

INSI

INTERNATIONAL NEWS SAFETY INSTITUTE

Killing the Messenger 2021

An analysis of news media casualties carried out for
the International News Safety Institute by Cardiff
School of Journalism



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Every one of the fifty-six journalists' deaths in 2021 is a personal tragedy but also an indictment for the country that failed to stop it.

– Elena Cosentino, INSI director



Cover: A media personnel pays homage to Reuters journalist Danish Siddiqui in Chennai, India, after the Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer was killed covering fighting between Afghan security forces and the Taliban near a border crossing with Pakistan on July 16. © Arun Sankar / AFP; This page: Palestinian demonstrators and journalists run from tear gas fired by Israeli security forces during a protest along a border fence in the Gaza Strip on August 25. © Mahmud Hams / AFP

Foreword from our Director

Every year at INSI we publish the grim total of journalist deaths around the world. Yet, from the remotest town in Afghanistan, to the heart of Europe, the casualty number itself is not enough to show the impact of each and every one of these deaths on the societies those journalists were serving through their work.

On the first day of 2021, after visiting family in a village nearby, Bismillah Adel Aimaq and his brother were driving back home to Firozkoh, a remote mountain town, high up on the western slopes of the Hindukush mountain range. At just 28 years of age, the bright and handsome Bismillah was the editor-in-chief of the Voice of Ghor, a local private radio station in a severely underdeveloped mountainous province, almost entirely reliant on agriculture and animal husbandry. In a region where deadly land disputes and marrying off young daughters for cattle are still common, Bismillah's journalism and championing of human rights had earned him repeated death threats, yet no police protection. As the young married journalist drove home, in the afternoon of New Year's Day, a group of gunmen ambushed his car and shot and killed him, still at the wheel. They then fled, leaving behind his unharmed brother and little doubt that this was a targeted assassination. One must stop and think of the devastating impact that such a killing would have had, not only on Bismillah's family and his radio station, but also on a community otherwise so cut off from the rest of the country, let alone the rest of the world. It's hard to imagine many young people in Ghor being willing to follow in Bismillah's steps now, and trying to bring news and progress to their homeland. And who could possibly blame them?

Seven months later, and seven thousand kilometres away, Peter de Vries, the Netherlands' best known crime journalist, was shot five times by a masked gunman, a hitman for a brutal drug syndicate de Vries had taken a stand against. The 64-year-old journalist had just appeared on national television, and was walking back to his car in broad daylight on one of Amsterdam's busiest streets. The country was stunned by the brazenness of the attack, the latest in a series of acts of terror, against both the media and the judiciary, that authorities appear unable to stop, leading to talk of a parallel narco-state. For a country ranking sixth in the World Press Freedom Index, it is extraordinary that today's Dutch crime reporters should feel under threat when they cover certain trials and that newsrooms should feel the need to rotate reporters on a story- to make sure no individual journalist is singled out by the mob.

Every one of the fifty-six journalists' deaths in 2021 is a personal tragedy but also an indictment for the country that failed to stop it. Mexico, for the third year running, came top of the list for journalists'

casualties, with nine colleagues violently killed, in a clear sign that the country's government continues to afford organised crime utter impunity for such attacks. Afghanistan maintained its place as the second deadliest country for journalists. 2021 has also seen the largest loss of life ever among Afghan female journalists. Three were shot in near-simultaneous attacks, possibly orchestrated by IS, while on their way home from work in Jalalabad. The fourth, 23 year old newsreader Mina Khairi, was blown up in her car as she was out shopping with her mother. It is a cruel paradox that this high toll might in fact reflect the growing role women were acquiring in Afghan media and society in general, before the Taliban takeover.

Conflict and civil strife have killed two journalists each in Ethiopia, Myanmar and Azerbaijan and, in the Philippines, the same year in which Maria Ressa shared a hugely deserved Nobel Peace Prize, no less than three of her Filipino colleagues were shot dead.

Fears that the threat posed to journalists by Islamic extremism was spreading to sub-Saharan Africa were confirmed when two seasoned Spanish filmmakers, David Berrián and Roberto Fraile, were killed in an ambush by an IS franchise group in Burkina Faso, while making a documentary about wildlife poachers.

And journalists also lost their lives because of their job in 17 more countries, from India to Nigeria, with the vast majority of these cases not having seen any proper investigation, or legal proceedings whatsoever.

Back in Afghanistan, we mourned the loss of one of our own colleagues, an INSI member. Reuters' Pulitzer prize winning photojournalist Danish Siddiqui was among the best trained, most experienced and better equipped journalists to cover conflict anywhere. But even with the best mitigation measures in place, it is impossible to cover the frontlines of war without any risk. A few weeks before his final and fatal assignment, Danish asked his picture editor at Reuters a rhetorical question "If we don't go, who will?". No story is worth losing one's life but we should all be grateful to those journalists who've stepped up in 2021, to bear witness to injustices small and big, or as in Danish's case, to history in the making.

– Elena Cosentino, INSI director

Country of death



An improvised altar in the place where Mexican radio journalist Jacinto Romero Flores was assassinated in Veracruz state, Mexico on August 19. © Victoria Razo / AFP



Bismillah Adel Aimaq, editor-in-chief of the local Afghan radio station Voice of Ghor, who was shot and killed whilst driving home on New Year's Day. © AJSC (Afghan Journalists Safety Committee).



TOTAL KILLED
56



Spanish airforce personnel carry the coffins of Spanish journalists David Berián and Roberto Fraile, and Irish conservationist Rory Young, who were ambushed by jihadists and killed while working on a wildlife poaching documentary in Burkina Faso in April. © Javier Soriano / AFP



A journalist (3rd L), who was covering a protest against the military coup in Myanmar, receives medical attention after a crackdown on the demonstration by security forces in Yangon on December 5. © STR / AFP



Members of the media applaud as mourners carry the coffin of Alexander Lashkarava, a Georgian cameraman, who died after being beaten by violent anti-LGBTQ+ protestors in Tbilisi on July 5. © Vano Shlamov / AFP

Country of origin



Mexico 9



Pakistan and Philippines 3



India 7



Brazil, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Myanmar, Somalia, Spain and Yemen 2



Afghanistan 6



Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Colombia, Georgia, Guatemala, Haiti, Lebanon, Netherlands, Nigeria, Turkey, Armenia, Greece, Syria and Palestine 1

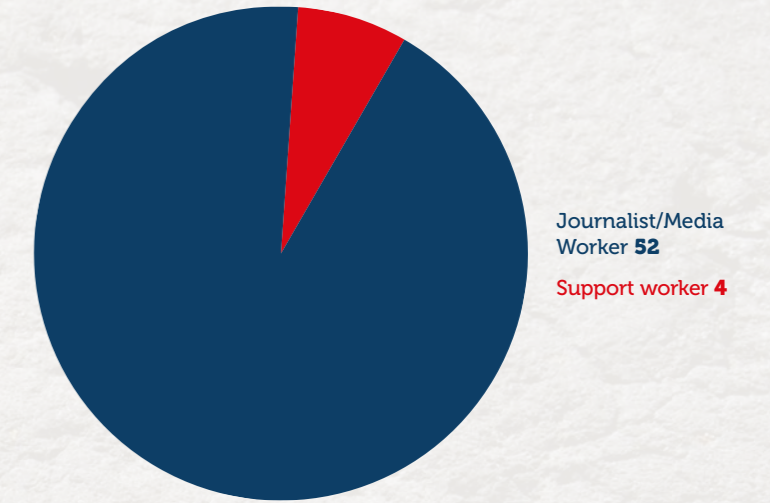


Family members carry the body of Abdiqiz Mohamud Guled, also known as Abdiqiz Afrika, director of Radio Mogadishu. A critic of Islamic militant group al-Shabab, he was killed by a suicide bomber outside a restaurant in Somalia's capital on November 20. © AFP

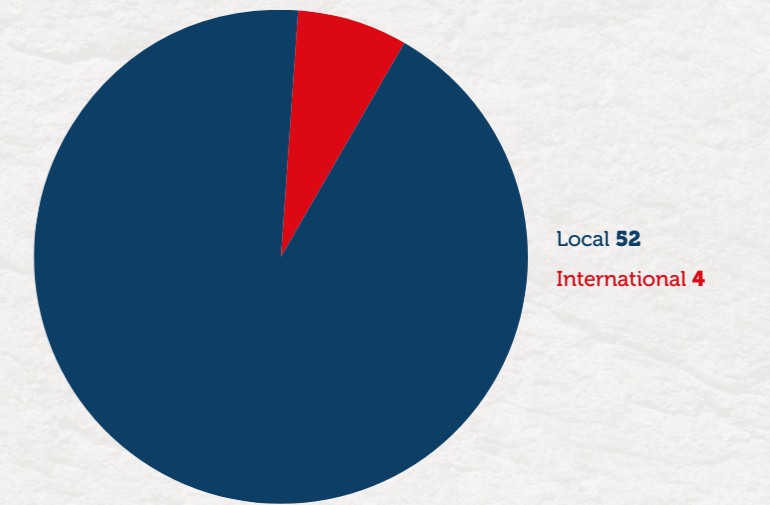
Friends of Mexican radio journalist Jacinto Romero Flores take part in a protest to demand justice for his murder in Veracruz state, Mexico on August 19. © Victoria Razo / AFP



