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Journalists targeted in on-going conflict in Syria

Scores of journalists reporting on human rights abuses in Syria have been killed, arbitrarily arrested, detained, subjected to enforced disappearances and tortured over the last two years, Amnesty International said in a report released today, World Press Freedom Day.

These abuses have been carried out by the Syrian authorities and armed opposition groups, turning Syria into a highly dangerous country for journalists to work in.

The Amnesty International report, entitled *Shooting the Messenger: Journalists targeted by all sides in Syria*, details dozens of cases of journalists and media workers attacked or held since the 2011 uprising began, in an attempt to prevent them from reporting on the situation in Syria, including human rights abuses.

It also details the crucial role played by citizen journalists, many of whom risk their lives to make sure information about what's going on inside the country is released to the outside world. Like their professional colleagues, this group has faced reprisals to prevent them carrying out their work.

Journalists are not the only civilians under threat in Syria, but so far at least 36 have died in what are believed to be targeted attacks.

“We have once again documented how all sides in this conflict are violating the laws of war, although the scale of abuse by government forces remains much greater,” said Ann Harrison, Deputy Director of Amnesty International’s Middle East and North Africa Programme.

“Deliberate attacks on civilians, including journalists, amount to war crimes for which the perpetrators must be brought to justice.”

Independent newspapers, and radio and television stations have not been permitted to operate freely in Syria for decades.

A state of emergency, in force from 1963 to April 2011, has now ended, but journalists continue to be persecuted for reporting a wide range of subjects, including human rights violations carried out by the authorities.

New laws ostensibly providing greater freedom of expression have done nothing to improve the situation in practice.

In 2011 the Syrian authorities stepped up their repressive tactics to prevent media coverage of the then mainly peaceful uprising by introducing a virtual news blackout on mainstream media outlets between March and December.

The heavy restrictions placed on the mainstream media have led to a surge in citizen journalism, where

people who are not professional journalists post information about the conflict on social networking sites.

Journalists targeted include Palestinian writer and journalist Salameh Kaileh, who was arrested on 24 April 2012 by Air force Intelligence after he criticized the new constitution.

He was taken to a detention centre in Damascus, where he was forced to strip to his underwear in a room holding 35 men. He told Amnesty International that he was blindfolded and tortured with falaqa (beating the soles of the feet).

He was even tortured when he was transferred to a hospital before he was finally released and deported to Jordan.

In another case, state television presenter Mohammed al-Sa'eed was reportedly abducted from his home in Damascus in July 2012 and summarily killed by Jabhat Al-Nusra, an Islamist armed opposition group.

“We have been calling for over two years for the international community to take meaningful steps to ensure those responsible from all sides are held to account for international crimes and other abuses and for victims to receive reparations, but the Syrian people are still waiting,” said Ann Harrison.

“How much more evidence of war crimes and crimes against humanity does the UN Security Council need to see before it refers the situation in Syria to the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court?”

Ends