

Free speech: The global balance

By Alison Bethel-McKenzie

Political repression of pro-democratic journalists throughout the Middle East and North Africa; serial murder of reporters caught up in Latin America's drug wars; constitutional attacks on the media in Europe: free speech faces adversaries worldwide, warns the director of the International Press Institute (IPI).

While popular consciousness is attuned to war correspondents dying in conflict zones that are in the international eye such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and, more recently, Libya, in many places such as Mexico and Honduras, there's another no-less-deadly front line.

It's a front line littered with the bodies of journalists whose by-line may not appear on the pages of the world's most prominent newspapers, and who may not file reports for the world's most prominent broadcasters, but who are no less heroic, no less committed to the cause of gathering and transmitting news to serve the public interest in a country facing a very real, extremely violent, and often deadly conflict.

Make no mistake. The importance of news and the value of accurate information has been highlighted by events in the Middle East and North Africa, where many have stood up to demand democratic reforms despite the threat of imprisonment, assault and death.

The manner in which regimes have sought to suppress these uprisings – mass arrests, torture, assault and outright murder – displays contempt for fundamental human rights.

And the suppression of news about the uprisings has revealed a sinister readiness to rely on censorship and violence to stifle the flow of information and freedom of the press.

In country after country – Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen, Oman, Libya, Syria, and others – we have seen the lengths to which governments will go to conceal information about the size and diversity of demonstrations, and to stop any news of human rights violations and repression from reaching the wider world.

The scenario differs in each country, but a pattern emerges. The same tactics of repression are used over and over again by governments across the Middle East and North Africa and elsewhere in the world.

We have seen efforts to break lines of communication, to prevent foreign reporters from entering a country, or to expel them if they're already there. Other journalists are intimidated, attacked and imprisoned.

In several countries, the authorities' first move was to cut off communications with the outside world – cell phones, the Internet and satellite broadcasts – to stop the spread of political messages, information and images.

In Tunisia, the government tightened control of the Internet. Email accounts and social media profiles were hacked, websites were blocked and blogs were disabled. Facebook, a crucial organizing tool for activists, told reporters that accounts across Tunisia were being hacked, and several bloggers were arrested.

In Egypt, authorities ordered cell phone service providers to stop coverage in certain

areas. The Internet went down in late January, and authorities tried to block access to Al Jazeera by jamming signals from several satellites.

In Libya, particularly in the rebel-held east, cell phone service remains intermittent. The Internet, although not as fundamental an organizing platform, has provided a way for people to share images and news to compete with the narrative of state television, but access has been completely cut off in the east.

In Syria, where most international media are banned and many who were already in the country have been expelled, satellite cell phones and social media provide one of the few ways for mainstream foreign media to reach their sources. But phone lines have been cut, as has electricity, in what appears to be a concerted effort to black out any information on an increasingly brutal and deadly crackdown.

Governments have not just sought to sever the lines of electronic communication; they have also tried to prevent the physical presence of reporters on the ground, denying entry or expelling them from the country.

Journalists who have been able to report on the uprisings have been accused of representing a malign "foreign agenda". Foreign journalists have been barred from accessing certain areas, or have been provided with government minders, supposedly for their own security.

But while these measures are repressive and unacceptable, they pale in comparison to the violent attacks, the deprivation of liberty and even the torture that has been meted out to both foreign and local reporters on the ground.

Hundreds of journalists covering the demonstrations and fighting in several countries have faced harassment, damage to their equipment and worse. Media houses have been raided and equipment confiscated. Journalists have been subjected to arrest and expulsion, and some have been subjected to physical and psychological torture.

In country after country, week after week, the media are threatened and persecuted by those with secrets to hide, who will go to any length to silence the voices of the press and the people. The picture becomes bleaker still when we consider that these are but a small handful of all of the attacks that have been perpetrated against the press recently.

