

4 November 2011

Ramallah

Escalation of settler attacks against journalists this October

Palestinian journalists faced a difficult month in October, with MADA monitoring an increased number of violations committed by Israeli Occupation Forces (IOF) and settlers across the West Bank. Among the most serious of the violent incidences against journalists was the attack on French Agency Photographer Hazem Bader, who was struck on the head by a large stone thrown by a settler during the weekly Beit Omar demonstration in Hebron. Additionally, in Ramallah a group of journalists suffered the severe effects of tear-gas inhalation while covering a solidarity protest for Palestinian hunger strikers outside Ofer prison.

Conversely, the number of Palestinian committed violations decreased in October. This reduction in the number of incidences is however a dubious indicator of improvement as some of the violations committed were of a serious nature, such as the raid and take-over of the Journalists' Syndicate headquarters in the Gaza Strip by journalists belonging to the Jihad and Hamas political parties. This increased the crisis among journalists body, and open the door widely for division in the journalists syndicate.

MADA is additionally concerned by the number of incidences of journalists tried for critical opinion pieces, and considers that as major contributor to increased practices of self-censorship among journalists in the region.

Israeli Violations

Israeli Occupation Forces last month committed a number of violations against Palestinian journalists, including a number of deliberate attacks. On Tuesday 11 October 2011, IOF personnel threw a number of tear gas projectiles at journalists covering a solidarity protest for Palestinian hunger strikers outside Ofer prison in Ramallah. Ma'an agency's correspondent Firas Taneneh and photographer Ashraf Kutkut, and Palestine TV reporter Sarah Aladra, reported suffering severe breathing difficulties following the barrage of tear gas directed at them by IOF soldiers.

A group of settlers on Wednesday 26 October 2011 attacked an Al-Jazeera channel crew as they returned by car from filming in the village of Beit Lou, west of Ramallah. The cameraman Majid

Al-Safadi suffered mild injuries from glass shards after a stone struck the windshield. Three days later another group of stone throwing settlers attacked four Palestinian journalists - French Agency photographer Hazem Bader, European Agency photographer Abdelhafiz Hashlamoun, Palestine TV cameraman Hussam Abu Alan, and Palestine TV correspondent Fida' Nasir – covering the weekly Beit Omar march near Hebron city.

In addition to these attacks, the Jerusalem Magistrates Court on 10 October 2011 accused 'The Palestinians of '48' website correspondent Mahmoud Abu Atta of two counts of criminal misconduct, including breach of the public system and obstruction of the police. These charges follow Abu-Atta's portrayal of a group of settlers inside Al-Aqsa Mosque on 3 April 2009.

On Tuesday 18 October 2011, Israeli occupation authorities prevented editor in Al-Quds newspaper Abdul Karim Abu Arqob from travelling to work and revoked his permit to access his paper's headquarters in Jerusalem. Abu Arqob was given no explanation as to the reason for the IOF's decision to further restrict his freedom of movement.

Israeli occupation authorities on Wednesday 26 October 2011 extended the administrative detention of West Bank's Quds TV program coordinator Nawaf Al-Amer for four months. Al-Amer was initially arrested on 28 June 2011 and has been held under administrative detention since that time.

Palestinian Violations

The Magistrates Court of Bethlehem decided on 3 October 2011 to drop the charge of libel against Radio Bethlehem 2000 director George Canawati, and instead pursue his case on the charge of slander. The trial date has now been set for 30 November 2011, when judges will deliberate the charge of slander based on a critical 'Note' Canawati published on his Facebook page concerning the Bethlehem Directorate of Health.

In Qalqilya, the local Magistrates court agreed to issue a verdict on the case of Issam Shawar on Sunday 4 December 2011. Shawar is charged with "undermining national unity and disturbing the serenity of the nation" based upon articles he wrote and published through Ma'an News Agency, Dunia Alwatan, Falastene Alan, and the Egyptian Al-Ahram newspaper. Intelligence services in Hebron additionally summoned French Agency photographer Hazem Bader for investigation on Sunday 16 October 2011.

A large number of journalists affiliated with Hamas and Al-Jihad groups in the Gaza Strip raided the Journalists' Syndicate headquarters on Tuesday 11 October 2011. The interlopers forcibly took control of the offices and expelled syndicate journalists, declaring themselves a transitional council which will be convened for 6 months in the lead up to elections.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Palestinian Center for Development and Media Freedoms (MADA) condemns all violations against Palestinian journalists and expresses its deep concern at the continuing escalation of attacks by Israeli occupation forces and settlers, the increased restrictions on freedom of movement and the disruption of their journalistic work, such as the withdrawal of travel permits to enter Jerusalem. The center reiterates its call upon the international community to take serious and clear steps to end Israeli violations, which pose a genuine threat to their well being and professional capacity.

