Forum: Human Rights Commission

Issue: Safeguarding freedom of expression by protecting journalists and media workers under restrictive regimes.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the issue of the safeguarding of journalists and media workers in conflict zones and restrictive regimes has become more prevalent than ever, with an extensive number of journalists being killed and jailed in places like Gaza, Sudan, the Congo, Iran, and various other regions. A critical factor is that many of these countries have implemented restrictive measures on freedom of speech and on how the media may report, further limiting the freedom of the press and journalists. Additionally, in regions like Congo and Palestine, a staggering number of journalists have been tortured, raped, and even killed by their respective governments. Journalists have become frequent targets of government attacks, with some media workers even being fired or banned on social media platforms. Overall, journalists and media workers face an increasing amount of political persecution and suppression online, prohibiting their ability to properly conduct reporting and posing an increased threat to the work as a whole. While many Western countries allow journalists to report freely and without restriction, many countries in the Global South still face challenges with corruption and freedom of speech, delayed by the legacies of imperialism and

neocolonialism, as well as conservative culture. It is imperative that we tackle this issue with urgency, and it is quintessential that we analyze the context in which suppression occurs and the international frameworks that address the rights of media workers. This report will examine why journalists are suppressed, how it functions, and possible solutions to address this problem.

DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

Journalist :

Professionals who research, write, edit, and report news, features, and information for print, broadcast, or media.

Media Worker:

A professional involved in the creation, production, management, or technical support of content for print, broadcast, or digital platforms.

Restrictive Regime:

A regime whose policies, laws, or conditions severely limit the freedom, rights, or movement of individuals, groups, or organizations.

Conflict Zone:

A geographically defined area or region experiencing active, intense violence, armed conflict, or severe instability, resulting in the breakdown of essential services.

Digital Security:

Protocols established to protect journalists from hacking, surveillance, or digital harassment.

Editorial Independence:

The right to operate without pressure from owners, advertisers, or political actors.

Freedom of the Press:

Constitutional guarantees that allow journalists to report censorship or undue government interference.

BACKGROUND ON THE ISSUE

The protection of journalists and media workers in conflict zones and under restrictive regimes has been somewhat of a complex issue throughout history. During the 20th century, as tensions heightened between major superpowers and ideological blocs, state-controlled censorship and press prohibition became ever more prevalent and deemed necessary. During World War II, censorship was an essential component of many of the information strategies employed by the nations involved in the conflict, aimed at both military security and the maintenance of civilian morale. Governments aimed at suppressing any news that could be used to the advantage of enemy forces or blocs. In the US, a system of voluntary censorship

was employed, while in the UK, the Ministry of Information was established to control narratives and suppress or prohibit any information that contradicted the government's narrative. In contrast, the Soviet Union used censorship primarily to enforce ideological doctrine and conformity, thereby hiding government failures and strengthening support for Stalin’s leadership. The 1940 Smith Act, passed by then-President Franklin D. Roosevelt, made it illegal to advocate the overthrow of the US government; in reality, this was used more to prosecute communists and media who aligned themselves with non-American narratives. In Germany, it was prohibited under Adolf Hitler's leadership to report in the media regarding the extermination of Jews in concentration camps. Nazi propaganda attempted to portray Germany’s defeat as a tragic misfortune for Hitler and to conceal his indifference to German suffering. In Asian countries like Japan and China, government agencies not only suppressed journalists' articles and reports but also exercised full jurisdiction over what information would be available to the press, sometimes even engaging in persecution tactics. In China, the opposition Nationalist Party to Mao Zedong’s Chinese Communist Party banned books, articles, and newspapers written by communists, even killing and beheading their editors. Similarly, Japan’s National Mobilization Law of February 1941 tightened secrecy and censorship rules, in preparation for the December 7 attack on the U.S base at Pearl Harbor, jailing and imprisoning media workers and journalists whose narratives contradicted that of the state.

