

We kill journalists

(Part 2)

BACK in February (see Grip 2/3/05) I wrote a piece about what Newsweek calls “The Salvador Option,” referring to Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld’s stated intent to train and employ Salvadoran style death squads to hunt down and kill or “disappear” suspected Iraqi resistance fighters and their alleged supporters. Such wholesale execution of political opponents resulted in approximately 70,000 deaths in El Salvador during Ronald Reagan’s reign in the White House.

Knight Ridder correspondent Yasser Salihee also covered this story. Unlike me, working from the comfort of the United States and doing my research online, Salihee was on the ground in Iraq compiling primary data in the form of damning evidence about extra-judicial killings. Knight Ridder, on June 27th, published Salihee’s preliminary findings. Working less than a week, Salihee and another Knight Ridder journalist turned up over 30 cases of suspected extra-judicial executions by U.S. backed Iraqi death squads.

In the article, Salihee and his coauthor document how victims show up at the morgue blindfolded, with their hands tied or cuffed behind their backs. Most showed signs of Abu Ghraib style torture. Many were last seen in police custody. They were usually killed with a single shot to the head.

On June 24th, while Salihee’s article was in-press, a U.S. military sniper killed him, also with a single shot to the head. According to Knight Ridder, it was his day off. He was on his way to his neighborhood gas station to fuel up before a family trip to a swimming pool

WE KILL JOURNALISTS (PART 2) / 2

when he encountered a makeshift U.S. checkpoint unexpectedly set up blocks from his home. Witnesses say he was shot without warning and for no apparent reason. For the record, Knight Ridder says, "There's no reason to think that the shooting had anything to do with his reporting work." Such disclaimers seem to be a de facto mandate these days. When an investigative reporter is shot dead by a member of an organization he or she is investigating, there's a clear rationale for suspicion.

In March (see Grip 3/3/05) I wrote a story entitled, "Truth, Death and Journalism: We Kill Journalists, Don't We?" In it I discussed CNN Chief News Executive Eason Jordan's retracted comment about U.S. forces in Iraq targeting journalists. Eason's comment cost him his job – and no genuflecting to the god of disclaimers and apologies could save it. He resigned. The problem was that he was right. I also looked at Reporters Without Borders' investigation into the deaths of two journalists killed by U.S. troops in Baghdad, and at other subsequently confirmed killings of journalists by U.S. forces in Afghanistan, Iraq and Serbia – showing how U.S. military documentation offers evidence that many of these dead journalists were in fact deliberately targeted by U.S. forces.

Journalists are the outside world's pipeline for documentation of atrocities in war zones. When military forces remove journalists from war zones – usually through terror and intimidation, if not outright murder – they've successfully removed the most credible witnesses working to document their crimes. Salihee certainly appears to be one of these witnesses – uncovering the smoking gun behind a series of what appear to be Rumsfeld-ordered war crimes. It's the brave reporting by the few remaining unembedded journalists on the ground in Iraq that allow armchair columnists like myself to write about Iraq, citing sources such as Salihee, Robert Fisk and Dahr Jamal.

As my March column indicates, Salihee's killing at the hands of a U.S. military sniper is not an isolated incident. Since his death last week, two more Iraqi journalists were also shot dead by American forces. Maha Ibrahim, a TV news editor who publicly opposed the U.S. occupation, was shot to death by U.S. troops who opened fire on her car as she drove to work on June 26th. On June 28th, al-Sharqiya TV Program Director Ahmad Wail Bakri was also shot to death by U.S. troops as he drove near an American military convoy in Baghdad. The International Federation of Journalists has called for investigations into all three murders. The Committee to Protect Journalists has also expresses alarm over the killings and is launching its own investigation.

If these journalists in fact were not targeted by U.S. forces, and were instead just killed as unintended victims of jittery soldiers shooting up Baghdad, these killings are evidence of a depraved indifference to human life – resulting from the stress of fighting a prolonged war against a civilian population, with no clear goals or exit strategy.

WE KILL JOURNALISTS (PART 2) / 3

If any of these journalists were killed because of their work – and Yasser Salihee's damning investigative work certainly raises that question – then what we are witnessing is not only a war against Iraq, but against the world's right to know what is going on in Iraq as well. With Salihee dead, it will now be more difficult to document death squad activity in Iraq. When you kill the messenger you kill the truth.