MADA also expresses its condemnation and concern for the raid on the Journalists' Syndicate headquarters in Gaza City. MADA calls upon all press blocks and Secretariat members of the syndicate to open serious dialogue about safeguarding a fair election process.

MADA additionally calls upon all parties, both Israeli and Palestinians to respect the tenets of freedom of expression as mandated under International law.

Details of violations:

(3 Oct) The Magistrates Court of Bethlehem decided on 3 October 2011 to drop the charge of libel against Radio Bethlehem 2000 director George Canawati, and instead pursue his case on the charge of slander. The trial date has now been set for 30 November 2011, when judges will deliberate the charge of slander based on a critical 'Note' Canawati published on his Facebook page concerning the Bethlehem Directorate of Health.

The governor of Bethlehem Abdul Fattah Hamayel filed a complaint against Canawati with the Attorney General on Thursday 8 September 2011, following a 'Note' Canawati published on his Facebook page concerning the work of the Bethlehem's Directorate of Health and criticising the presence of Israeli products in a meeting he attended with Directorate managers.

(10 Oct). The Jerusalem Magistrates Court accused 'The Palestinians of '48' website correspondent Mahmoud Abu Atta of two counts of criminal misconduct, including breach of the public system and obstruction of the police. These charges follow Abu-Atta's portrayal of a group of settlers inside Al-Aqsa Mosque on 3 April 2009.

Abu Atta told MADA that his lawyer Mohamad Aghbarieh presented his defence, maintaining that he did not attack anyone inside the Al-Aqsa compound, but was there covering events

when he was attacked and arrested by Israeli police. Abu Atta added: "The trial was postponed until June 2012, when the prosecution will produce witnesses, all from Israeli police, of my alleged attack against police. My lawyer will also present witnesses who can testify that they saw the events surrounding my arrest and assault".

(11 Oct) A large number of journalists affiliated with Hamas and Al-Jihad groups in the Gaza Strip raided the Journalists' Syndicate headquarters on Tuesday 11 October 2011. The interlopers forcibly took control of the offices and expelled syndicate journalists, declaring the formation of a new transitional council which will be convened for 6 months in the lead up to elections. Secretariat member of the Syndicate Yousef Alostaz told MADA that he witnessed between 80-100 journalists belonging to Al-Jihad and Hamas parties raid the headquarters and forcibly remove journalists from the headquarters.

Alostaz also stated that following the attack Secretariat members filed a number of complaints with human rights centers in Gaza, but as of yet the situation has yet to change. Alostaz added: "Members prepared to do that as soon as they announced the formation of the council after taking over the Syndicate headquarters".

(11 October) IOF personnel fired a number of tear gas projectiles at journalists covering a solidarity protest for Palestinian hunger strikers outside Ofer prison in Ramallah. Ma'an agency's correspondent Firas Taneneh and photographer Ashraf Kutkut, and Palestine TV reporter Sarah Aladra reported suffering severe breathing difficulties following the barrage of tear gas directed at them by IOF soldiers.

Ma'an agency correspondent in Ramallah Firas Taneneh said that he went to cover the protest in solidarity with the families of Palestinian prisoners, and that while covering events occupation soldiers threw tear gas bombs at protesters before deliberately throwing tear gas canisters at the group of journalists, despite the fact they were covering from a reasonable distance from both soldiers and demonstrators. Taneneh added: "I was asphyxiated, I could not breathe at all. My colleagues Ma'an photographer Ashraf Kutkut and Palestine public TV correspondent Sarah Aladrh all suffered the effects too. It was a very difficult situation and we could not extricate ourselves so we were stuck in the cloud of gas."

(16 Oct) Intelligence and security services in Hebron summoned the French Agency photographer Hazem Bader for investigation on Sunday 16 October 2011. Bader informed MADA: "The summons is based on an incident that occurred on 10 September 2011, when I was covering an event in Hebron with my colleague Nasser Shyoukhi and occupation forces wanted to arrest us. By virtue of our work with international agencies, we had contacts within the military liaison office who could lobby for our release. I was investigated as to my reason for

contacting the liaison office. I told them that it was standard protocol with my agency to do so in instances of arrest by the IOF. I was interrogated from 11:30 am until 3:30 pm ".

