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ARTICLE 19

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Iraqi journalists demand protection for their lives, not early graves

ARTICLE 19 calls for the Iraqi authorities to take serious action to protect the right of journalists to express themselves freely, and in doing so honour their lives, rather than prepare their graves.

As we approach the fifth anniversary of the war in Iraq, freedom of expression is still under fire and the death toll among journalists continues to grow. During the last five years Iraq has been the most dangerous place on earth for journalists. According to the Journalist's Freedom Observatory, 274 journalists have been killed since the beginning of the war. Sixty one journalists and media workers were killed in 2007 and 23 were kidnapped, most of them were killed, but the fate of six of them remains unknown.

Instead of announcing much needed protection measures, earlier this month the governor of Najaf told the press that he has devoted a piece of land in Dar Al-Salam cemetery to bury the martyrs of Iraqi journalism. He made the statement during the funeral of Mr. Shehab El Tamimi, President of the Iraqi Syndicate of Journalists, who died of wounds sustained from an attack carried out by unknown gunmen in Baghdad in Feb 2008.

Journalists were surprised by the governor's statement. Although they recognised the good sentiments behind his decision, they argued that the authorities should take more action to protect journalists and demanded a full investigation into the killings of journalists and for those responsible to be brought to justice. On Wednesday 5 March dozens of journalists took these demands to the streets in a public protest. They called for 'protection, not a place to be buried!'

Dr. Hashim Hassan, head of the Journalism Department at Media College of Baghdad University and member of ARTICLE19 Media Law Working Group told ARTICLE 19: *'The governor's statement highlights the Iraqi authorities' failure to provide adequate protection for journalists. Without real action on protection the killing of journalists will continue.'*

ARTICLE 19 Executive Director Agnes Callamard added her support to the protests of journalists and said: *"The Najaf governor's statement is symptomatic of the resignation that paralyses leadership across the country and internationally. Such is the sense of defeat in the face of the repeated and seemingly senseless aggressions and killings."*

Yet, some of the killings of journalists and media professionals could probably have been prevented. For example in cases where attacks were preceded by death threats the authorities may have been able to take measures to either protect individuals or apprehend the person making the threats.

She went on to say: *'The lack of serious investigations into the assassinations and attacks means that perpetrators feel they can continue to target journalists in complete impunity while journalists will continue to fall victim of the war against freedom of expression in Iraq.'*

NOTES TO EDITORS:

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- ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees free speech.