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**UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
SCIENTIFIC, AND CULTURAL
ORGANIZATION
(UNESCO)**

**PROMOTING FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION
THROUGH THE ENCOURAGEMENT OF
INDEPENDENT PRESS AGENCIES IN
WAR-TORN NATIONS**

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Basic Overview of the Issue

One essential thing for functioning democratic societies is the right to express ideas freely. This right is also acknowledged by the United Nations (UN) (with the 19th article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) and the UN and its organs work to provide this right to everyone. This right is especially important in conflict zones, as the world hearing about the situation in conflict zones may lead to a better understanding of the severity of a dissent which can lead to more accurate action.



Image 1: Member of Press being interrogated by the military

The press plays an important role in the practice of this right since the press allows people to voice their ideas and spread information. However, the press may face violence and obstruction while in conflict and post-conflict zones, which prevents the rights to obtain information and freedom of expression. The activities of the press in these areas are essential, as they keep the civilians in the area informed and get their stories to people all around the world. In this sense, the protection of the press in conflict and post-conflict zones becomes essential.

The media and journalists face various difficulties in conflict and post-conflict zones. States and non-state actors attack journalists and the press to control the press and support their side of the conflict. These attacks or intimidations cause the reporting to be biased. It also causes the press to back off since it becomes too risky to operate in such areas. These combined make it challenging for people to reach impartial and accurate news. This doesn't



only deprive individuals of their rights to obtain information and express ideas but also hampers the efforts to resolve conflicts or rebuild post-conflict areas, as the lack of accurate information prevents meaningful conversation between parties. Considering this, it can be said that the freedom of the press in such areas is of utmost importance.

Independent media provides an alternative in areas of conflict and post-conflict, as most news in these areas is under government control or the control of other groups in the areas. Independent media organizations help in correcting misinformation, uncovering human rights violations, and becoming the voice of minorities. These organizations also help ensure the accountability of those in power by inspecting them. This ensures that corruption is mitigated and contributes to the restoration of democracy.

As mentioned before, the UN recognizes the role of independent press agencies in resolutions and rebuilding of post-conflict areas. The UN recognizes this role through actions such as preparing the UN's Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity.

The need for an independent press that can thrive in conflict and post-conflict areas is now more than ever, especially considering that new conflicts keep emerging, such as the Israeli attacks in Gaza, which are immensely dangerous for journalists.

Explanation of Important Terms

Press Freedom

The right of journalists and press organizations to operate without interference and censorship. It is essential for the dispersion of accurate and impartial information (Merriam-Webster, 2025).

Conflict Zones

Geographical locations where armed conflicts, civil unrest, or political instability are present. These areas are the places where journalists face high risks of violence or unlawful incarceration. Journalists often have limited access to these areas.

Independent Press Agencies

Media organizations that operate separately from any government or groups. These organizations are essential in reaching impartial information and can contribute



directly to the resolution of conflicts (Merriam-Webster, 2025).

Enforced Disappearances

The imprisonment or kidnapping of someone without the knowledge of any other groups about their whereabouts. This is usually done by governments or non-state actors to silence opposition (OHCHR, 2025).

War Crimes

Violations of human rights in war conditions. The most common war crimes are the targeted attacks on civilians or journalists. These are often prosecuted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) (United Nations Regional Information Centre for Western Europe, 2024).

Impunity

The failure to hold assailants accountable for certain crimes they have committed due to legal restrictions. This failure can result in further cases of human rights violations (Britannica Dictionary, 2025).

Advocacy Groups

Organizations that promote press freedom and document crimes committed against independent press and journalists.

Media Suppression

Acts that aim to hamper journalistic activities and the distribution of information. These acts range from censorship to physical violence.

Detailed Background of the Issue

Promoting freedom of expression through the encouragement of independent press agencies in war-torn nations is of utmost importance, especially considering the dangers and challenges that journalists and reporters face in these areas. These challenges can be physical violence, intimidation, imprisonment, censorship, or destruction of equipment. These not only threaten the lives of those who are involved in the press but also the basic human rights of those in the conflict and post-conflict areas in terms of restriction of freedom of expression and obtaining accurate information. Without these risks that the press faces being mitigated, it is not possible to tackle the issue at hand. Therefore, it is important to



understand the agenda item in the framework of protecting journalists as well.