During the Cold War, the suppression of journalists and the proliferation of state-sponsored narratives accelerated amid tensions between the capitalist West and the communist Eastern Bloc, the most powerful of which were the US and the Soviet Union. Eastern Bloc media and propaganda were controlled directly by each country’s communist party, which oversaw all

media, censorship, and propaganda organs. State and party ownership of print, television, and radio media was used to control media and society in light of Eastern Bloc states viewing even marginal opposition groups as posing a major threat to the bases underlying the communist regimes. The ruling authorities regarded the media as a propaganda tool and widely practiced censorship to exercise almost full control over information. Until the late 80s, all Eastern Bloc radio stations and media organizations were heavily restricted and controlled by the state. Additionally, some regimes restricted the flow of information from their countries to outside of the Eastern Bloc by restricting the travel of foreigners and segregating them from the population. Censorship and the restriction of information, journalism, and media were at their peak during the 20th-century conflicts, and throughout history, media and reporters have faced suppression, targeting, and outright persecution by state governments, whose policies were to control the narrative for their benefit.

Unfortunately, the professions of journalism and media continue to be threatened by political instability, authoritarian policy, and armed conflict. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, authorities continue to restrict the rights to freedom of association, expression, and peaceful assembly. In 2021, democracy activists, journalists, and media workers were subjected to arbitrary arrest and detentions, judicial harassment, and exile by the Congolese government. In Eastern Congo, occupied by the paramilitary group M23, journalists are targeted for their reporting with murder, kidnapping, detentions, assaults, and theft of equipment. In Gaza, Palestinian and foreign journalists continue to be jailed, imprisoned, and killed by the IDF (Israel Armed Forces), making it extremely difficult to obtain information on casualties in the strip. Israel has continued to engage in the systemic decimation of media infrastructure in the region, tightening censorship throughout the West Bank and Israel itself. According to the International Federation of Journalists, 261 journalists have been killed, and dozens have been injured or presumed missing. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, more

than 300 journalists were imprisoned worldwide as of the end of 2025. Many of these detentions are illegal and unjust under international law. Unfortunately, the international community has failed to ensure the protection of journalists' rights, as nations and member states continue to violate them.

The global crackdown on democracy and human rights protections has become a catalyst for new and old authoritarian leaders to repress press freedom in recent years. In the Western world, since Russia's war on Ukraine began, its media have been experiencing an immense crackdown. Hundreds of journalists have been forced to flee the country, where they continue to face legal persecution from their respective governments, and many of their families have become targets of surveillance by the state. Reporting from Russia continues to be increasingly difficult, with journalists and media outlets often being silenced by laws criminalizing independent journalism. As of February 2022, 27 journalists have been imprisoned on criminal charges, and 355 journalists and media outlets have been branded as foreign agents. This speaks not only to the heavy restrictions imposed on journalists and the press but also to the increasing authoritarian regimes proliferating across the globe, threatening the rights and protection of journalists, activists, and ordinary citizens.

While international frameworks have continued to provide guidelines to try to secure the rights of the press, journalists still face threats to their lives, imprisonment, torture, and detention. In 2025, 128 journalists lost their lives, including a significant number in the Middle East. Several organizations, including the Committee to Protect Journalists, Reporters Without Borders, and the International Federation of Journalists, have served as key actors in defending journalists, providing legal aid, advocating for press freedom, and providing safety resources. Unfortunately, despite these efforts, the profession of journalism and media workers continues to be threatened by authoritarian governments, corruption,

violence, and persecution. Freedom of the press, the rights of media workers, censorship laws regarding reporting, and the security of journalists all need to be urgently addressed and rectified to ensure the safety of journalism for all.

