

## Calcutta Notebook

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JOURNALISTS ARE DYING. THEY are dying in situations of armed conflict. A recent press release issued by the Press Emblem Campaign (PEC) says 106 journalists die per year while discharging their duties. Muqjad al-Lami, head of Iraq's national journalists' union and co-founder of 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 an all time record of sort, after World War II. Then the number of journalists killed worldwide while investing in the fields is said to be 411 since 2006. Meanwhile UN Human Rights Council adopted a resolution expressing concern at the large and increasing number of deaths and injuries among members of the press in conflict zones and convened a panel discussion at its 14th session on the issue of how to protect journalists in armed conflict. The Council exercise is in reality a tribute to the commitment and hard work 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 to uphold and expand the freedom of the press and the freedom of opinion and expression. But Council's exercise is related to armed conflict situations only.

The hard fact is that even in peaceful time journalists face trouble at the place of service and death if reporting goes against the vested interests. This happens everywhere, even in the so-called matured democracies—where freedom of press is constitutionally recognised.

For exposing assassination or 'targeted killings' of non-combatant Palestinian political opponents by Israeli undercover units, an Israeli journalist, of late, has come under house arrest while another lives abroad for fear of detention by Israeli's notorious intelligence agency—the Shin Bet. Due to a military order, the news has remained suppressed even as Israeli journalists fight the suppression order legally in court. And now the world knows the event because Britain's *Independent* broke the news only a few weeks back.

For one thing Israel promotes a profoundly racist view of the Palestinians and enforces a system of land apartheid. It is the only member of the United Nations that is an apartheid state, but anyone who criticises what it is doing to the Palestinians is called anti-Semite or Jew-hater. Disproportionate part of the western media coverage of anti-Semitism concentrated on tarring critics of Israeli's action against the Palestinians with any unpleasant label.

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 is a case in point. They are not allowed to enter the conflict zones in Chattisgarh. Then press people are not officially permitted to talk to the victims of police atrocities in West Bengal in junglemahal otherwise known as floating maoist territory. Even if somehow one manages to file a report on the on-going civil war in "red corridor" it may be politely killed at the desk because big media is controlled by big business against which the maoist offensive is raging. Journalists are

supposed to be key witnesses who document from the field gross human rights abuses when conflicts turn to gun and bullets to settle disputes.

In today's India human rights bodies themselves are increasingly becoming targets of the security establishment. In almost all states, even where 'maoist threat' does not exist, they are not allowed to function freely. People's tribunals are being dubbed as "Kangaroo Courts" though it is part of a democratic tradition. 'One of India's first people's tribunals was organised way back in 1917 when Gandhiji in support of jute mill workers in Champaran protested against unfair taxes on the indigo crop levied by the British.' 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 very recently on 'Operation Green Hunt' in New Delhi. It has been one of the most accepted practices by civil society people to air grievances against the establishment since the days of historic Russel Tribunal against Vietnam War in the seventies.

If journalists are not allowed to function without being haunted by fear-psychosis in conflict zones as also in non-conflict zones, the myth of press freedom will remain a myth even in advanced democracies, not to speak of fascist variant of third world democracy, as it is in Sri Lanka. □□