IRAQ: MEDIA UNDER SIEGE

ARTICLE 19 is deeply saddened by the recurring attacks on journalists, media personnel and on the right of free expression in general in Iraq. In the month of April alone, several serious targeted attacks on well-known and respected journalists have occurred, demonstrating the ever-increasing impact of the lawlessness and violence on the media’s ability to convey information and ideas to the Iraqi people. The latest victim, Amal Al-Mudarress, a well-respected reporter, narrowly escaped an attempt on her life on Sunday April 29.

Mrs Al-Mudarres was attacked by an armed group on her way to work in Baghdad and was seriously injured in the head and chest. She was shot a number of times and is currently in hospital struggling for her life.

“The media in Iraq is being unrelentingly targeted and attacked by all sides including the various armed groups, the Iraqi authorities and US forces” said Dr Agnès Callamard, Executive Director of ARTICLE 19.

On April 12, a gunman shot dead journalist Iman Yussef Abdallah and her husband east of Mosul. The bodies of the two victims were set alight in their vehicle. Mrs Abdallah worked for the radio of the Mosul workers’ union.

Earlier that month, Baghdad TV station and Dar Al-Salam radio were targeted by a suicide bomber driving a truck full of explosives. The attack claimed the life of Mr Ahmad Jaber, Assistant Director of the station.

More than 50 journalists have been abducted in Iraq in the past four years, 18 over the last 12 month, according to the Iraqi Journalists Freedom Observatory. While most have been brutally killed soon after their abduction, the fate of 12 journalists remains unknown. Talal Hashim Birkadar, the editor for weekly newspaper Aldiyar, were kidnapped on March 6 in Karkuk city, north of Baghdad. His fate, and the identity of, the group that kidnapped him are still unknown. Also in March, Jamal Alzobidi, the chief editor of the Baghdadi newspaper Alsafeer, was kidnapped opposite his workplace in Baghdad. A week after, on the March 5th, he was found dead.

Iraqi journalists have been subjected to arbitrary arrest and detention by both the Iraqi and the American authorities and have been held without charge and without access to legal assistance, human rights organisations or their families for prolonged periods of time, sometimes for years. Al-sabah newspaper journalist, Forat Al-atabi was arrested by the American forces two months ago and remains held in custody without charge. According to the Iraqi Journalists Freedom Observatory, the American forces have not provided any
information about his condition or reasons behind his arrest despite a number of requests. Similarly the Pulitzer Prize winner Bilal Hassan of the Associated Press who was arrested last year in Ramadi, remains in American custody to this day for “imperative reasons of security.” He has yet to be charged. ARTICLE 19 calls upon the American forces and the Iraqi government to charge or release journalists held in custody as they are entitled to a swift and fair trial.

In northern Iraq, attacks are also occurring. According to Al-Fayhaa TV channel in Sulaimania, Kurdistan, in April armed forces supported by the police entered the building and attacked ten members of staff. Earlier that month, independent journalist Nebz Koran was arrested in Erbil by a group of men dressed in military uniform. While the security forces in Kurdistan have strongly denied any responsibility for the attack, many journalists in Kurdistan have considered these two incidents as a warning from the authorities.

“Oh on the occasion of World Press Freedom Day, ARTICLE 19 reiterates its commitment to securing freedom of expression in Iraq and urges others to join in solidarity with Iraqi journalists in their struggle to carry out their daily work without threats or fear of reprisal.” said Dr Agnès Callamard, Executive Director of ARTICLE 19.

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 freedom of expression.