MAJOR COUNTRIES AND ORGANIZATIONS INVOLVED

Democratic Republic of the Congo:

Journalism in the DRC faces severe restrictions, with journalists often subjected to targeting by the state and armed groups, especially in conflict-wrecked regions in Eastern Congo. Countless journalists have been arrested, kidnapped, or disappeared in the fog of the three-decade war tearing the DRC apart. It is very common for authorities, militias, and religious groups to exert pressure on journalists and media outlets in their provinces. The country's Higher Council for Broadcasting and Communication, its media regulator, frequently decides on access to reliable information, especially in the eastern part of the country. In occupied territories, the M23 attempts to suppress news coverage by which they try to threaten and intimidating journalists.

State of Israel:

The Israeli military holds the power to censor and suppress what the public sees, block publications, and put journalists in jail for violations. In 2024, the Israeli government introduced a law banning foreign media from operating and broadcasting if deemed a threat. Its stated purpose is to permit a "temporary" shutdown of news channels that "damage

national security." The law dictates that media broadcasts be halted and the broadcast equipment be confiscated.

Republic of the Sudan:

Journalists in Sudan continue to face extreme danger as the war between the Rapid Support Forces and the Sudanese Armed Forces wages on. Since the outbreak of war in Sudan on April 15, 2023, journalists and media institutions have become direct targets of the warring factions. Newsrooms were ransacked, media equipment destroyed or looted, and press freedom has come under attack on numerous occasions. Journalists face life-threatening situations daily, including death and persecution, threats, arbitrary arrest, torture, and enforced disappearance. As the conflict intensifies and more parties become involved, the risks escalate. Many of the warring militias and groups have established their own media outlets, co-opting and suppressing independent news. Facing severe threats, many Sudanese journalists have been forced to go into hiding. The Sudanese Journalists Syndicate has recorded hundreds of violations against journalists, including at least nine journalists killed in the exercise of their profession, according to UNESCO.

Russian Federation:

Ukrainian and international journalists covering Russia's invasion of Ukraine continued to be targeted by the Russian Army in the course of their work. Since February 2022, Reporters without Borders has documented more than 175 cases of journalists who have fallen victim to abuse following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Three journalists were killed in 2025, targeted by a Russian drone equipped with explosives and a camera transmitting live footage. The

RSF has documented 25 attacks against broadcasting towers by Russian armed forces, aimed at disrupting the transmission of information from independent sources. Over 300 Ukrainian media outlets have been forced to close down in part due to the targeting of media facilities by the Russian Army, as well as the suspension of funding from the United States Agency for International Development.

Mexico:

Mexico's troubles with free expression continued into the modern era, and an increase in violent attacks against journalists in the 2010s earned it a reputation as one of the most dangerous places in the world for media workers. The systemic murder of journalists began two decades ago as a result of increased organized crime in the 1990s. The National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) stated that about eighty-eight journalists were killed between 2000 and 2014. Crime reporters have been targets of attacks, although many attacks have been attributed to corrupt or abusive government officials. According to the CNDH, 89 percent of crimes against journalists go unpunished; meanwhile, self-censorship and antagonism from the police still remain major challenges for news outlets operating in Mexico.

People's Republic of China:

China continues to take internet censorship, surveillance, and propaganda to unprecedented levels, making it one of the world's worst countries for journalists, according to Reporters Without Borders. Journalists are threatened and subjected to murder, mistreatment, and torture. Violence committed by the regime against journalists is widespread; in 2023, an

independent journalist was beaten to death by state security agents in his home, days after releasing footage of protests against Chinese leader Xi Jinping. China is also recognized as one of the world's largest jailers of journalists. Due to the systemic imprisonment of reporters, at least 122 reporters and press freedom advocates are currently detained in China, including Chinese journalist Zhang Zhan, who spent four years in prison for her coverage of the COVID-19 outbreak, and was recently criminally detained for "provoking trouble".