It is also important to mention the contributions of the press to the resolution of conflicts and rebuilding. They act as a bridge between the affected populations and the rest of the world, helping the world and related organizations to see how they can help the affected communities. For example, these efforts by press organizations allowed for the voices of the local communities in places like Gaza and Yemen to be heard, which was previously suppressed by military activities. The press in these areas also shed light on any human rights violations and point to any possible offenders. These actions ensure that justice is served and can prevent other groups from carrying on unlawful activities in such regions, therefore paving the way for peace.



Image 2: The press being caught in the crossfire of conflict

The international law, especially the Geneva Conventions, states that the press should be protected at all times during and after conflicts. However, these regulations fail to stop hostilities towards the journalists in conflict and post-conflict zones. According to UNESCO, more than half of the journalists killed were in these zones (UNESCO, 2023). In 2023, there was a drop in the total fatalities compared to last year (It went down from 88 to 65; however, the numbers are different in different sources) (UNESCO, 2023). It should be kept in mind,



however, that these numbers may be deceiving as the aforementioned decrease is a result of the decrease in fatalities outside the conflict zones. The number of journalists killed and harmed in conflict and post-conflict zones is still increasing. In 2023, 38 journalists were killed in these zones, which is an increase compared to 28 in 2022 (UNESCO, 2023). The most dangerous zone for journalists was Palestine with 19 journalists killed only since October 2023 (all numbers can vary across different sources) (UNESCO, 2023).

Lots of press workers are also killed in nations like Pakistan or Bangladesh. This makes South and Southeastern Asia the second most dangerous area for journalists. The rising number of journalist deaths and attacks are indicative of the risks the journalists who are reporting on cases such as civil wars, civil unrest, or government oppression face. Although some of these journalist deaths are not directly linked to conflicts, it is still important to discuss these situations as well, since these deaths may be linked to civil unrest, or the creation of zones without freedom of expression can also lead to conflicts.



Image 3: A relative bids farewell during the funeral of Palestine TV journalist Mohamed Abu Hatab and 11 family members, the day after they were killed in an Israeli bombardment of Khan Yunis in November 2023. Image by Mahmud Hams.



Deaths of journalists, however, is not the only issue at hand and only looking at these statistics may lead to a faulty perception of the issue. Unlawful incarceration of journalists is also a massive threat to their safety and to freedom of expression. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) reported that 550 journalists are currently imprisoned, which means an increase of 7 percent (Reporters Without Borders, 2024). With 41 journalists imprisoned, Israel became the biggest prison for reporters with the start of the conflict in Gaza (Reporters Without Borders, 2024). The use of jails is a developing method in silencing the press and indicates another hazard for media professionals.

Along with deaths and incarcerations, forced disappearances are also a big issue, as it poses a threat to media workers and obstructs the functioning of the press. 100 journalists are currently missing worldwide (Reporters Without Borders, 2024). These journalists are speculated to have disappeared by oppressive regimes or armed groups etc.

The destruction of media infrastructure and equipment is also a major problem. The local communities' access to accurate and impartial information is restricted with the destruction of infrastructure and equipment, as these can be the part of larger military operations. Destruction of media infrastructure results in "zones of silence" in the respective parts of the war-torn nations (Mahoney, 2017). Examples of this can be seen in Syria, Afghanistan, and Yemen. These zones give armed groups the freedom to operate without any supervision or intervention.

There are initiatives to protect journalists and media organizations; however, they mostly fall short in creating a meaningful mitigation in the protection of journalists and the press, as proven by the statistics. The violence against journalists and destruction of infrastructure is exacerbated due to reasons such as impunity and insufficient assistance.

