

Media killings' impunity outrage



By Issa Sikiti da Silva

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Despite the slight decrease last year in the number of [journalists killed across the globe](#), a heated debate continues to rage on about the massive impunity surrounding these killings, as analysts decry governments' lack of action, and more journalists flee their homelands and threaten to quit the profession.



While in some countries alleged perpetrators are caught but set free due to 'lack of evidence', in other parts of the world governments, which in line with the constitution have the duty to protect their citizens, simply turn a blind eye on these senseless massacres.

Safety of journalists depends



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Lesley Cowling, senior lecturer at Wits University's Journalism School, told Bizcommunity.com last week that the safety of journalists depends very much on what country and area they are operating in.



www.right2know.org.za

"In societies where there is the rule of law, and where media is seen as having an important role in the operations of the democracy, journalists can function in a relatively unhindered fashion," she said. "And, states that have not achieved that stability - politically or [socially] - will be a much more dangerous place for journalists."

Cowling added: "Few foreign correspondents will even consider going to Somalia, for example. War zones are also dangerous for journalists and photographers, as the recent mine accident that critically injured South African photographer [João Silva](#) demonstrates."



In October last year, Silva stepped on an antipersonnel mine while on assignment for the *New York Times* patrolling with US soldiers in southern Afghanistan. Reports said he continued taking pictures while waiting to be evacuated from the scene of the accident. As a consequence, both his legs had to be amputated below the knees.

Continues to baffle



www.sanef.org.za/coalition/

However, while media killings might seem unavoidable in zones of conflict, killings that occur in the so-called democratic countries continue to baffle media watchdogs and reporters. Cowling explained: "In war, no one is safe, so in conflict situations, journalists would be as vulnerable as any civilian or even more so, as they need to get close to the action."

But, some critics believe when a journalist is killed by hitmen in a 'peaceful' country and the government keeps quiet, or tampers with the murder investigation by influencing the court handling that matter, then that government is suspected of having a hand in that murder.

Cowling said: "In societies where there is instability, there is often also corruption, lack of security, or behind-the-scenes power-mongering. This makes journalists easy targets and governments do not protect them either because they are not sufficiently in command of their societies or because other issues are more important to them.

"However, any society in which journalists can be killed as a consequence of a story cannot be said to have attained democratic maturity."

Tense rhetoric

Asked whether the tense rhetoric between governments and media has the potential to worsen the problem, as journalists could be targeted by ruling party die-hard supporters, she said: "I don't think it worsens the problem, but is more a symptom of a lack of sophistication in government officials about how constitutional democracies work."

"If democratic practice and citizenship are entrenched in the society, and if the media is seen to be fulfilling its ideal functions in the society, the media will have the protection of the courts and the support of the public."

Media watchdogs Reporters Sans Frontieres, Press Emblem Campaign, World Association of Newspapers and the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) put the number of journalists killed in 2010 at 57, 105, 66 and 44, respectively. A total of 845 journalists have been killed since 1992, according to CPJ, which compiles an impunity index as part of its Global Campaign Against Impunity.

Cowling said: "I have no idea why the differences in numbers, but I assume it has something to do with the ways in which the reporting of deaths is done, and how the deaths are verified, and what publications or programmes are considered to be 'journalistic' rather than more broadly media."

For more:

- Bizcommunity: [WAN-IFRA lists deadly places for journalists in 2010](#)
- Journalism.co.za: [What press freedom? Treatment of Mpuma journos raises concerns](#)

See also:

- Bizcommunity special section: [special focus on media freedom](#)
- Bizcommunity Twitterfall: [#ZAmefreeedom](#)
- Press Council of South Africa: [Help make journalism in South Africa better](#)
- Right2Know petition: www.right2know.org.za
- Avaaz.org petition: [South Africa: democracy at risk](#)
- MediaMattersZA: www.Facebook.com/MediaMattersZa and [@MediaMattersZA](#)
- Keep South Africa's Media Free: [Facebook](#) and [@safreemedia](#)
- SANEF: [Media Freedom](#)
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- Google News Search: [Protection of Information Bill media appeals tribunal](#)
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ABOUT ISSA SIKITI DA SILVA

Issa Sikiti da Silva is a winner of the 2010 SADC Media Awards (print category). He freelances for various media outlets, local and foreign, and has travelled extensively across Africa. His work has been published both in French and English. He used to contribute to Bizcommunity.com as a senior news writer.

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