North Korea (DPRK):

North Korea enforces one of the world's most repressive censorship laws and policies, having a ranking of 179 out of 180 in the 2025 Reporters Without Borders Index. The government virtually controls all information within the country, so independent media is extremely limited. Domestic journalists have no right to report freely or investigate stories, and the government tightly monitors print, broadcast, book publishing, and online media. The Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) is the only permitted news source for North Korea's media. The regime tightly monitors the production and distribution of information and strictly prohibits independent journalism. A few foreign press agencies are present in the country, but operate under very close, strict surveillance, which hinders their reporting.

Islamic Republic of Iran:

Iran remains one of the most dangerous places in the world for independent journalists to work; journalists who stray from official state lines in their reporting are subject to threats, surveillance, arbitrary arrest, and legal persecution from the state. According to Reporters Without Borders, at least 21 journalists are currently detained in Iran, ranking Iran 176th out

of 180 countries–one of the worst in the world. Iran's press laws allow the codification of the state's ability to repress, allowing prosecution for charges such as "spreading false information", "insulting the Supreme Leader", and "propaganda against the state". Additionally, Iran's Ministry of Intelligence summoned or detained 98 journalists for alleged links to a Persian-language media outlet outside the country during the June to July period of the Israel-Iran conflict.

Reporters Without Borders:

Reporters Without Borders is an international non-profit organization that defends journalists and media workers alike. They provide assistance to journalists and media workers who have been imprisoned or persecuted for doing their job and expose the mistreatment and torture of them in many countries. Reporters Without Borders works in regions across the world and reports on press freedom conditions worldwide. They have been a strategic organization in defending the rights of journalists and media workers, especially those working in heavily restricted regions and countries.

International Federation of Journalists:

The IFJ, the world's largest organization of journalists, represents 600,000 media professionals from 187 trade unions and associations in more than 140 countries. Established in 1926, the IFJ is the organization responsible for protecting and promoting the rights of journalists within the United Nations system and as an international trade union. It works to organize collective action to support journalists' unions in the fight for fair pay, and to promote international cooperation and action to defend press freedom and social justice. It

has offices across multiple regions, working to oppose government discrimination and to combat the use of the media to promote conflict or intolerance.

Committee to Protect Journalists:

The Committee to Protect Journalists is an independent, nonprofit organization that promotes press freedom worldwide. They defend journalists' right to report the news safely and without fear of reprisal. The CPJ is made up of about 40 experts from around the world, with its headquarters in New York City. CPJ mobilizes a network of correspondents who report and take action on behalf of those targeted. It works to report on violations in repressive countries, conflict zones, and established democracies alike.

Journalists in Distress Network:

Journalists in Distress Network is an informal platform that enables members of the organization to share information about journalists in distress and collaborate on emergency efforts. The network facilitates coordination among its members–international organizations with mandates to protect freedom of speech.

TIMELINE OF KEY EVENTS

1920s-1960s/Apartheid Era and Civil Rights Movement:

Journalists and activists covering apartheid discrimination and abuses faced detention, with major crackdowns on press freedom and security in South Africa. In the United States, during the Civil Rights Movement, journalists were targeted and beaten by police officers for filming and reporting on arrested protesters and activists. Early 20th-century South Africa used legislation to suppress dissent and state brutality. Laws such as the Native Administration Act and the Riotous Assemblies Act, both of which blocked and prohibited reporting on banned gatherings.

1970s Argentina:

A rebel group began a military coup in 1976, which sparked Latin America's worst-ever military dictatorship. It ended in 1983, with a toll of more than 30,000 people murdered or disappeared. More than 100 journalists were killed during the seven-year rule of the armed forces, who had taken over the government.

1980s:

During the Iraq-Iran war, key journalists included international reporters who provided firsthand accounts. They became targets of surveillance and murder after highlighting the brutalities of the war.