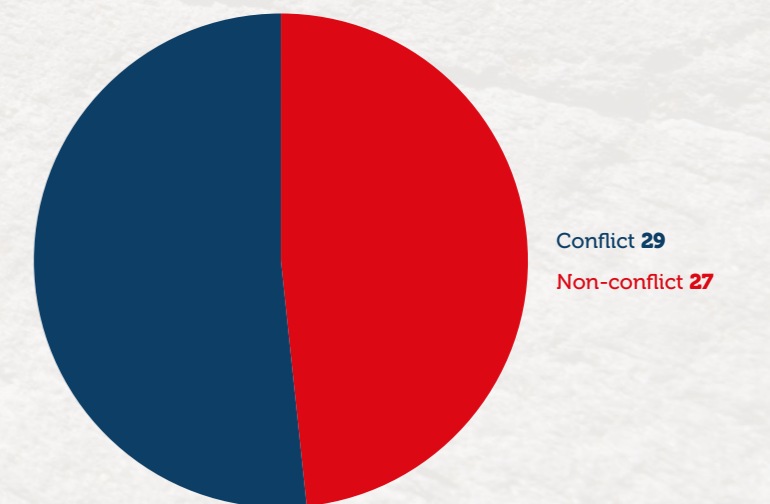
Professional position



Status in country of death



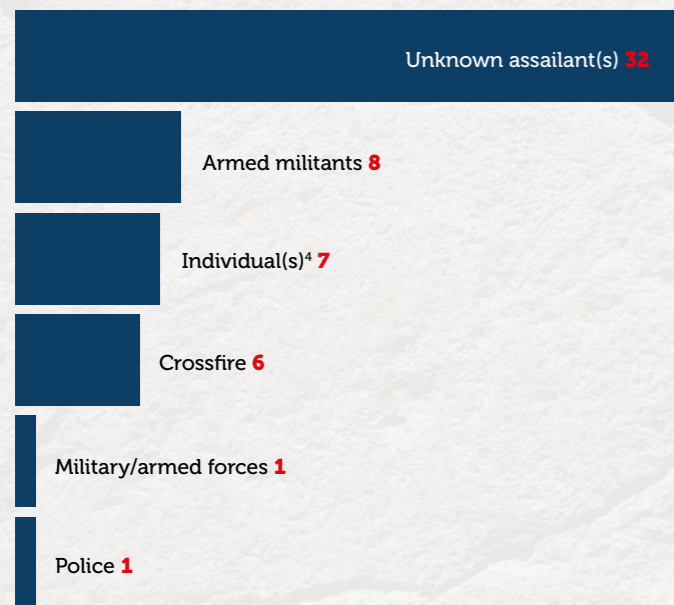
Context of death



Cause of death



Perpetrator³



¹ One burned, one deliberately killed by a car, one killed in prison (details unclear), one body found (details unclear).
² Capsized boat.
³ Accidents are not included.
⁴ Suspects identified and/or arrests made.



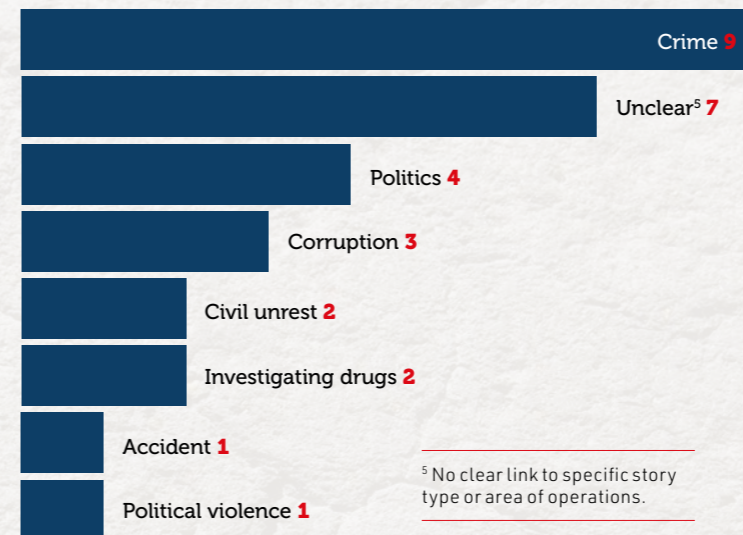
AFP photographer Bulent Kilic addresses the media during a demonstration in Istanbul in June to demand protection for journalists, while protestors behind him hold signs reading 'we can't breathe'. Kilic had been assaulted and arrested by Turkish police days earlier while covering a Pride march in the city. © Yasin Akgul / AFP



