

CAN A COLORFUL PATCH SAVE JOURNALISTS' LIVES?

by Vicki Chan

As the number of journalists killed in the field worldwide continues to increase, a debate is raging within the profession. Would high-profile patches worn by journalists in combat zones offer greater protection by tagging them as non-combatants, or would such a move mark them as targets for assassination?

According to figures from the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), in the past 12 years more than 1,200 reporters have been killed, and 95 percent of these killings have remained unsolved. Over 50 media members have been killed in Iraq alone since the March 2003 invasion. Few are willing to accept these deaths simply as the price of doing business. Most agree that something must be done.

But what? In Europe, one solution is gaining popularity: equipping journalists with special identification patches to identify them as non-combatants.

A patch of luck?

"I think the whole profession shares a feeling of urgency as to the unbearable situation that many of our colleagues face throughout the world," Blaise Lempen, a correspon-

dent for SDA/ATS, the Swiss national news agency, told Agente France Press (AFP). Lempen is among the group of correspondents, predominately based in Geneva, who have founded the Press Emblem Campaign (PEC). They are pushing for an internationally recognized symbol—one suggestion includes the word “PRESS” in black on an orange disk—to distinguish reporters in combat zones, much like the Red Cross or Red Crescent symbol for medical workers. With the full support of governments that uphold international law, this would ensure journalists the same legal protection that humanitarian workers have, and would provide an important means of prosecuting those who commit crimes against journalists.

World press opinion is split on the issue. There is increasing concern that journalists are being targeted in certain regions.

‘Calculated suicide?’

In recent years, the number of journalist deaths has moved far beyond the realm of accident. In conflicts from Bosnia to Sierra Leone to Afghanistan, there have been multiple instances of combatants going out of their way to target journalists. Even setting aside kidnappings or politically-driven assassinations, the trend is disturbing. And it continues in Iraq today.

Henrik Zörner, spokesman for the German Journalists Federation, told Deutsche Welle, "A visible identification mark for journalists would be calculated suicide."

Targeting journalists is a recent development. Larry Martz, co-chair of the Overseas Press Club Freedom of the Press Committee, recalls coverage of the rebellion in Honduras in the 1980s. Journalists took great pains to put up and wear signs identifying themselves as members of the press, and they were respected for these indicators. "I think [a press emblem] certainly would have been a good idea 15 years ago, when the press was universally recognized as neutral in battle situations. That impression has eroded considerably," cautions Larry Martz. "Journalists are now seen as legitimate targets by combatants."

Prominently displayed press badges may be a dangerous maneuver today, particularly in places like Baghdad, where reporters are associated with the Western invaders. Martz notes, "The professional role of the press is overwhelmed by the ethnicity of the press."

On 20-21 September, fourteen media associations met in Geneva and signed a declaration for stronger safeguards for reporters. The document failed to include the implementation of a press emblem as some had hoped, but the issue will be revisited in early 2005 when the group convenes again under the auspices of the United Arab Emirates Syndicate of Journalists.

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