

Protesters against genocide in Gaza target annual White House Correspondents' Association dinner

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Washington, April 28 (RHC)-- Activists in the United States demanding an end to Israel's war on Gaza rallied outside a hotel hosting the annual White House correspondent's dinner, condemning President Joe

Biden for his support of the military campaign and “under-coverage” of the conflict by Western news outlets.

However, Biden, who attended Saturday’s event in Washington, DC and delivered a 10-minute speech, made no mention of the war in Gaza or the grave humanitarian crisis there.

Protests at the gala event – which is normally devoted to presidents, journalists and comedians taking outrageous pokes at political scandals and each other – took place as antiwar demonstrations also spread through U.S. college campuses, with students pitching encampments and withstanding police sweeps in an effort to force their universities to divest from companies enabling Israel’s military campaign on Gaza.

The protests in the US capital forced Biden’s motorcade to take an alternate route from the White House to the Washington Hilton, where more than 100 protesters, some of them waving Palestinian flags, shouted “Shame on you” at guests hurrying inside.

At one point, the crowds chanted, “Western media we see you, and all the horrors that you hide”, while some protesters sprawled motionless on the pavement, next to mock-ups of bloodied flak vests with “press” insignia.

The crowds also cheered when someone inside the Washington Hilton – where the dinner has been held for decades – unfurled a Palestinian flag from a top-floor hotel window.

Since Israel’s war on Gaza began last October, the Israeli military has killed 142 media workers and arrested at least 40 Palestinian journalists, according to the Government Media Office in Gaza.

The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) has said 2023 was the deadliest year for those in the profession in a decade, with some 75 percent of those killed worldwide being Palestinians reporting on the war in Gaza.

In his speech, Biden offered a toast for “press freedom and democracy around the world”, but failed to speak about the suffering in Gaza. He spent most of his address poking fun at his main rival in this year’s presidential race, Donald Trump, as well as the two men’s advanced age.

His speech remained focused on what he believes is at stake this election, speaking about how another Trump administration would be more harmful to the country than his first term.

“We have to take this seriously. Eight years ago we could have written it off as ‘Trump talk’, but not after January 6,” he told the audience, referring to the supporters of Trump who stormed the U.S. Capitol after Biden defeated Trump in the 2020 election.

One of the few mentions of Gaza came from Kelly O’Donnell, president of the White House Correspondents’ Association (WHCA), who briefly noted some 100 journalists have been killed in Israel’s war on Gaza.

In advance of the event, more than two dozen Palestinian journalists published a letter calling for their colleagues to boycott the gala, accusing the Biden administration of being complicit in Israel’s systematic killing of media workers in Gaza.

“The toll exacted on us for merely fulfilling our journalistic duties is staggering,” the letter stated. “We are subjected to detentions, interrogations, and torture by the Israeli military, all for the ‘crime’ of journalistic integrity.”

One organiser complained that the WHCA – which represents the hundreds of journalists who cover the president – has largely been silent since the first weeks of the war about the killings of Palestinian

journalists. The WHCA did not respond to a request for comment.

American-Palestinian journalist Ahmed Shihab Eldin, one of the signatories of the letter, told Al Jazeera that it is “unacceptable” for media workers to stay silent for fear of endangering job security. “We are seeing journalists in Gaza continuing to be, not just killed, but detained, tortured, and even their families killed,” he said.

Sandra Tamari, executive director of Adalah Justice Project, a US-based Palestinian advocacy group that helped organise the letter from journalists in Gaza, said, “It is shameful for the media to dine and laugh with President Biden while he enables the Israeli devastation and starvation of Palestinians in Gaza.”

In addition, the Adalah Justice Project started an email campaign targeting 12 media executives at various news outlets expected to attend the dinner who previously signed onto a letter calling for the protection of journalists in Gaza.

“How can you still go when your colleagues in Gaza asked you not to,” a demonstrator asked guests heading in. “You are complicit.”

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