1990s Algeria:

Between 1992 and 1996, armed extremist groups targeted media workers, journalists, activists and engaged in the massacre of civilians. An estimated 75, 000 people were killed in violence sanctioned by the state. The state tried to vigorously control media and press coverage of the violence and brutality through state censorship, the suspension of newspapers, and the arrest and criminal prosecution of journalists who attempted independent reporting. At least 58 journalists were killed by suspected extremists.

The Iraq War (2003-2010):

The Iraq War was especially dangerous and brutal for journalists, as media professionals and journalists often faced assassinations, crossfire, or detentions. The number of journalists and media contributors killed in the country since the outbreak of the conflict stands at 230. Over 93 professionals were abducted in those seven years, at least 42 of whom were later executed.

Syrian Civil War (2011-2020):

During the Syrian Civil War, the Syrian regime enforced a total media blackout in March 2011, banning international journalists from reporting or entering and detaining local journalists who tried to cover protests seeking an end to Bashar al-Assad's rule. In a widespread campaign to silence media coverage, the government detained and assaulted journalists, expelled foreign journalists, and disabled mobile phones, landlines, electricity, and the internet in areas where the protest broke out. The regime also extracted passwords of social media sites from journalists using violent coercion and defaced social networking pages.

2021-2022:

2020 to 2022 were among the deadliest years for journalists reporting. 2021 saw the most journalist killings in Europe since 2015, according to the Platform. Additionally, the organization recorded three times more murders of journalists than in the earlier years of 2020 and 2019.

Gaza War (2023-Present):

Israel's War on Gaza is categorized as the deadliest conflict for journalists in history, with 261 Palestinian journalists killed by Israel's bombardment of the Gaza Strip. The Israeli government has continued to use starvation as a weapon against the Palestinians as they continued to wage war on the strip.

RELEVANT UN RESOLUTIONS, TREATIES, AND EVENTS

Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was drafted and adopted by the United Nations in 1948, outlining the fundamental rights and freedoms, including freedom of opinion and expression, as stated in Article 19.

Geneva Conventions Protocols:

The Geneva Conventions Protocols are three international treaties, adopted in 1977 and 2005, that aim to strengthen protections for victims of armed conflict. The Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols are at the core of international humanitarian law, which regulates the conduct of armed conflict to limit its effects. They specifically protect people who are not participating in the hostilities.

UN Security Council Resolution 2222:

Strongly condemns violence against journalists and emphasizes that they must be treated like other civilians in conflict zones. It focuses on the protection and security of journalists, media professionals, and other personnel in armed conflicts. It condemns all attacks and violence and requires that all parties to armed conflict comply with international law frameworks to protect them. The resolution calls for member states of the UN to create safe environments for journalists, ensure accountability for crimes perpetrated against them, and take necessary steps to end impunity for such attacks.

UN General Assembly Resolution 78/215:

This resolution strongly addresses and condemns all attacks, reprisals, and violence against media workers and journalists, such as torture, extrajudicial killings, and enforced disappearances. The resolution also condemns the targeting of journalists and calls upon other member states of the UN to refrain from these practices, also further condemning the specific attacks on women journalists and other forms of Gender-Based Violence. It stresses the importance of people's rights to receive information, to freedom of expression and opinion, to freedom of journalists and media workers to access information, and to the public's right to receive it.

UN General Assembly Resolution 59/15:

Condemns abuses, surveillance, and the deliberate targeting of journalists and media workers, in both conflict and non-conflict situations. Additionally, it urges political leaders and officials to refrain from threatening and intimidating the media, including individual

journalists and women journalists. It primarily targets reaffirming the safety of journalists in conflict zones and reassuring their right to security and safety from being targeted in warfare.

UN Security Council Resolution 1738:

Condemns intentional attacks against journalists, media professionals, and associated personnel in situations of armed conflict, and calls upon parties to put an end to such practices.

UN Human Rights Council Resolution 51/9:

Condemns impunity for attacks and violence against journalists, and expresses concern that the vast majority of crimes go unpunished. It mentions and attacks the spread of misinformation as a violation of human rights, including the rights to privacy and freedom of expression.

PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE THE ISSUE

The UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity:

The UN Plan of Action was developed and initiated by UNESCO, the first concentrated effort within the UN to address attacks and impunity of crimes against journalists. It brought together UN bodies, national authorities, media, and civil society organizations. It aims to create a free and safe environment for journalists and media workers, with a view to strengthening peace, democracy, and development worldwide. The Plan includes measures

such as the establishment of an inter-agency mechanism to strengthen the contribution of each of the UN actors and enhance UN-wide cohesion; cooperation with states to develop legislation and other mechanisms for safeguarding the freedom of expression and information, as well as the safety of journalists; and the establishment of partnerships, awareness-raising, and fostering initiatives.

International Day to End Impunity for Crimes Against Journalists:

The IDEI is a UN-recognized day, adopted in 2013 after the killing of two French journalists in Mali, to raise awareness and highlight the risks the journalists take to do their jobs, call for accountability, reaffirm commitment to the protection and safety of journalists in the course of their work. Every year, UNESCO calls on all governments, civil society, media organizations, and everyone involved to uphold the rule of law and join global efforts to end impunity for crimes against media workers and journalists.

UN Resolutions:

The Human Rights Council and General Assembly often submit resolutions that condemn violence and call for the investigation of crimes.

Anti-SLAPP Measures:

On 27 April 2022, the European Commission presented a series of proposals against manifestly unfounded or abusive court proceedings against public participation (known as SLAPPs). The measures include a mix of legislation and recommendations designed to equip

journalists and human rights defenders who are targets of SLAPP with the tools to fight back aganist abusive abusive court proceedings. The aim of the directive is to provide targeted civil procedural safeguards against SLAPPs with cross-border implications brought against natural or legal persons, in particular journalists and human rights defenders. It primarily prioritizes training, awareness-raising, support, and monitoring.

International Media Support:

International Media Support is an organization that works to defend journalists' rights and ensure they can operate safely. They monitor attacks and threats, coordinate international outreach and support, develop guidelines and handbooks, and engage governments to pass better legislation and policies that safeguard journalists. They offer 24/7 hotlines, safe houses, safety funds and equipment, and legal and emergency assistance.

Monitoring and Reporting Watchdogs:

Reporting and monitoring platforms like MARS and Media Monitoring Africa serve as independent tools for journalists to report on and track online and offline attacks, for legal action.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Strengthening Laws to Protect Journalists:

Strengthening laws in developing countries to protect journalists can help provide government support for their safety. Many countries, especially in the Global South, have extremely weak laws protecting media workers, and many even prosecute journalists themselves. Laws and policies to protect journalists from discrimination, harassment by officials, abuse, and censorship can help ensure the safety of journalism.

Fortifying Persecution Penalties and Legal Justice Systems:

Strengthening penalties and punishments for serious war crimes and atrocities against journalists can further ensure that those who participate in these actions are brought to justice. Additionally, it can expand to include paying compensation or restitution to the victim's family and ensuring that any necessary resources are adequately provided to them. Some examples of this could include longer imprisonment and punishments for the perpetrators, and paying the victim's family compensation in the form of money, social services, and other means of rectification.

United Nations Enforcement Procedures:

Using the judicial power of the UN and its other bodies to prosecute perpetrators of war crimes against journalists and civilians. Some examples of this could include, for instance, using the International Criminal Court to prosecute criminals and perpetrators, and using international law to try war criminals for crimes against humanity.

Heightening Security Measures in Conflict Zones:

Further intensifying security measures in high-conflict regions and areas to ensure that journalists and media workers are protected and provided with adequate resources for survival. This could include arranging the deployment of UN peacekeeping forces to regions with high levels of conflict and ensuring that those fleeing conflict or war are protected. Additionally, this could also include establishing safe zones, areas where journalists and civilians are to be protected and housed.

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