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[Debate on the Safety of Journalists and the Danger of Impunity](#)

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The defining moment of a deadly decade for journalists came on November 23rd 2009 when 31 journalists and media staff were brutally massacred in a rural corner of the Philippines. The group were among 57 victims of a horrifying atrocity in which bodies were mutilated and dumped in shallow graves.

It was the worst single act of political violence against media recorded by the IFJ in the 20 years we have been issuing these reports and a reminder, if any were needed, that journalism remains among the world's most dangerous professions.

The massacre by armed political gangsters in the lawless region of Maguindanao Province shocked the world of journalism. It turned 2009 into another year of grief and mourning for people in media – with a total of 138 deaths across the globe.

It provoked angry demonstrations by members of the IFJ's affiliate the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines. An urgent mission was sent, humanitarian assistance to the victims was delivered and safety training organised, but these are only pain relievers for an open wound that weakens democracy in many corners of the world.

The massacre was an inevitable consequence of lawlessness, impunity and ruthless politics. It could just as easily have happened in the troubled border region of Mexico, or in the sectarian frontlines of Iraq, or in the devastated back streets of Mogadishu, Somalia.

It reminds us that the safety of journalists' crisis is no temporary phenomenon; it will be with us as long as journalists need to tell their stories in defiance of corruption and the exercise of power without responsibility.

The numbers speak for themselves – some 138 media deaths, of which 113 are targeted killings. Journalists are being killed by crooks, religious extremists, political gangsters and trigger-happy soldiers under reckless military command, all of them acting on the same impulse – to keep their dirty secrets from public scrutiny.

Journalists try to tell their stories despite these threats and they deserve protection in the process, but they rarely get it. The impunity in killings of reporters and political indifference over the censorship by violence is an international scandal that rarely gets the attention it deserves, and even when it does get noticed, some countries shrug their shoulders and look the other way.

The adoption of Resolution 1738 by the United Nations Security Council in 2006 which called for protection for journalists in conflict zones and for proper investigation of violent attacks on media has largely ignored.

For instance, the murderer of Lasantha Wickrematunge, the Sri Lankan Editor, shot dead in January 2009 shortly after he wrote an article predicting his own demise, is still running free a year after a sanctimonious government vowed to find his killers.

In Russia, where six journalists died in targeted killings last year, three people accused of the murder of Anna Politkovskaya in 2006 were brought to trial and then acquitted, largely as a result of incompetent prosecution and police work.

The problem of corrupt and hapless policing and the scandal of political inaction is a curse affecting journalism in many regions of the world. In Mexico, where impunity encourages ever-more scandalous human rights abuse for many in the population, another dozen journalists were murdered.

Altogether 2009 claimed 30 media deaths in Latin America and in Colombia, where killings of journalists is once again on the rise, an anonymous leaflet was circulated giving tips on how to kill journalists, as if the world didn't already know only too well.

One place where they don't need any helpful tips on putting journalism to the word is Somalia which continues to top the list of dangerous countries in a region where civil war, ethnic violence and religious rivalry continues to put the brakes on urgently-needed actions to combat poverty and build viable economies.

A total of 13 journalists died in Africa. The very first casualty of 2009 was in Somalia, a country that saw the year out with three more journalists killed in a Mogadishu bombing in December. The IFJ is working with other to try to put an international focus on the need for urgent actions in Somalia and other countries in the Horn of Africa, a troubled and poverty-stricken corner of the world which rarely makes headlines beyond death and destruction precisely because it is one of the deadliest trails for journalists to follow.

Across the continent, from Somalia, through the Democratic Republic of Congo, to the tiny tongue-like state of Gambia, there is a thread of misrule and social dislocation that has continued to claim the lives of journalists and has sent many more into exile.

But there are glimmers of hope – most of them provided by the courageous work of journalists' unions such as the National Union of Somali Journalists and the Gambian Press Union. In many countries, like Zimbabwe where the threats to media are never far away, the journalists' unions stand out as beacons of hope and solidarity for a media community under siege. In the coming year the IFJ's Federation of African Journalists will continue to put safety at the top of its crowded agenda.

The Middle East, which has for most of the last ten years been the primary source of casualties among journalists, figures less prominently in the 2009 killed list, largely because of the easing of the crisis in Iraq. There is not peace, but there is less slaughter of innocents in the streets and fewer casualties among media. But the Gaza invasion by the Israeli military in the last days of 2008 and the beginning of 2009 showed once again that when war breaks out, it is media that are among the first targets. An IFJ mission, in association with the Federation of Arab Journalists in January 2009, produced a detailed report on how media and journalists were affected by the conflict.

In Europe, the shadows of impunity fall across the whole of Russia and many of the neighbouring states. There were nine targeted killings – six of them in Russia alone – including Anastasia Baburova, a reporter on Politkovskaya's paper *Novaya Gazeta* and Natalia Estimirova, who was kidnapped and executed for continuing the reporting tradition of Politkovskaya by exposing human rights abuse in Chechnya.

The publication of *Partial Justice*, a detailed report on a selected number of killings in Russia since 1993, was a highlight of the year. The report and the extensive database accompanying it reveals in grim detail how journalists are targeted and provides an essential

campaigning tool for those trying to end the cycle of targeting and poor policing that makes reporting Russia so dangerous for journalists intent on exposing corruption.

Across the Asia-Pacific region, the devastating news from the Philippines made 2009 a year to forget. Altogether 59 journalists and media staff were killed in the region – almost half of all of the casualties globally. In Sri Lanka and Pakistan, where media have been victims of the civil strife, four journalists died.

As the new year approached the crisis in Afghanistan provided yet more victims: Michelle Lang, a reporter embedded with Canadian troops, was killed in a bomb blast in on 30 December and some days later, Rupert Hamer from the United Kingdom, a veteran of reporting war and travelling with the United States marines was also killed by a bomb. This was yet more evidence that reporting from the frontline in the company of soldiers is no guarantee of protection.

The start of another year is always filled with good intentions and a new decade even more so, but the experience of 2009 is that after ten years of unprecedented action to raise the bar of news safety there is still much to do. Governments need to end impunity, the international community needs to hold political backsliders to account, and media need to invest more time and effort in building a culture of safety within the industry.
