

Forum: Human Rights Council

Issue: The question of press freedom and journalists rights in conflict zones and authoritarian regimes

Student Officer: Tvesha Kumar

Position: Deputy Chair

Introduction

Our world relies on information as a powerful source. Journalists represent the freedom of speech and expression in our world. They are the voice of news for the people as they serve as a bridge between the people in power (world leaders etc) and the common populace. The pressing issue is that journalists do not experience their basic human rights in authoritarian regimes and conflict zones. They are faced with censorship of their work. They are threatened and faced with death threats in many situations. Hence, they cannot report the truth in these cases most of the time, which is taking away the basic human right of freedom of speech. This is because in both these areas, there are no legal protections or frameworks established to protect journalists' themselves as well as the integrity of their work.

In authoritarian regimes, conditions for journalists are both dangerous and prove to be a major violation of their human rights. Their work is almost always censored and they are faced with persecution as well as death threats. For example, in Russia, a law was passed in 2022 when they were at war with Ukraine. This law completely restricts press freedom and it punishes those journalists who report from a different point of view, with up to 15 years in prison. No journalists have freedom to write the truth of what they see and understand because the restrictions on their work and what the media is allowed to publish are numerous in such authoritarian countries. This puts journalists at complete mercy of the government and what the government wants published. They are controlled by the state by manipulation and fear. Authoritarian regimes have harsh and difficult penalties for any journalists who dare to express their views in any other way than the state would like the information to be presented. There is also no accountability for missing journalists, abused journalists.

Furthermore in conflict zones, they are faced with similar threats. They are at complete risk of death from enemies. They are caught in the crossfire with no adequate protection. In the Israel-Gaza war alone, 131 media workers were killed. They don't have any support in these areas and this is a key issue

because it is causing them great physical and mental harm. According to [UNESCO](#) in such zones, media infrastructure is destroyed, journalists' equipment is confiscated, they are banned from visiting the premises, they face physical attacks and detention. Due to this many of them are forced to leave or comply with the information that they are forced to present. This not only takes away journalists' own right to voice their opinions, it also gives biased and sometimes untrue information to general society. This undermines their human right to be informed about all situations and unravels the fabric of democratic values.

Definition of Key Terms

Journalism

The act of gathering, preparing and sharing information by writing or broadcasting news to the public. There are various forms of the media they share their information in, including; magazines, newspapers, books, blogs, television, radio and many more.

Censorship

Censorship is the barring or suppression of information including books, public communication, speech, news and more. It is usually concerned with things that are obscene, a threat to security or are politically unacceptable.

Authoritarian regimes

Regimes where power is completely centered in a single leader or a small elite group who take decisions without consideration of the peoples' wills. It is a non democratic government. The government systems have no established procedure to transfer the power. Furthermore, these regimes do not allow citizens political rights or [civil liberties](#).

Conflict zones

Conflict zones are regions with a war or political instability that leads to a disruption in many essential services like sanitation, healthcare, water etc. They are identified with the existence of widespread violence, armed forces and risks of harm to the citizens.

Freedom of speech

The right to express one's ideas and opinions without restraint, censorship or legal actions taken against them. The idea that one can express their ideas freely without fear of repercussion given most often by the government.

Background Information

Journalists do not have access to basic human rights in conflict zones and authoritarian regimes as they do not have the freedom to publish the truth. They are always in danger in such zones, whether it be psychological danger, physical danger or digital danger. They are exposed to harsh realities, with the intention of sharing their stories with the world. The unfortunate reality is that in conflict zones and authoritarian regimes, most of them never get to express them.

In conflict zones, journalists are supposed to be neutral third party organisations that should be treated like innocent civilians. However, the truths that they reveal shed bad light on some parties causing them to be targeted. This can be seen in the case of Christsian Amanpour, a famous journalist who did a lot of war reporting. When covering the Bosnian war story, her fellow journalists were targeted in front of her eyes and her close coworker was terribly injured. In her hotel, a bomb landed two doors from her room showing her immense threat to safety, and the cost that comes with doing her job. She also received countless death threats from the government and other entities who weren't happy with the news she was publishing. Moreover, as explained above, the example of the Israel-Gaza war shows the danger the journalists are in. In this Israel-Gaza war, Israel labelled six journalists as terrorists because they were publishing the truth of the war situation. All the journalists were all killed in deliberate air strikes, or by sustaining life threatening injuries. This shows the physical attacks on the people who are trying to voice their opinion showing their complete lack of human rights. The idea that millions of journalists are in such dangerous situations every day highlights how dire the situation is. The issue is that those voices who are bringing the truth to the public are silenced, taking away citizens rights' to know the truth about their nations.

