

Family mourns first Christmas without slain Palestinian reporter Shireen Abu Akleh

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Ramallah, December 25 (RHC)-- Relatives of Shireen Abu Akleh, the Palestinian-American Al Jazeera reporter shot dead by Israeli occupation forces in May, marked their first Christmas without their beloved family member Sunday by vowing to "make sure her legacy continues to be remembered."

Lina Abu Akleh, Shireen's sister, told Al Jazeera that December was always a "happy month," a time when the busy journalist usually took a break from work to spend time with family. It will be very difficult... There will be an empty seat around the table," Shireen's 27-year-old sibling said. "I still feel like I'm in this nightmare. And it's just not ending," she added. "She was so present in our lives that for us to lose her in this sudden and heinous way makes it so difficult to comprehend."

Abu Akleh's colleagues also lamented their first Christmas without her. "The joy is missing, but hope in a better tomorrow will never die," tweeted Al Jazeera English producer Rania Zabaneh. "We'll never stop talking about you, demanding #JusticeForShireen, 227 days on and every day."

Abu Akleh—known throughout the Middle East as the "Voice of Palestine"—and other journalists were covering a May 11th Israel Defense Forces (IDF) raid on Jenin in the illegally occupied West Bank when she was shot dead by a sniper. Al Jazeera producer Ali Samodi was shot in the back but survived.

After initially trying to deny that its forces killed Abu Akleh, Israel admitted that there was a "high possibility" that the journalist was "accidentally hit" by army fire. Israeli officials declined to launch a criminal investigation of the killing.

An independent probe by London-based Forensic Architecture and the Palestinian human rights group Al-Haq in September revealed evidence that an Israeli sniper repeatedly shot at Abu Akleh—who was wearing a helmet and flak vest clearly identifying her as a journalist—and for two minutes also fired at anyone who tried to come to her aid.

Investigations by international media outlets, rights groups, the United Nations Human Rights Office, and others concluded that Abu Akleh was killed by Israeli fire. In the United States, the Biden administration said in July that Abu Akleh was "likely" but unintentionally shot by an Israeli soldier, a move critics condemned as a "whitewash." Last month, the FBI launched its own probe into Abu Akleh's killing.

Abu Akleh's relatives and Al Jazeera are seeking justice at the International Criminal Court, where the Qatar-based news network earlier this month filed a lawsuit against the Israeli military over the killing.

Lina Abu Akleh told Al Jazeera that knowing Shireen would be fighting for justice if she were still alive is what keeps her going. "She was optimistic, always, that justice will prevail," she said.

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