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Research report

Forum: GA 6

Issue: Strengthening legal protection for journalism in conflict zones to prevent war-time disinformation

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Introduction

Journalism is not merely a job, it is a talent, a passion and a commitment; a commitment to find out the truth and report on it accordingly. Journalists play a vital role in democracies by seeking the objective truth and reporting it to the public. Through articles, reports, broadcasts, and even social media platforms like Twitter, journalism takes many forms, yet serves one purpose: to inform unbiased information.

Journalists have proven to play an extremely important role in society as a form of communication unlike any other. Journalism is a one way, unbiased message or story from an expert to an audience. Instead, journalists act as a conduit, narrating an objective story about something that has happened or is happening based on observations and research. To the public, this form of information can be received through breaking news, editorials, featured stories, investigative reports and more, by the act of reporting. In general, reporting comes from interviews, studying, examining, documenting, assessing and researching.

However, when members of the media face intimidation or violence. These threats not only endanger the lives of journalists but also jeopardize the public's fundamental right to information. Today, journalists are not simply casualties of crossfire, they are targets. Without strong legal protections, these dangers continue to grow, and the spread of war-time disinformation becomes easier. When journalists are silenced, false narratives and misinformation spread quickly, manipulating public opinion and hiding the truth. Strengthening legal frameworks to protect journalists in conflict zones is essential to ensure transparency, uphold freedom of the press, and combat the harmful impact of disinformation during war.

The UN recognised the fundamental role of journalism and the essential steps that must be taken in order to protect them. They also acknowledge the growth of danger against journalists, partially in conflict zones, as well as the online threats from non-conflict zones.

Journalism is one of the most dangerous professions worldwide. Without strong legal protections, journalists in conflict zones will remain highly vulnerable to violence and censorship. For these reasons, it is extremely important to strengthen legal protection through international collaboration and commitments.

Definitions of key terms

Journalists

Professionals hired by media organizations to research, investigate, interpret, edit, write and produce news and media content through television, radio and other media.

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Conflict Zone

A conflict zone is a geographical area experiencing significant violence, armed conflict, civil unrest, or severe political instability. These zones are characterized by intense fighting, unstable security conditions, and disruptions to essential services and daily life.

Disinformation

False or inaccurate information that is created to deliberately spread online quickly and mislead people, intentionally misstating the facts.

Freedom of the Press

A fundamental right that enabled the media to investigate, publish and broadcast without censorship or fear of punishment from the government. It is essential to democratic societies as it promotes transparency by informing citizens about matters of public interest.

International Humanitarian Law (IHL)

A set of rules which seek for humanitarian reasons, to limit the effects of armed conflict. It protects the people who are not, or no longer directly or actively participating in hostilities, and imposes limits on the means and methods of warfare.

Geneva Conventions

A set of international treaties that establish legal standards for humanitarian treatment during war. Journalists in conflict zones are considered civilians under these conventions and must be protected accordingly.

War Correspondent

A journalist who is specifically assigned to cover stories in conflict zones or areas affected by military action. They often face extreme danger and work in high-risk environments.

Impunity

The failure to hold perpetrators accountable for crimes or violations, particularly concerning violence against journalists. Impunity remains a major obstacle to press freedom and the enforcement of international protections.

General overview

The information that we receive on a daily basis is what shapes out opinions, stances and ultimately defines our reality. This is why journalism is such an important profession, bringing us the information society needs to understand and make informed, real-time choices surrounding our lives and the way we live them. Uncovering threats to our rights, revealing misconducts of justice, authority and exposing corruption in society. Journalists' primary role is to get as close to the truth as possible, no matter the lengths they have to go to or how uncomfortable it is for people in positions of power. A quote from William Randolph Hearst, a newspaper journalist and politician describes this perfectly stating "News is something somebody doesn't want printed; all else is advertising".

In the current political climate, the question is whether or not journalists can continue to seek objective truths, especially in certain regions authoritarian regimes such as North Korea, China, Vietnam, Iran, and Turkmenistan where press freedom is tightly controlled or entirely suppressed. This being said, Journalists' presence within is under a global constant, progressive threat.

When people plead for the preservation of quality news of integrity, journalists are speaking out on something beyond self interest, it is not just another business sector in jeopardy, it is an integral piece of democratic infrastructure that is in danger. The importance of sustaining and protecting journalists simply, is that self-governing people need objective information in order to govern and allow for freedom of thought. In order to be an active member of society, people need to know what is happening around the world, what topics are up for debate before governments can make final decisions. To achieve this, the information received by the public must be impartially sourced, without bias and with full confirmation of reliable, truthful, and comprehensive information. As well as a means to distribute this information to a broad, diverse society made up of different classes, religions, and cultures. Crucially, democracies rely on the press to act as a check of power and to bring to light corruption that the powerful rather to be kept hidden.