Countless journalists have died or disappeared after writing controversial or different articles. For example, Kenji Goto (a well known journalist in the middle east) wrote a controversial article and the government in the middle east beheaded him and live streamed it for the general public to see. This served as both a warning and a major threat which would instill a certain fear in the other journalists' when they are reporting the news. In Myanmar, the government has no tolerance for the Muslims, labelled as Rohingya men. Two journalists by the names of Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo were arrested simply for

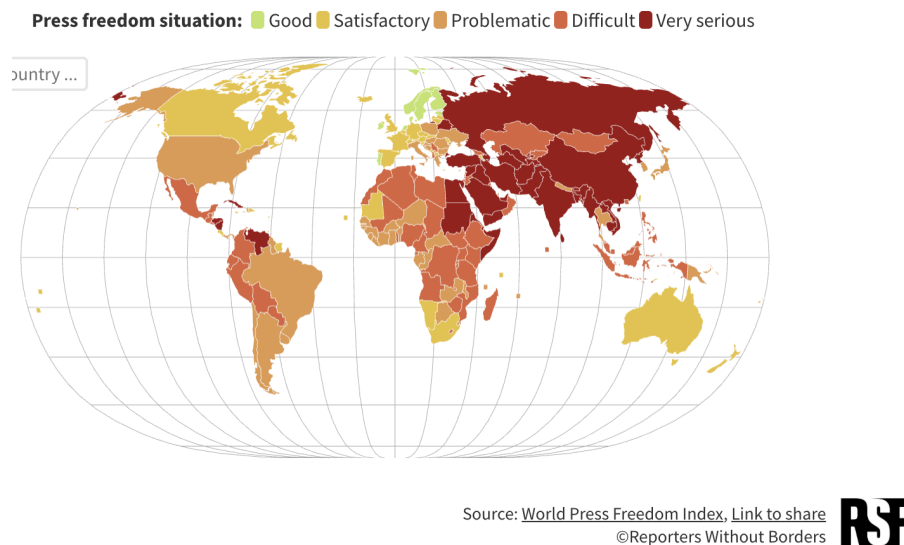
investigating 10 Rohingya men's deaths. This shows the ways authoritarian countries silence criticism, highlighting the general culture of authoritarian regimes as very controlling and dedicated to a strong public image. To give journalists freeway to publish and reveal truths that shed bad light on the governments, will cause the citizens to question their absolute power, so in order to uphold the power they find ways to silence those journalists who question their authority serving as a silent warning to anyone else who tries. In today's world, the spread of disinformation is very prevalent and authoritarian leaders are silencing journalists and media workers by attacking them in order to sow public distrust. According to the [OHCHR](#), it is crucial to have critical independent journalism in this day and age that is created for the public interest. The decline of this is proving to be a major attack on media freedom.

Furthermore, women journalists are more targeted in such regions as they are facing an increasing number of offline and online attacks. They are exposed to gender based violence in the form of physical assault, stigmatisation, trolling, rape and murder. They are the ones who are most at risk here, highlighting the underlying issue of gender inequality as well. The authoritarian regimes and conflict zones use women as easy targets by threatening them which causes lack of incentive for them to work. They also stigmatise them which further embeds the gender bias in society causing citizens to doubt the credibility of the work, achieving the government's goals to manipulate and control the flow of information. The toll on their mental health is a lot greater than the men's because they are harassed and stigmatized a lot more. This takes away not only their freedom of speech but also their passion and ability to do their job.

Research from [The Time](#) shows that labelling journalists as terrorists is a common technique used by governments and especially authoritarian governments. This way, journalists are targeted and the government can get away with crimes against them in order to silence their voices. It causes great confusion in the readers and causes them to doubt the credibility of the sources, which highlights the manipulation of information done by governments in such regimes.

