israel occupation of the West Bank or against the "separation wall" built by Israel are hit by rubber bullets fired to break up the protests. Israeli soldiers do not bother to ensure journalists are not aimed at during shooting.

The death of Reuters news agency cameraman Fadel Shanaa on 16 April 2008 has renewed our concern about lack of openness in Israeli army enquiries into such incidents. Over the past decade, five journalists have been killed by Israeli soldiers. Not many compared with the number of civilians killed in Israeli-Palestinian fighting but still worrying because the soldiers responsible are not punished. Journalists take huge risks to report on the fighting and physical attacks on them must be prevented and penalised. Yet soldiers who killed journalists Raffaele Ciriello (2002), Imad Abu Zahra (2002), Nazeem Darwazi (2003) and James Miller (2003) have still inexplicably not been punished. Israeli courts have never tried them and no convictions have been handed down in connection with these war crimes.

1. Online freedom

Reporters Without Borders has not observed any special problems with the free flow of news online in Israel.

2. Government steps to improve the situation

The Israeli Defence Forces have taken some steps to improve the safety of journalists reporting on the fighting, notably:

- Training sessions for soldiers and their superiors about how to behave with journalists.
- Setting up a hotline for journalists.
- Sending e-mail and text-message alerts to journalists.
- Arranging meetings between soldiers and the Foreign Press Association in Jerusalem.

3. Working with non-governmental organisations (NGO)

Reporters Without Borders deplores the lack of transparency in enquiries made by the Israeli military into incidents. The results and details of such investigations must be made public.

4. Recommendations

- Reporters Without Borders urges the Israeli authorities to conduct serious enquiries into incidents that have led to the death of journalists in the Palestinian Territories. Only the Israeli army has the information and technical and logistical means to do this. The military hierarchy must take seriously these investigations, which are needed to reassure journalists still covering the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The lack of security in the Palestinian Territories has kept away nearly all foreign reporters and there is a risk that the fighting will only be reported by Israeli and Palestinian journalists. Other witnesses must be able to go there without fear of getting killed.
- Reporters Without Borders calls on Israel to sign the Dublin Convention banning cluster munitions. Journalist Fadel Shanaa was killed by flechettes released by the explosion of a shell fired by an Israeli tank. Observance of this convention would greatly increase the safety of journalists and of Palestinian civilians living near the site of clashes.

The data in this report has been gathered and verified by Reporters Without Borders, which has a network of correspondents in 130 countries and partner organisations in a score of countries.

In some countries, a journalist can be imprisoned for several years just for a word or a photo someone does not like. Reporters Without Borders, founded in 1985, works daily to support press freedom because imprisoning or killing a journalist removes a key witness and threatens the right of all of us to be kept informed of the news.

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