Major Parties Involved

UNESCO

When promoting journalist safety in crisis areas, UNESCO is leading the front. It is in charge of programs like the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists, which aims to provide media professionals with digital, psychological, and physical safety training. The



group also advocates for more robust international procedures to fight impunity and offers emergency aid. Its view on the attacks on journalists is that they are breaches of international law in all cases. UNESCO also publishes reports, one of which is the World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development. This report “analyzes trends in media freedom, pluralism, independence, and the safety of journalists” (UNESCO, 2025). It serves as a reliable source in understanding the situation of the media in various parts of the world.

Reporters Without Borders (RSF)

This organization has made important efforts in terms of showing the dangers that reporters have to withstand in conflict and post-conflict areas to the international community. The group records incidents of violence against journalists and uses the information to push for changes to the law. To guarantee responsibility for crimes against media professionals, RSF actively pursues legal action by submitting complaints to the ICC. Its effort highlights how crucial journalism is to maintaining openness and the truth.

Israel

Israel has been under fire for its military operations that have killed journalists, especially in Gaza. Many press organizations and human rights groups see the government's activities as targeted repression of media freedom, even if Israel deems them necessary for national security. International criticism has also been directed at Israel's arrest of journalists. Furthermore, Israel has laws that are contrary to press freedom, such as the requirement to comply with military censorship. The government is passing new laws such as giving the senior ministers the right to shut down foreign media outlets, which caused media organizations such as Al Jazeera to be banned. This not only worsens the situation of the conflict, but also harms the internal democratic system.

Palestine

Many journalists have been murdered during military operations in the Gaza Strip, making it the most dangerous area for them. The main threat is foreign violence, but journalistic freedom is also threatened by internal constraints. Hamas and the Palestinian Authority have come under fire for stifling dissent and controlling media narratives, posing a



complex risk to journalists covering the area. Besides these groups, Israeli government is also accused of imposing communications blackouts in the Gaza strip, which further threatens the freedom of expression and access to reliable information.

Russia

The repression of independent reporting and targeted attacks on journalists are two of Russia's tactics during the invasion of Ukraine. Both domestic and foreign journalists have been imprisoned by Russian authorities, who have shaped narratives through propaganda and censorship. Advocacy organizations draw attention to the dangers that journalists who try to report on war crimes and oppose government-run media confront. Besides attacks on journalists, imprisonment of them is also widespread as part of Russia's war strategies.

Yemen

There has been an ongoing civil war in Yemen since 2014, and this civil war has caused Yemen to be a perilous country for press workers. The Houthis, one side of the civil war in Yemen, in particular, are being linked to attacks and kidnappings. The independent reporting in the region is thus limited. Media outlets are also often forced to align with the agendas of the armed groups. The narratives that the public sees is often dependent on the group that is in power (such as the difference of the narratives in the media between North and South Yemen). Furthermore, a suppression is evident in the numbers of violations against journalists, which surpass 1400. There are also 44 reported journalist deaths (Albaiti, 2023). International support, including secure tools of communication, is vital for the promotion of independent press agencies in the area.

Syria

The Syrian civil war left the country in a similar situation to Yemen. The killings of journalists by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) caused the country to become one that is feared by journalists. Even if the civil war is now over with the Assad regime being overthrown, the region is still dangerous for reporters and international support is essential for impartial reporting in the area. For this reason, RSF wrote seven recommendations for the new Syrian government. With these recommendations, RSF calls for the release of all the detained journalists, information about the disappeared journalists, and prosecution of



offending groups.

International Criminal Court (ICC)

The ICC is essential to punish those involved in the attacks on journalists and press agencies. Many organizations continue to file complaints about the issue to ensure justice and to strengthen the press. However, one major issue in these proceedings is the accountability of individuals and groups for these crimes. This causes impunity, which many organizations still try to fight.

