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A lethal way to 'dispatch' the news

In times of war, journalists can serve as vital witnesses for the people of the world. So it's especially sinister when governments take aim at reporters and photographers. A few weeks ago, when I was talking with a CNN cameraman, he recalled an overseas stint to cover events in the West Bank. Anger was evident in his voice: "The Israelis were shooting at us."

When military forces are assaulting civilians, commanders often try to prevent media from telling true stories with pictures and words. Governments that maim and kill civilians are routinely eager to stop journalists from getting too close to the action. Those who persist are vulnerable to retribution.

For a long time now, the U.S. government has been hostile toward the Al-Jazeera television network. Widely watched in the Arab world, Al-Jazeera's coverage of the war on Iraq has been in sharp contrast to the coverage on American television. As Time magazine observed: "On U.S. TV it means press conferences with soldiers who have hand and foot injuries and interviews with POWs' families, but little blood. On Arab and Muslim TV it means dead bodies and mourning."

Back in 2001, with the United States at war in Afghanistan, the Pentagon bombed Al-Jazeera's bureau in Kabul. This year, during the lead-up to the war in Iraq, Al-Jazeera repeatedly informed the U.S. military of the exact coordinates of the network's office in downtown Baghdad.

On April 8, a U.S. missile hit that Al-Jazeera office, taking the life of Tareq Ayub, a 34-year-old Jordanian journalist. A coincidence? Accident? I don't think so.

The same day, a U.S. tank fired a shell at the Palestine Hotel, where most foreign journalists have been based lately in Baghdad. The assault killed Taras Protsyuk of the Reuters news agency and Jose Couso of the Spanish network Telecinco.

Explanations from the Pentagon have not been credible. "U.S. Central Command first said troops came under fire from the (hotel) lobby, while the field commander said whatever fire had been headed toward his troops was wiped out with a single tank round into the upper floors of the hotel," the AFX news agency reported. "But after a

journalist questioned why the tank shot the upper floors when fire had come from the lobby, Central Command issued a revised statement saying there had been 'significant enemy fire.'"

However, the journalists who were eyewitnesses flatly contradicted that claim, saying no weapons fire had emanated from the hotel. "There was no shooting at all," said French TV cameraman Herve De Ploeg. "Then I saw the turret turning in our direction and the carriage lifting. It faced the target." He insisted: "It was not a case of instinctive firing."

The U.S. government's response has been to scold journalists for trying to do their jobs. "We continue to warn news organizations about the dangers," said the Pentagon's Victoria Clarke, who added: "We've had conversations over the last couple of days, news organizations eager to get their people unilaterally into Baghdad. We are saying it is not a safe place, you should not be there."

The key word in Clarke's statement was "unilaterally" -- as opposed to "embedded" with U.S. troops. Decoding the Pentagon's message to journalists isn't too difficult: If you don't play by our rules, you're much more likely to find yourself on a stretcher -- or dead.

I certainly wouldn't argue with the father of the journalist killed by the U.S. missile that hit the Al-Jazeera office in Baghdad. "My son is a martyr who was killed as a result of America's so-called civilization in an attack on press freedom," said Naeem Ayub. He added: "They are attacking journalists to hide the truth."

Civil libertarians in the United States worry aloud that government pressures and corporate dominance can have a "chilling effect" on freedom of the press. We should not forget that it can also be chilling for journalists to see their colleagues killed as part of a governmental pattern.

The day after Tareq Ayub died, Al-Jazeera moved to evacuate its employees. "I believe that none of them is safe anymore, whether in Baghdad or the rest of Iraq," said editor-in-chief Ibrahim Hilal, "even those who are with American troops."

No doubt the media spinners in Washington look forward to the departure of Al-Jazeera's journalists from liberated Iraq. ■