The Americas last year inched closer to becoming the most dangerous region in the world for journalists, with Mexico and Honduras accounting for nearly a quarter of journalists killed in 2010. According to IPI's Death Watch, the region, with 32 deaths, accounted for almost a third of the 102 journalists who died in 2010.

Last year was the second bloodiest since IPI's Death Watch records began in 1997, behind only 2009, which saw 110 deaths. (The IPI's Death Watch includes journalists and media staff who were deliberately targeted because of their profession, or who were caught in the crossfire while covering dangerous assignments or killed during otherwise routine assignments.)

Mexico, which remains locked in a violent standoff between drug cartels and security forces, saw 12 deaths. Honduras, which has seen a spike in killings since the ouster of President Manuel Zelaya in 2009 by a military-backed coup and the subsequent election of Porfirio "Pepe" Lobo Sosa as president, saw 10 deaths.

Only Asia saw more deaths, holding on to its title as the most dangerous region for journalists with 40 deaths. Pakistan, with 16 deaths, was the most dangerous country in Asia, and the world, for journalists last year.

Elsewhere, 15 journalists died in sub-Saharan Africa in 2010, while eight died in the Middle East and North Africa and seven died in Europe.

Although the number of deaths last year represented a drop from 2009's all-time high, it was in some ways worse than previous tallies because no large number could be tied to a major war or a single high-fatality incident.

Almost all of the 12 journalists who died in Mexico in 2010 were murdered, with all but one – whose throat was slit – shot.

Many were also kidnapped and tortured prior to being murdered, like Valentín Valdés Espinosa, a reporter with the Mexican daily *Zócalo Saltillo* in the northeastern state of Coahuila. His body was found with a note addressed to "everyone" warning that "this will happen to anybody who does not understand".

In Honduras, all 10 journalists died in shootings, with most gunned down in their cars or while leaving home or work. Joseph Hernández Ochoa, 24, a journalism student and former entertainment presenter on the privately-owned Canal 51 TV station, was shot more than 20 times in the chest after the car in which he was travelling with another journalist was fired on 36 times by men in another vehicle on an unlit road.

The number of deaths means that four of the last five years have been the deadliest on record for journalists.

In the Americas, as elsewhere across the world, impunity for those who murder, assault, harass and intimidate journalists remained the unacceptable norm.

Even Europe, where liberal democracies enjoy a tradition that values freedom of expression, freedom of the press, that pillar of a free society, is under threat.

In Hungary, a new media law has taken effect that effectively places full regulation and control of the media in the hands of the government.

Critics have noted the law's prescription of media content based on vague concepts, and insufficient guarantees to ensure the independence and impartiality of the regulatory body empowered to apply it. They have also faulted the law's excessive fines and other administrative sanctions that can be imposed on media; its broad scope regulating all types of media, including the press and the Internet; registration requirements for the operation of media service providers; and the lack of sufficient protection of journalistic sources.

In Italy, the media is consolidated in the hands of the few, and journalists accused of defamation can face debilitating fines or, even worse, criminal charges and the threat of imprisonment.

Turkey, long held up as an example of a healthy Muslim democracy, and which plays a pivotal bridge-building role between east and west, now appears to jail more journalists –

at least 57 and counting – than any other country in the world. The next highest jailers – Iran and China – were estimated in November 2010 to be holding only 34 journalists each in prison.

In the United Kingdom, the rich and famous, in addition to powerful companies, ostensibly in the name of privacy, are able to use their means to convince a handful of judges to issue super-injunctions barring the press from reporting on their transgressions and excesses, or from identifying those who seek such gag orders. In early May, the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg rejected a bid to force media to warn people every time it sought to publish details of their private lives.

Meanwhile, the phone hacking scandal that has engulfed the UK – and subsequent calls for more media regulation – demonstrates how bad journalism and criminal behaviour by reporters can serve as another serious threat to press freedom.

Investigative journalism, embodying the full and enormously important watchdog role of the press in serving the public, must be allowed to continue to thrive.

We must remain vigilant, for the sake of our media here and for the sake of the free media everywhere.