

# Protecting Journalists

These days journalists struggle hard to imagine a future because in most cases they are trapped by integrity and in -security. They are dying. They are dying everywhere in situations of armed conflict. Also they die in cross-fire. A recent press release issued by the Press Emblem Campaign (PEC) says 106 journalists die per year while on duty. In other words two per week. What a horrific scenario for a noble profession. Muaid al-Lami, head of Iraq's national journalists' union and co-founder of the PEC, announced after escaping the second assassination bid on his life on March 21, that the number of journalists killed in Iraq since March 2003 stands at 301. Maybe it is a kind of record in itself. And the number of journalists killed throughout the world while carrying out their duties is 411 since June 2006. More they talk about press freedom, more journalists get killed, sometimes simply for exercising their freedom of opinion.

Meanwhile the UN Human Rights Council a few weeks back adopted a resolution expressing concern at the large and increasing number of deaths and injuries among members of the press in armed conflict, decided to convene a panel discussion at its 14th session to be held in a week or two on the issue of how to protect journalists in conflict zones. Many see the Council Resolution as a tribute to the commitment and hardwork of journalists all over the world and to those who have fallen in the line of duty. The Council itself describes it as an attempt, long overdue, to uphold and expand the freedom of the press and the freedom of opinion and expression. UN Resolutions are fine because they mostly remain on paper. Given the unipolar nature of the world, particularly after the demise of Soviet Russia in 1991, UN has lost much of its relevance and resilience in recent years. That UN in the absence of any counter-weight is being increasingly utilised as a US rubber stamp is a hard reality. Even in areas free from armed conflict, journalists face trouble if reports go against the powers that be. This happens in the so-called democracies, let alone military regimes.

For exposing assassinations or 'targeted killings' of non-combatant Palestinian political opponents by Israeli under cover units, an Israeli journalist has come under house arrest while another lives abroad for fear of being arrested by Israel's notorious domestic intelligence agency—the Shin Bet. And now the world knows the incident because Britain's *Independent* broke the news a few days ago.

In truth press freedom is a myth. Nearer home how journalists are being held down and pressurised not to reflect on what is actually happening in Dantewada in the state of Chattisgarh is a case in point. They are not allowed to enter the conflict zones in Chattisgarh and report on the real face of the world's biggest showcase of democracy. And in marxist Bengal press people are not permitted to talk to victims of police atrocities in Lalgarh otherwise known as a floating maoist territory. Even if somehow someone by breaking the security cordon, manages to file a report on the ongoing civil war—an area of armed conflict in UN parlance—threat to his life may be the immediate reward. Journalists are supposed to be key witnesses who document from the field gross human rights abuses when

conflicts turn to guns and bullets to settle disputes. So it is better not to allow those witnesses to exercise their freedom of expression!

Human Rights activists themselves, not to speak of journalists, find it increasingly difficult to have democratic space to express their freedom of opinion. Even in regions where 'maoist menace' does not exist they are not allowed to function normally. People's Tribunal, conducted by eminent citizens, is being dubbed as 'Kangaroo court' which it is not. It's now part of democratic tradition that strengthens democratic institutions. One of India's premier people's tribunals dates back to 1917 when Gandhiji organised it in support of jute mill workers in Uttar Pradesh's Champaran. In the recent past 'people's tribunals were organised against fake encounters in Srinagar and Imphal, against arbitrary hike in the price of power in Hyderabad and much more recently on Operation Green Hunt in New Delhi. It is one of the most tested democratic practices, getting ever increasing acceptance and popularity in society. But not here—in India. Because self-proclaimed democrats, Gandhian and non-Gandhian alike, get panicked with the slightest possibility of being unmasked.

It may be a futile exercise in escapism as to how to define the freedom of journalists when so many people are suffering so much in so many areas.

For one thing journalists and human rights activists like the victims of armed conflict are shaken, blooded, frightened and weary—but not exhausted yet. Geneva conventions are there but nobody is interested in observing the Geneva code in War. Human Rights groups view the UN Human Rights Council resolution which was presented by Egypt and co-sponsored by 21 countries as a milestone that will create a momentum and progress to boost the global issue of the protection of journalists in armed conflicts. But journalists will have no respite from the life and death situation unless their cause is backed by popular mass movement. □□□