Furthermore, in this day and age, cyber attacks on journalists' and the press are becoming increasingly frequent which simply exacerbates the main issue. They have become main targets for the use of spyware, malware and digital surveillance which compromises both their personal safety as well as their sources' safety. Some governments have tried to take away encryption on secure platforms like Whatsapp which exposes new software vulnerabilities. Moreover, the use of spyware has been proven to be linked to multiple physical violence acts around the world. In one instance, TikTok employees tracked a UK journalist and her sources showing how common apps like TikTok, can prove dangerous to a

journalist's safety and privacy. Some other key threats posed by digital devices are location tracking, hardware exploits, disinformation, hacking of sources and many more. There have been multiple cyber attacks with the use of generative AI, which is being used to imitate journalists' likeness and overall proves to be a hazard to digital privacy and security. Aside from the fact that these cyber attacks harm the journalists both mentally and physically, they also erode trust in the media corporations, which can damage business models and push people away from reading the news. Thus achieving the goal of the government or third party actor to manipulate and control the flow of news.



This chart shows how the press freedom situation is either very serious or difficult in authoritarian regimes particularly, or conflict zones. Hence, proving where the main source of the problem lies.

Therefore, press freedom and journalistic rights are currently at a major risk in authoritarian regimes and conflict zones showing a decline in human rights for society as a whole, making it a pressing issue that needs to be addressed.

Causes

Lack of accountability

There is great concern about press freedom and journalistic rights and one of the main causes of this is that there is no accountability for any acts against journalists. The impunity of crimes against journalists has become the norm. Between 2013 and 2023, greater than 260 journalists were killed. In about 80% of the cases, no one was held accountable. The majority of the murders were unresolved. This emboldens any criminals or would-be criminals because they know that they can get away with their agenda against journalists, further increasing the danger that they are

in. In authoritarian regimes, it is often the government suppressing the journalist voice by killing them, and since no one can act against the government or speak out against them, for fear of facing the same fate, there is no accountability for their actions which means the danger to journalists will remain. Furthermore, this impunity also creates greater fear in journalists causing them to self censor their work to meet the requirements of those in power, so they are not targeted. This lessens the credibility of their work and instills a deep fear in journalists that prevents them from expressing themselves and doing their work with passion. Hence, if entities will continue to not be held accountable for their crimes against journalists in both authoritarian regimes and conflict zones, journalistic rights and press freedom will never be achieved.

Censorship of their work

Journalists' work is censored around the world but it is very prominent in authoritarian regimes and conflict zones. If journalist's are threatened to keep quiet about some facts, they have no control or say in their own work. They are constantly at risk. They are also coerced and manipulated in ways that violate their human rights. The idea that they are not allowed to publish information is the core reason for why they have no access to their rights. If they don't follow this, they are punished for simply doing their job and sharing their research with the world, showing the dire consequences of censorship of information on journalists' rights.

Individual interests of major parties, organisations and governments

In both conflict zones and authoritarian regimes, press freedom is greatly restricted because individual entities or governments only want certain information to be published. In authoritarian regimes, the government controls the media flow because they want complete control of the citizens which cannot be achieved if citizens have access to information, particularly controversial information that can put them in a bad light. The government has all the power and in order to maintain that power, whatever information is being shared needs to be controlled by them. This unfairly controls and suppresses media workers. If a media worker reports anything besides the interest of the government they are at major risk because they are at the complete mercy of powerful parties and entities like the government. Similarly, in conflict zones, some countries or organisations involved do not want news of what's happening on the battlefield to get out for their own personal interests, which puts journalists at major risks. This is because in order to maintain their power, they find ways to silence the journalist's voices. Through this, it is clear how those

with power manipulate and control the flow of information, and the danger this puts the journalists in.

Major Countries and Organisations Involved

United Nations, Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO)

UNESCO focuses on addressing and understanding the issue of journalistic rights as they have partnered with other organisations and already begun to create initiatives. They are leading the UN plan of action on the safety of journalists, and have made some progress in the last 10 years. They research and focus on the safety of journalists. Their goal is to make journalism safe and they advocate for the citizens basic human rights of freedom of speech and the power of true, unbiased information.

International Federation of Journalists (IFJ)

IFJ is the organisation that speaks for journalists. It is the world's largest organisation of journalists where they represent 600,000 media workers from 140 countries in the world. Their goal is to promote action to defend freedom of the press, human rights and democracy. They have established an International safety fund that helps those journalists in need by providing humanitarian aid for them. They advocate for change when it comes to press freedom and do a lot of research into the situation of journalistic rights.

Reporters without borders

Reporters without borders is an international non-profit organisation that has created the Declaration on the safety of journalists. They have worked with the ICRC and other international leaders to establish it. Their general work is supporting journalists. They have launched numerous initiatives to aid those journalists working in conflict zones. These include providing bulletproof vests and helmets, training for reporters going to war zones and a free press helpline for those journalists in trouble. They have also collaborated with UNESCO to create a Handbook for journalists that go to dangerous parts of the world with advice on safety and the international laws that protect them. They are focused on the freedom and independence of journalism as well as defending those who showcase these ideals. They have created protocols and done research on this issue and have been successful on many occasions.

Russia

Russia follows an authoritarian regime and has imposed many restrictions on journalists. They have created laws like the jailing of journalists in 2022, which completely proves the unsafety and unfairness of journalists' situations in authoritarian regimes like Russia. According to a report by the Reporters without borders, over the last two years, between 1500-1800 Russian journalists were forced to go to exile and 30 journalists are currently in prison simply because of their reporting. When it comes to the press freedom index, Russia is ranked 164th out of 180 countries showing their complete lack of press freedom. An American journalist reporting in Russia by the name Evan Gershkovich was arrested and after investigations, Russia had no concrete proof or reason to arrest him. Hence, Russia's stance as an authoritarian nation is clear on the restriction of press freedom and journalistic rights.

Israel

Israel has been responsible for silencing multiple journalists' voices in the recent ongoing Israel-Palestine war. In this war, more than 131 journalists were killed but not all of them were intentional. Recent discovery from the Time shows that Israel labelled 6 Al Jazeera journalists as terrorists and killed them all. The Israeli Defense force claimed that these six are conspiring with Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, based on some documents that they allegedly discovered in Gaza. Multiple international media organisations tried to speak up about the injustice because there was no solid proof and journalists are not terrorists, simply people reporting about the truth. Their aim is to conceal the happenings of North Gaza by silencing those journalists' voices. Numerous investigations have also shown that Israel has been responsible for killing multiple journalists in the past by air strikes, and by being shot directly by soldiers. Journalist's have claimed to be threatened by the Israeli Defense Force and their family members have been killed. They are at major risk in the conflict zone. Hence, Israel's stance on journalists' rights and press freedom is one of suppressing them and restricting what they can report in order to stop the truths of the war from being shared.

Norway

Norway ranks number 1 in the world on the press freedom index. They have advocated for change and are very focused on journalistic rights. They have established an extremely strong legal framework for safeguarding journalists. The environment they work in is generally safe, with very few cases of harassment reported. Their laws guarantee freedom of expression and the public's right to unbiased information and this is maintained and protected by various laws. The state and society are open to all media forms resulting in a country with a very inclusive and free environment for journalists.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
1950s to 1960s	The press in the civil rights movement- The news coverage of events like the March on Washington and the Montgomery Bus boycott exposed the inequality and brutality of the time, bringing it to the forefront of national attention.
August 1974	The Watergate scandal- A key political scandal where there was a break-in at the Democratic National Committee headquarters and it was covered up by the president. Two journalists from the Washington post investigated it and President Nixon resigned, showcasing the power of the press in influencing and holding the government accountable.
1987	The Fairness Doctrine was abandoned by the Federal Communication Commission- This doctrine required broadcasters who discussed controversial viewpoints to share alternate viewpoints. By removing the doctrine the accuracy and objectivity of news was reduced causing it to be more political and one-sided.
1990-1991	The Persian Gulf war was the first war to ever be broadcasted on live TV. It was the first war that was shown to the rest of the world highlighting the growth in journalism.
January 15th 2007	The Apple iPhone is launched. This was a turning point for mobile journalism as it enabled real time reporting and live streaming from countless different places. It also created the issue of citizen journalism.
July 12th 2007	A platform called WikiLeaks published a classified US military video which displayed the murder of innocent civilians and journalists in Iraq, at the hands of the American military. This changed the conversation about press freedom and provided clear evidence regarding the dangers journalists face in war zones.
November 30th, 2022	Open AI released Chat GPT. AI was used to assist journalists with research, fact checking and writing, highlighting its potential to expand the industry. At the same time it posed ethical concerns about deep fakes and plagiarism which proves to be a major issue regarding journalism today.
7th October 2023 till this date	The beginning of the Israel-Palestine war, where nearly 131 media workers were killed when reporting in the conflict zones and numerous were gravely injured showing a major threat to their safety.

