

The Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP
Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
London SW1A 2AA

Dear Prime Minister,

Re: Protecting journalists and press freedom in the Israel-Gaza conflict

Following the provisional measures called for by the International Court of Justice on 26 January 2024, we are writing to entreat you to act immediately and decisively to protect journalists and to promote the conditions for safe and unrestricted reporting on the hostilities, and to prevent potential association of the UK in the committing of war crimes.

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), as of 6 February 2024, at least 85 journalists and media workers – 78 Palestinian, 4 Israeli, and 3 Lebanese – have been killed since 7 October 2023, when Hamas-led fighters carried out horrific attacks and hostage-taking in Israel. Four journalists were killed in Hamas' assault on 7 October, and at least 81 journalists have been killed since, almost all of them by the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) according to CPJ. More journalists were killed in Palestine during the first 10 weeks of the hostilities of the Israel-Gaza conflict than have ever been killed in a single country over an entire year since CPJ began tracking journalist killings in 1992. The killing of so many journalists in so brief a period is shocking and horrific. It has obvious and profound implications for the ability of the public, including British citizens, to be informed about a conflict with local, regional, and global implications.

There is growing evidence that, in some cases, the IDF may have deliberately targeted journalists. Credible reports by human rights and media organisations indicate that the IDF strikes in southern Lebanon on 13 October that killed Reuters journalist Issam Abdallah and injured six other journalists from Reuters, Al Jazeera, and Agence France-Presse were unlawful and apparently deliberate.¹ The IDF has also acknowledged deliberately targeting a car in which journalists were travelling on 7 January, killing two journalists and seriously injuring a third. In at least two other cases, journalists reported receiving threats from Israeli officials and IDF officers before their family members were killed in Gaza.

The targeted or indiscriminate killing of journalists, if committed deliberately or recklessly, is a war crime. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has already submitted two complaints to the International Criminal Court regarding suspected war crimes against journalists in Gaza since 7 October, and the Court has confirmed that crimes against journalists will be included in its investigation into the situation in Palestine. The UK Foreign Secretary has acknowledged he is 'worried' that international law may have been broken by Israel during this conflict. However, to our knowledge

¹ The IDF also deliberately targeted journalists before October 7, as in the case of Palestinian American journalist Shireen Abu Akleh, whose killing is the subject of an ongoing Justice Department investigation. See *CPJ report finds no accountability for journalists killed by the Israeli military over the past two decades*, Comm. to Protect Journalists (May 9, 2023).

the British government has not yet issued a public statement regarding the need for further protection of journalists or calling on the IDF to ensure that their troops refrain from targeting journalists. This is of grave concern considering the UK is a crucial founding member of the Media Freedom Coalition and is a signatory to the Coalition's "Statement on the safety of journalists and media workers in conflict", which called for 'all parties to the conflict to comply with international law and guarantee the protection of journalists and media workers'.

Journalists reporting on the war contend with challenges beyond the ever-present risk of death. These challenges include the refusal of Israel and Egypt to allow international journalists access to Gaza except under Israeli military escort (and, even then, with restrictions on reporting),² internet shutdowns that prevent news and testimonies from Gaza from reaching the outside world, arbitrary detention, and harassment and intimidation. In addition, the Israeli government is requiring media outlets in Israel to submit almost any detailed reporting on the war to its "Censorship" office for review, while banning reporting on significant topics of public interest related to the war. It has also acted against its domestic press, for example, by threatening to retaliate against the country's oldest newspaper, *Haaretz*, for its coverage of the war, as well as threatening to shut down local bureau offices of foreign news agencies.

The United Kingdom has a long record of strong support for Israel, including military aid, and is clearly one of Israel's most influential partners. As such, the United Kingdom will be judged on how it has used that influence to ensure that all parties to the conflict abide by international law. Integral to this is the protection of journalists, not only because journalists are civilians, but also because they play an indispensable role in documenting and reporting on war crimes and other human rights violations.

We believe that the British government can and must do more to effectively pursue accountability for journalists killed in the hostilities and to protect and support local and international journalists covering them. Our call echoes those of others to your government, including 30 MPs, that more must be done to protect press freedom. The United Kingdom should use its considerable influence with the Israeli government to press them to ensure that journalists are able to safely document military operations and to shed light on their compliance with international humanitarian law.

We urge you to act immediately and decisively to ensure that all the parties respect the rights of journalists to report on the conflict. In particular, we ask you to:

- Publicly call on all parties to the armed conflict to respect the right of journalists to report on the hostilities, ensure journalists' safety, allow all journalists seeking to evacuate from Gaza to do so, abjure the indiscriminate and deliberate killing of

² A small number of journalists have entered Gaza whilst embedded with the Israeli military on very short visits that offer a limited and curated view of the war, and a CNN correspondent briefly reported from inside Gaza after entering with an Emirati aid group. See Patrick Kingsley *A Glimpse Inside A Devastated Gaza*, New York Times (Jan. 9, 2024)

- journalists, promptly and thoroughly investigate all attacks on journalists, and hold accountable individuals found to be responsible for them.
- Demand that Israel and Egypt provide international journalists with access to Gaza, and that Israel cease communication blackouts and take whatever steps are necessary to assure the safety of journalists admitted to Gaza as well as those already working there.
 - Conduct thorough, transparent, and public assessments of the end-use of UK weapons and military assistance to Israel in the course of the hostilities to ensure/evaluate compliance with UK law or regulations, international law, and civilian protection responsibilities.
 - Demand that Israel allow the passage of personal protective equipment and materials used for newsgathering, such as helmets, flak jackets, phone chargers, eSIM cards, and laptops, to reporters in Gaza and the West Bank.
 - Support swift, transparent, and independent investigations into the killing of all journalists and an end to the longstanding pattern of impunity in the killings of journalists by the IDF.
 - Publicly call for the immediate cessation of hostilities in order to protect all civilians affected by the ongoing conflict.

Thank you for your attention to these matters.

Respectfully,

ARTICLE 19

Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)

English PEN

Irish PEN/PEN na hÉireann

National Union of Journalists (NUJ)

PEN International

Reporters Without Borders (RSF)

Scottish PEN

Wales PEN Cymru

cc. The Right Hon Lord Cameron and Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon