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Violence against journalists takes various forms including:

- Murder and physical assault/torture
- Psychological intimidation including threats to their lives or relatives
- Unfounded detention during demonstrations or other public events
- Attacks on media property, including vandalism and arson
- Arbitrary police raids on editorial offices and journalists' homes
- Sexual harassment and gender-based violence
- Digital surveillance and cyber attacks
- Forced exile or displacement
- Equipment confiscation or destruction
- Intimidation through legal threats and lawsuits
- Online harassment and death threats

Globally, 124 journalists and media workers were killed in 2024 making it the deadliest year for journalists in documented history. Amidst the heightened political unrest, the number of conflicts globally, whether political, criminal, or military in nature has doubled in the past five years, making today, the most dangerous time to be a journalist. The toll of conflict on the press is most glaring in the unprecedented number of journalists and media workers killed in the Israel-Gaza war, 85 in 2024, and 78 in 2023.

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Major parties involved

General Assembly 6

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United Nations

Primarily UNESCO, which contributes to the UN reporting mechanism on human rights, including the safety of journalists, and promotes the fundamental right to freedom of expression. Has also promoted the freedom of press through various initiatives such as World Press Freedom Day and the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists.

The Human Rights Council continues to monitor violations against members of the media and adopts resolutions calling for member states to advocate for the protection of journalists.

General Assembly 6 is the legal backbone for creating and improving binding international law that defends the rights and safety of journalists, especially during war.

Russia

Russia has multiple documented examples of misinformation campaigns and targeting of journalists in the Ukraine-Russia conflict. Journalists wishing to report on the Ukraine-Russia conflict have been subject to harassment, expiation, and even the death with 35 reported since the beginning of the war in 2014.

Israel

During the Israel-gaza conflict, dozens of journalists have been killed. Israel has been accused of targeting media facilities and failing to protect civilian press workers, this has sparked global criticism for the treatment of journalists during military operations. Since October 7 2023, Sitrael has arrested and imprisoned 170 journalists, most charged with “incitement to terrorism”. Additionally, the Committee to Protect Journalists has reported 178 journalists have been killed, (176 palestinian and 2 Israeli).

China

The constitution of the People’s Republic of China guarantees “freedom of speech [and] of the press” but the regime routinely violates the right to information, in total impunity. Major Chinese media groups such as Xinhua News Agency, China Central Television (CCTV) and more are all state owned and strictly controlled and censored by the Chinese Communist Party. In 2024, China imprisoned at least 50 journalists, making it the world's leading jailer of journalists, over half for online expression.

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Myanmar

Since the 2021 military coup, the freedom of press has deteriorated rapidly. Journalist who report on military abuses face the threat of arrest, torture or execution. Many independent media outlets have been banned by the government. According to the Commission of Protection of Journalists, a 2024 census showed that 35 journalists were being held in custody and 4 had been killed.

Belarus

Belarus systematically suppresses independent journalism through arrests, torture, and executions. 31 journalists have been jailed in 2024. The EU strongly condemns Belarus' authorities and calls for it to adhere to international commitments of the UN.

USA

The U.S. promotes press freedom abroad but faces criticism for domestic issues like journalist harassment during protests and surveillance of reporters. Since 2024, the USA has seen a rise of 50% on assaults of journalists compared to 2023, now standing at 68. This has been due to the aftermath of multiple political unrests. Still, it remains a major global funder of journalist protection programs and supports international press initiatives.

European Union

The EU is a strong advocate for media rights, funding safety initiatives and offering asylum to threatened journalists. Countries like Sweden, Germany, and France lead in global press freedom efforts, supporting both legal protections and emergency assistance.

Non-Government Organizations (NGOs)

Organizations like Committee to Protect Journalists, Reporters Without Borders, International Press Institute and Amnesty International, all play a crucial role in research, advocacy and emergency support for journalists. They also pressure governments and international bodies to adopt stronger protections.

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Timeline of Key Events

01-02-21 Myanmar Military Coup

The Myanmar coup d'état began when governing power was seized from the democratically elected government by the military, against the wishes of the public. This sparked a wave of political and civil disobedience, protests and resistance. The military coup in turn, restricted all forms of journalism and punished those who resisted. Many journalists were forced into hiding, fled the country or were arrested by the military, within the following months, well over 100 journalists were arrested. This made it extremely hard to report on the current political, social and economic state of Myanmar.

15-05-21 Israeli Airstrikes Target Media in Gaza

The destruction of the al-Jalaa building occurred on 15 May 2021 in Gaza City, when the Israeli military levelled the complex because of its alleged use by Hamas. Israel issued warnings to the building's occupants in advance, allowing it to be safely evacuated; no one was injured or killed in the bombing however, it raised global concern over targeting of media infrastructure.

21-12-21 UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/78/215.