Relevant UN Treaties and Events

- Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 10 December 1948 (**General Assembly resolution 217 A**)
- Article 19, 6, 7, 9, 17, 14 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 19 December 1966 (**Resolution 2200A XXI**)
- Human Rights Council Resolution on the Safety of Journalists, 2012 (**A/HRC/RES/21/12**)
- Human Rights Council Resolution on Freedom of opinion and expression, 2022 (**A/HRC/RES/50/15**)
- UN General Assembly Resolution on the safety of journalists and the issue of impunity, 2023 (**A/RES/78/215**)

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity

This action plan created by the UN is organised by UNESCO and aims to address the fundamental aspects of journalistic and press freedom which are protection, prevention and prosecution. They focus on providing journalists with holistic support addressing their mental, physical and digital safety. They support journalists in exile and provide lifesaving humanitarian assistance to those caught in conflict zones. They have established protective equipment for journalists (particularly in conflict zones) and safety numbers in order to increase the level of security of the press in such dire situations. They also facilitate training workshops that educate journalists about risk assessment, safety protocols, digital safety and conflict reporting. They have organised a World press freedom day on 3rd May to spread greater awareness about the issue. The UN's programme has already been implemented in Afghanistan, Yemen, Haiti and the journalists' in the Israel- Gaza war, showing the wide reach of the programme.

Forbidden stories

Forbidden stories is a non-profit news organisation that investigates the murder and the jailing of journalists. It was established in 2017 by Lauren Richard, an award winning journalist. The motto of Forbidden Stories is, "Killing the journalist won't kill the story." They collaborate with international partners to conduct such investigations. Furthermore, they have a secure communication channel which helps journalists send sensitive or confidential information. This is their "SafeBox Network," where those journalists who feel at risk can send documents to a secure location where their stories are protected. If

something happens to these journalists, these stories will still be protected by the organisation, keeping the integrity of their work intact. They play an important role in preserving key stories in order to maintain press freedom and ensure the accountability of abuses against journalists.

The Geneva Convention and their Additional protocols

The Geneva Convention are international treaties that protect the third parties in wars, such as journalists. The original Geneva convention made in 1864 was designed to protect wounded soldiers during wartime. Now it includes additional protocols which take care of people not taking part in the war including health workers, civilians, wounded etc. The protocols and conventions highlight measures to prevent all breaches in security. If there are any grave breaches, those who commit them are faced with strict consequences, regardless of their nationality. Their protocols are very clear and ensure clear accountability. Overall, their goal is to protect those neutral third party organisations in the war like journalists, proving to be a strong treaty to safeguard the rights of journalists.

Possible Solutions

1. Embed safety courses into journalism schools' safety curriculum- It is important to train journalists how to handle dire situations by embedding it into their university training. This will include things like risk assessments, basic personal defense, first aid training, planning for situations etc. These aspects in the curriculum will protect the journalists on one level from external threats.
2. Establish clear, legal frameworks protecting journalists in conflict zones - Reinforce treaties like the Geneva Conventions and strengthen international laws to protect the safety and security of the press when reporting in the war. There should be harsh penalties incorporated should the laws not be followed.
3. Increase digital safety- As established, cyber attacks are increasingly frequent on journalists' and most current software is not sufficient against the spyware and surveillance of sabotaging parties. Hence, it is important to develop safer and stronger encryption, collaboration with technology companies to establish and develop human rights safeguards for journalists in order to maintain journalists digital safety and privacy.
4. Establish a dedicated task force from the UN which is focused on journalistic safety in these areas as well as addressing the impunity of crimes against them- This task force should have well trained professionals to provide support and aid to journalists' when needed. They should establish

a safe accessible communication channel for journalists to report and share their views and concerns.

5. Increase accountability- The UN should have a dedicated team to investigate the jailing and murder of journalists in order to hold those perpetrators accountable and create a stronger foundation for journalistic safety- have severe penalties imposed on them inclusive of jail time and heavy sanctions.
6. Spread awareness about the issue- Use UN funding to create NGO initiated talks and programmes raising awareness about human rights issues for journalists in conflict zones and authoritarian regimes, creating a mobilized and unionized public which will have the power to incite change in society.

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Appendix or Appendices

- i. <https://www.unesco.org/en/safety-journalists/safety-journalists-crisis>
- ii. <https://humanrightsfirst.org/library/silencing-the-truth-the-global-crisis-of-press-freedom-and-journalist-safety/>
- iii. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/stories/2022/07/un-expert-warns-dangerous-decline-media-freedom>