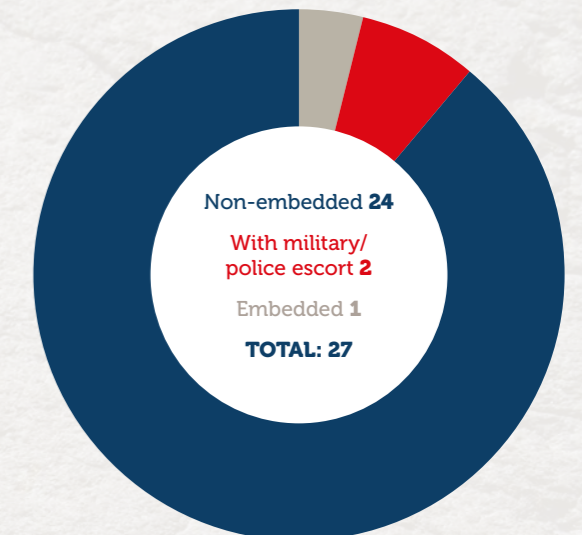
سليح حزب الله على مين
#حزب_الدرطاب

Protesters hold pictures of slain Lebanese columnist and activist Lokman Slim, during a rally in front of the Justice Palace in the capital Beirut, on February 4. © STR / AFP

Deaths unrelated to war reporting

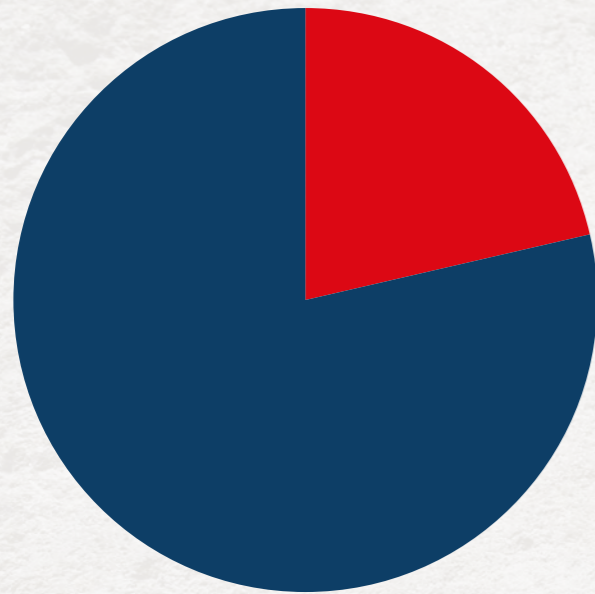


War/conflict zone reporting



Palestinians attend the funeral of journalist Youssef Abu Hussein who was killed when an Israeli strike hit his home north of Gaza City on May 19. © Mohammed Abed / AFP

Legal outcome⁶



No identification + no legal proceedings **37**

Identification⁷ **10**

⁶ This does not include indiscriminate bombings, suicide bombings or crossfire.

⁷ Suspects have been identified or arrests made.



Pieces of broken media equipment in an improvised memorial in Tbilisi for Alexander Lashkarava, a Georgian cameraman who died after being assaulted by violent anti-LGBTQ+ protesters. © Vano Shlamov / AFP



Students take part in a silent march in memory of missing student Tanja Groen and slain crime reporter Peter R. de Vries in Maastricht, on August 31. © Marcel Van Hoorn / ANP / AFP



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Relatives and members of the Syrian Civil Defence service (White Helmets) carry the body of volunteer photographer, Homam Al-Asi, who was killed in a shelling on the village of Sarja in Idlib province, on July 17. © Omar Haj Kadour / AFP