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16-09-22 Iran arrested 79 journalists During Mahsa Amini Protests

More than 70 journalists, many of them women, were arrested by authorities following the death of Mahsa Amini. Though already being an authoritarian state, with journalists facing arrests, interrogations, imprisonments, and threats, the military ruthlessly emphasised those rules. Even Iranian journalists based abroad were subjected to pressure, from online harassment to death threats.

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03-05-23

World Press Freedom Day Focuses on Conflict Zones

The theme for World Press Freedom Day 2023 was "Shaping a Future of Rights: Freedom of expression as a driver for all other human rights". This year's theme highlights the importance of press freedom and the role it plays in a democratic society which has become increasingly important as global tensions rise.

01-12-23

CPJ Reports 99 Journalist Deaths in 2023

More than three quarters of the 99 journalists and media workers killed worldwide in 2023 died in the Israel-Gaza war. There was an overall increase in global deaths as well as press worker deaths due to the heightened political landscape. CPJ also documented 320 journalists behind bars on the census date of December 1, 2023. The number was the second-highest recorded by CPJ since the census began in 1992.

Previous attempts to solve the issue

UNESCO's Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists (2012)

The UN plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity was a UN-wide initiative led by UNESCO in 2012 signed by 53 countries. Its main objective was to create a safe and free environment for journalists and media workers worldwide. It aims to strengthen peace, collaboration, democracy and development by addressing the threats journalists face. The plan involved UN bodies, national governments, media and civil society organizations. This plan has had some successes, mainly in raising global awareness towards the importance of protecting journalists, and implementing some protective measures. More than 30 countries have prioritised the creation and strengthening of national frameworks for the protection and prevention of attacks. This being said, there have been significant challenges such as digital threats and holding countries responsible for their actions.

International Humanitarian Law (IHL) Protections

IHL is a set of rules which seek for humanitarian reasons to limit the effects of armed conflict. It protects individuals who are not, or are no longer, participating in the hostilities and restricts the means and methods of warfare. This framework has been designed to protect persons who do not, or no longer participate in the fighting including civilians, medical, aid workers and the wounded. Much of the IHL is accepted globally as conventional law. This includes the protection of attacks on, schools, medical aid units and workers, as well as the denial of access to humanitarian and medical aid and sexual assault. Over the last five years, there have been many developments within the IHL, with revision of guidelines and addition of other commitments. Though there was a spike in casualties, in 2023 and 2024, that can be attributed to the political landscape during those years.

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UN Security Council Resolution 2222 (2015)

In 2015, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2222 which focuses on the protection of journalists, media professionals, and associated personnel in situations of armed conflict. The resolution condemns all violations and abuses against these individuals and calls on all parties involved in armed conflict to cease such practices. It also addresses the issue of impunity for crimes against journalists.

International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) Guidelines

The ICRC has developed guidelines to protect journalists in armed conflict. These guidelines emphasize the need for parties to a conflict to respect and protect journalists as civilians, ensuring they can carry out their work without fear of attack or harassment .

Protect Reporters from Exploitative State Spying Act (PRESS Act)

The PRESS Act is a significant legislative effort in the United States aimed at strengthening legal protections for journalism, particularly in conflict zones and areas of heightened government surveillance. Introduced in the 118th Congress (2023–2024), the PRESS Act seeks to safeguard journalists' rights and ensure the free flow of information, which is crucial for preventing wartime disinformation.

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Possible solutions

Nation Wide Legal Protections

- *Adopting PRESS Act* laws globally to guarantee confidentiality of sources and limit government surveillance on journalists.
- *Creating New Protections in Legal Frameworks* that focus on the freedom of press to focus on wartime reporting protections.
- *Implementing Safe and Fast Relocation Channels* for journalists in unsafe situations, those seeking visas and asylum.
- *Constructing International Safety Zones* in areas of conflict that can be monitored by appropriate members of the government. This will be particularly useful for those international/cross border reporters.
- *Emergency Legal Aid Fund* to be created to cover legal, medical and bail expenses for journalists detained or injured.
- *Ensuring all Press Members are Provided with Training and Equipment* such as body armor, digital security as well as emergency training for hostile environments. This can be distributed through governmental organizations as well as NGO's.

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Further reading

[Committee to Protect Journalists \(CPJ\) Official Website](#)

Practical case studies, legal advocacy, and global press freedom data.

[Reporters Without Borders \(RSF\) Official Website](#)

World Press Freedom Index. Advocacy for legal reforms, documentation of press freedom violations, and global rankings.

[UNESCO Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity](#)

International law, UN resolutions, and coordinated state/NGO efforts.

[International Committee of the Red Cross \(ICRC\) Safety of Journalists](#)

Humanitarian perspectives, legal protections for journalists as civilians, and guidelines for safe reporting in war zones.

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