

Killing the Messenger: Israeli Air Force Targets and Kills Journalists in Southern Lebanon

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Journalists' group says TV crews complain of targeting by Israeli warplanes

By TAREK EL-TABLAWY | Associated Press

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NEW YORK (AP) - A leading journalist freedom group on Thursday demanded an "immediate investigation" into reports that Israel is targeting Arab television crews operating in southern Lebanon, the latest in mounting criticism that Israel is making little distinction between civilian and combatant in its campaign in Lebanon.

The call by the Committee to Protect Journalists came in response to allegations from several Arab television stations that Israeli aircraft fired missiles within 80 yards (75 meters) of them on July 22, in an apparent bid to prevent them from covering the effect of Israel's bombardment around the town of Khiam.

So far, at least two journalists and media workers have been killed, and another seven wounded since the fighting began on July 12, following the kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers by Hezbollah guerrillas, according to media groups. In all, at least 420 Lebanese have been killed since the start of the fighting, most of them civilians, while 52 Israelis have died, including 34 military personnel.

The strikes in question were directed at television crews, especially those of the independent satellite channels Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya and the Hezbollah-affiliated Al-Manar channel, said Ghassan Benjeddou, Al-Jazeera's Lebanon bureau chief.

"It's a miracle that our crew survived the attack," Benjeddou told the CPJ.

An Israel Defense Forces spokesman denied that Israel was targeting journalists, telling CPJ that "we are targeting the roads because Hezbollah uses those roads; under no circumstances do we target civilians, including the media."

"Journalists working in those areas are knowingly taking a risk," said Capt. Jacob Dallal.

The allegations, however, have fueled criticism that Israel is not doing enough to guard against wounding civilians or journalists _ particularly as July 25 Israeli air strikes on Khiam left four U.N. observers dead in an attack that drew widespread international condemnation.

On Thursday, another press freedom group, the Paris-based Reporters Without Borders, said its secretary-general had traveled to Beirut where he met with executives and editors of

media outlets that have been hit by Israeli air strikes, including the private Lebanese Broadcasting Corp. and the Hezbollah-affiliated Al-Manar television station.

A statement by the group said the goal of Robert Menard's trip was "to demonstrate its solidarity with Lebanon's journalists _ regardless of the positions of the media concerned _ and to stress that there can be no grounds for targeting journalists."

The group said it was preparing to ask the International Humanitarian Fact-Finding Commission to "investigate these Israeli attacks on the grounds that they are violations of the Geneva Convention."

Although denying targeting journalists, Israel has been criticized earlier after journalists were wounded or killed while covering Israeli-Palestinian clashes.

In the case of the strikes on Al-Manar in Beirut, which left three employees wounded, Israel argued that the station has, "for many years, served as the main tool for propaganda and incitement by Hizbullah, and has also helped the organization recruit people into its ranks," according to a Foreign Ministry statement July 13.

CPJ and Reporters Without Borders officials criticized that explanation, with CPJ executive director Joel Simon saying that "in our view, broadcasters are not making a contribution to the military effort."

"It is incumbent on Israeli soldiers to make distinctions between civilians and combatants," Simon told The Associated Press. "I understand that it's difficult in this conflict, but journalists are entitled to the same protections as other civilians which include the right to not be targeted."

Another Al-Manar correspondent was also hit during bombardment of a bridge in southern Lebanon, while on July 12, three journalists with New TV, another Lebanese, station were slightly wounded when their vehicle was hit by fire from an Israeli helicopter in southern Lebanon, CPJ and Reporters Without Borders said. The station said their vehicle was clearly marked with the New TV logo.

On July 22 _ the day on which the Arab crews said they were targeted _ Israel also struck a Lebanese Broadcasting Corp. transmission tower, killing Sueliman Chidiac, the head of LBC's transmission center. Simon said that strike appeared to be deliberate. "We don't know the reason and we have asked for an explanation," he said.

"In the case of the air strikes on LBC's installations, neither the official or unofficial explanations have been in any way satisfactory," said the Reporters Without Borders statement. "The usual Israeli excuses do not suffice, and Reporters Without Borders call for a transparent investigation to determine who has been responsible."

The following day, photographer Layal Nejib, of the magazine Al-Jaras, was killed on a strike near the convoy in which she was riding in the southern Lebanon.

While Israel-based journalists have generally been able to cover Israeli operations, live footage of the operations along the border on the Lebanese side are now virtually impossible, journalists have told the CPJ.

As the Israeli attacks intensified in southern Lebanon, Hezbollah's stronghold region, most television crews with satellite uplink trucks pulled out of the strategic town of Marjayoun, CPJ said. Those that remained included the international satellite channels Al-Arabiya and Al-Jazeera, LBC and Al-Manar.

But according to the broadcasters, while three LBC vehicles from Marjayoun reached the village of Hasbaya, where the Lebanese Red Cross had a presence, a convoy of Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabiya and Al-Manar vehicles was chased by Israeli fighter aircraft.

The stations told CPJ they were chased by the aircraft, which fired missiles on the road behind them as they approached an already bombed-out bridge. While the broadcasters made an escape along back roads, they said, the planes again fired at the road ahead and behind them. They finally abandoned their vehicles and walked to Hasbaya.

"Their cars were clearly marked Press and TV," Nabil Khatib, executive editor of Al-Arabiya, told CPJ.

Al-Jazeera has come under criticism _ both by the United States and Israel as well as several Arab countries _ for allegedly slanting the news and stirring public sentiment. The station has denied any allegations of bias.

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