(18 Oct) Israeli occupation authorities prevented editor in Al-Quds newspaper Abdul Karim Abu Arqob from travelling to work and revoked his permit to access his paper's headquarters in Jerusalem. Abu Arqob was given no explanation as to the reason for the IOF's decision to further restrict his freedom of movement.

Abu Arqoub told MADA that he was travelling to work on Tuesday morning when he was stopped by IOF at Qalandia, soldiers then confiscated his permit and identity card and told him to wait in a holding room. After 15 minutes they returned his identity card but informed him that the permit was revoked and he must appear before the military liaison office. Abu Arqoub added: "I went to the Liaison Office and they told me, without offering any explanation, that my permission was cancelled. I am very surprised by this decision as I have been working with the newspaper since 1999 and am usually granted the permit to enter my place of work, so I don't know why it was revoked. For what reason?".

(26 Oct) Israeli occupation authorities extended the administrative detention of West Bank's Quds TV program coordinator Nawaf Al-Amer for four months. Al-Amer was initially arrested on 28 June 2011 and has been held under administrative detention since that time.

His wife, Mrs. Nawal Hussein Al-Amer, told MADA that Israeli occupation authorities officially informed her on Wednesday of the administrative detention extension and declined to provide any reasons for his arrest and imprisonment. She added: "We heard the news about the extension of his detention, but we were assured that the news was correct on Wednesday morning". Israeli occupation forces arrested Nawaf Al-Amer on 28 June 2011 from his home in Kofor Kalel southeast of Nablus city, West Bank, after raiding his home and searching a floor of the building. Mrs Al-Amer confirmed that occupation forces have additionally prevented their sons, who over 16 years old, from visiting their father since his arrest.

(26 Oct) A group of Israeli settlers attacked an Al-Jazeera channel crew as they returned from filming in the village of Beit Lou, west of Ramallah. The Al-Jazeera Jerusalem office issued a statement yesterday that the settlers – outside the nearby settlement of Nahaliel – threw stones at the Al-Jazeera crew's car while they were on their way to Ramallah after visiting the village. Crew cameraman Majid Al-Safadi suffered mild injuries from glass shards after a stone struck the windshield. Al-Jazeera also reported that a unit of the Israeli occupation army and border guards came to the scene, but told the crew that they couldn't do anything, and instructed them to go to the nearest police headquarters. The crew however was unable to comply as the nearest police headquarters are located inside the Jaba – East Ramallah – or Hashmonaim – near N'lin village – settlements, both of which the crew are unable to enter because of security reasons related to their safety and wellbeing.

(29 Oct) Stone throwing settlers attacked four Palestinian journalists covering the weekly Beit Omar march near Hebron city. Of the journalists, French Agency photographer Hazem Bader, European Agency photographer Abdelhafiz Hashlamoun, Palestine TV cameraman Hussam Abu Alan, and Palestine TV correspondent Fida' Nasir, Bader sustained the most serious injuries after a large stone struck his head causing substantial bleeding. Bader told MADA that he and his colleagues were covering the weekly demonstration when settlers began throwing large stones at the crowd. Israeli Occupation Force personnel were witness to the attack but did not prevent the settlers from continuing and instead began also targeting the peaceful demonstrators with tear gas projectiles. During the confusion a large stone struck Bader, resulting in severe head contusions for which he had to receive medical treatment. Bader went to the nearby hospital and received five stitches.

Abdulhafiz Hashlamoun added: "During our coverage of the weekly march the settlers attacked us with stones, one hit my waist and caused bruising. Two of my other colleagues were also injured, Hussam Abu Allan was struck on his waist and Fina' Nasir was hit on the leg, both were bruised."

(29 Oct) In Qalqilya, a local Magistrates Court judge agreed to issue a verdict on the case of Issam Shawar on Sunday 4 December 2011. Shawar is charged with "undermining national unity and disturbing the serenity of the nation" based upon articles he wrote and published through Ma'an News Agency, Dunia Alwatan, Falastene Alan, and the Egyptian Al-Ahram newspaper.

Shawar told MADA that his lawyer presented his defence and submitted a plea of 'not guilty' on all charges. The judge set the hearing for the verdict on 4 December 2011. The prosecution first presented the indictment against Shawar on 1 February 2011, however the trial has been postponed several times.

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Contact:

Riham Abu Aita
Public Relation Officer
Riham@madacenter.org
www.madacenter.org
0097222976519