

Committee to Protect Journalists says Israel takes no accountability for killing reporters

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The Israeli military's impunity in the killing of at least 20 journalists in the past 20 years

'severely' undermines press freedom, says CPJ report.

Veteran Al Jazeera journalist Shireen Abu Akleh reporting from Jerusalem on May 22, 2021

[File: AFP]

New York, May 10 (RHC)-- The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) says in a damning new report that the Israeli military has taken no accountability for its killings of at least 20 journalists, 18 of whom were Palestinian, over the past 20 years.

The press freedom watchdog said it had found "a pattern of the killings of journalists by [Israeli military]" in its report, *Deadly Pattern*, published on Tuesday. "No one has ever been charged or held accountable for these deaths ... severely undermin[ing] the freedom of the press," it added.

The CPJ said Palestinians make up 80 percent of journalists and media workers killed by the Israeli military. "Those figures are partly a reflection of broader trends in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; over the last 15 years, 21 times more Palestinians than Israelis have been killed, according to United Nations figures," added the report.

The report also highlighted that "Israeli officials discount evidence and witness claims, often appearing to clear soldiers for the killings while inquiries are still in progress", adding that the Israeli military's inquiries of the killings are a "black box", with results kept secret.

"When probes do take place, the Israeli military often takes months or years to investigate killings and families of the mostly Palestinian journalists have little recourse inside Israel to pursue justice," the CPJ said.

Hagai El-Ad, executive director of Israeli human rights group B'Tselem, said in the report that Israel's examination of its soldiers' actions, was a less serious inquiry than a "theater of investigation." "They want to make it look credible. They go through the motions, things take a lot of time, a lot of paperwork," he told CPJ. "But the bottom line ... is almost blanket impunity for security forces."

The report said human rights groups have consistently raised concerns about "the ... slow pace of these totally confidential assessments, which can drag on for months or years", during which "witnesses' memories fade, evidence may disappear or be destroyed, and soldiers involved can coordinate testimonies".

The report comes two days before the first anniversary of the killing of veteran Al Jazeera journalist Shireen Abu Akleh by an Israeli bullet to the head while she was reporting on an Israeli military raid in the occupied West Bank city of Jenin on May 11, 2022.

A joint investigation by Forensic Architecture, a multidisciplinary research group, and Palestinian rights group Al-Haq uncovered in September 2022 that the evidence refuted Israel's story that Abu Akleh's killing was a "mistake."

The inquiry examined the Israeli sniper's angle of fire and concluded that they were able to clearly tell that the journalists were there. It also ruled out the possibility of confrontations between Israeli forces and Palestinians, which could have caused crossfire, at the time.

According to the investigation, for which Al Jazeera provided material, the Israeli sniper shot for two minutes and targeted those who tried to rescue Abu Akleh. The findings came on the same day that the 51-year-old Palestinian American journalist's family formally submitted an official complaint to the International Criminal Court (ICC), demanding justice for her killing.

Israel said in September there was a “high possibility” that Abu Akleh was “accidentally hit” by Israeli army fire but added that it would not be launching a criminal investigation.

Like Abu Akleh, who was wearing a helmet and a blue protective vest labelled “Press” when she was shot, most of the 20 journalists killed were “clearly identified as members of the media or were inside vehicles with press insignia at the time of their deaths,” said the report.

The report also said after a journalist is killed by Israeli security forces, Israeli officials “often push out a counternarrative to media” as they attempt to push any responsibility away from their soldiers. The CPJ highlighted that in the case of Abu Akleh, Israeli officials began to blame Palestinians despite witnesses and the Palestinian health ministry saying she was killed by Israeli troops. Israel has also accused some Palestinian journalists its forces killed of “terrorist and militant activity.”

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