Chronology of Important Events

10 December 1948	The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted. Article 19 establishes the right to freedom of expression.
8 June 1977	Additional protocols were added to the Geneva Conventions which explicitly call for the protection of journalists in conflict zones, which criminalizes any targeted attacks against them.
15 March 2011	The Syrian civil war began, resulting in widespread fear among reporters for covering conflict zones which was caused by executions done by armed groups, such as ISIS.
12 November 2012	The UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity was introduced by UNESCO.
16 September 2014	The Yemeni civil war began, which caused



	Yemen to be a high-risk zone for reporters due to partial media and unsafe conditions.
15 April 2023	The Sudanese civil war began. There have been allegations for both non-state actors and the military of the state of Sudan which claim suppression of media and violent attacks on reporters.
7 October 2023	The Israeli attacks in Gaza began, which proceeded to create one of the most dangerous zones for journalists and independent press agencies.

Relevant International Documents

- Security Council Resolution 1738 (23 December 2006, S/RES/1738) - This resolution tackles the issue of the safety of journalists in conflict zones. It reaffirms previous resolutions passed by the Security Council regarding the protection of civilians in conflict zones and adds to them.
- Security Council Resolution 2222 (27 May 2015, S/RES/2222) - This resolution adds to resolution 1738, discussing that the media workers should be treated with respect and clears other issues regarding media equipment and installations and forbids their destruction.
- Disinformation and freedom of opinion and expression during armed conflicts (12 August 2022, A/77/288) - This report looks in depth at information manipulation. It examines the problems it causes for freedom of expression, especially in conflict zones.
- Resolution on the safety of journalists and the issue of impunity (31 October 2023, A/C.3/78/L.56) - This resolution puts further regulations to prevent violence against



journalists, especially in conflict zones. It also aims to tackle the issue of impunity, which threatens the safety of journalists.

Past Attempts to Resolve the Issue

Over the years, both national and international organizations have contributed to the protection of journalists and encouraged independent press in conflict and post-conflict zones. The first step was the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which set freedom of expression as a basic human right. Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions also helped in settling the issue by putting an emphasis on media workers and their safety. These protocols considered them as civilians, which criminalized any attacks on them. The UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity was later introduced by UNESCO, which put procedures to achieve the safety of media workers and to hold the offenders accountable, removing the issue of impunity.

Even if these frameworks helped, they were insufficient as the danger for journalists is rising in war-torn nations. Various non-governmental organizations keep putting complaints to international entities such as the ICC to ensure accountability and mitigate impunity for the crimes committed; however, these efforts were not so effective. To overcome these issues, ongoing efforts are required globally.

Solution Alternatives

Several steps may be taken to protect journalists and freedom of speech. Delegates may work on creating an agreement that aims to criminalize any actions done to harm journalists to tackle impunity. This may be an important addition to the previous conventions, as the delegates will get the opportunity to define the boundaries of human rights violations. Delegates may also think about creating task forces that will aim to safeguard journalists quicker in case of an attack. It can also be helpful to organize safety training and invest more on the protective gears.

Assisting independent media organizations financially and logistically to operate in war-torn nations is also important. Fostering cooperation between national and international



press agencies is also a possible way of increasing the reporting quality. In addition to these, reinforcing the judicial systems of countries, such as establishing special tribunals, and enhancing their communication with international bodies can also prove to be useful in decreasing impunity. There should also be deterrents to prevent interruptions to press activity. These deterrents can include sanctions to groups or nations who are found guilty of acts such as violence against journalists.

Campaigns for public awareness on the importance of press can develop society's understanding of the press' role in conflict resolution and peace. To ensure safety of media workers, safe zones for this purpose can be established in war-torn nations which can act as checkpoints. Finally, media workers can also be protected from hazards with the help of technical solutions such as advanced warning and communication systems.

Useful Links

[RSF calls on Syria's new authorities to adopt seven priority measures in line with their promises to safeguard press freedom](#)

[Israel Cannot Remain a Democracy Without Protecting Press Freedom](#)

[Freedom of the press during the civil war in Yemen](#)

[RSF's 2024 Round-up: journalism suffers exorbitant human cost due to conflicts and repressive regimes](#)

[Protection of Journalists](#)

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Committee Name: United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

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Agenda Item: Promoting freedom of expression through the encouragement of independent press agencies in war-torn nations



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