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"Reporting from Gaza is risking one's life"

Interview with Anthony Bellanger, IFJ General Secretary, returning from Palestine

This massacre must stop immediately and we reiterate to the Israeli government that it must respect international law and protect civilians, including journalists. Solidarity is at the heart of our actions, and we will continue to work with the United Nations and its affiliates to ensure a dignified future for the press and the right to inform.



In Palestine, being a journalist can be a death sentence/In Palestine, être journaliste peut être une condamnation à mort. FIXED PHOTO

Almost the same number of journalists killed as in the entire Vietnam War

War violence has been raging in Gaza since the beginning of October. More than sixty journalists are already part of the 15,7 fatalities (as of December 600) of this scorched-earth conflict. "I have just returned from a visit to Palestine and I never imagined that it could be such a hard experience," says French journalist Anthony Bellanger, who for eight years has served as secretary general of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ),

based in Brussels, Belgium, and which has 140, <> affiliates from <> countries. He visited Ramallah in the West Bank in the last week of November and anticipated the willingness to organize an upcoming mission to Gaza as soon as conditions permit. As a result of his interview, this testimonial look at a conflict in which the right to inform is already one more victim and journalism, there, means a profession of very high risk.

Anthony Bellanger, secretary general of the International Federation of Journalists, at a press conference in Ramallah on his visit to Palestine, late November 2023. Photo: Frédéric de Bellaing.

Q: Between November 21 and 24 you were in Ramallah, in West Bank Palestine. What are your impressions?

Anthony Bellanger (AB): Although I have often visited the region for years, this latest mission organized by the International Federation of Journalists with our affiliate, the Palestinian Journalists' Syndicate, represents a very powerful experience.

The aim of the meeting was to express active solidarity with our colleagues on behalf of the entire IFJ membership. I spoke to relatives of murdered journalists; I found a colleague who was an amputee; I heard heart-wrenching testimonies; received information about the destruction of national and international media offices; I found wounded journalists and others who had been detained in Israeli jails. They are all examples of a deplorable situation in the practice of journalism.

We also visited media outlets in Ramallah, including the Palestine Broadcasting Corporation (PBC), Al Jazeera, Al Arabia TV, Nisaa FM, Ajyal Radio Network and the editorial staff of Al-Ayyam newspaper. All these exchanges showed how appalling the daily lives of Palestinian journalists are, both in the West Bank and Gaza. When they are not harassed, threatened, or injured by the Israeli army, they are prevented from covering events because their internet signal is cut off.

During the trip, I proposed to the press office of the Government of Israel a meeting with them, but no one responded. I had tried to communicate with the Israeli authorities before, but to no avail. I should recall that last October the IFJ published a statement signed by 70 of its members calling on the government to comply fully with international humanitarian law and international human rights law. And we called on it to act to prevent the commission of any crime under international law, including war crimes and crimes against humanity and genocide, as well as incitement to commit them.

Since 7 October, the date of Hamas' deadly attack, followed by the Israeli army's bloody response in the Gaza Strip, never before in recent history has the profession experienced such a massacre in such a short period of time. As of December 5, more than 60 journalists have been killed, mostly Palestinians, but also Israelis and Lebanese. It's a real nightmare. I am left with a very bitter feeling: I was there for three days, but those men and women journalists continue to live and work in that brutal daily reality of war and death.

Q: Does this feeling also mean relative helplessness?

AB: Above all, I can't help but feel a very strong emotion. The press workers who are still working in Palestine, particularly in Gaza, have their newsroom meetings in the morning, but they don't know what is going to happen in just a few minutes or just a couple of hours. They can't say for sure if they're still going to be alive or if they're going to join the already huge list of those who perished after October 7. Many of them were victims of the massive bombings. Others were targeted by targeted military attacks by the Israeli armed forces. I am moved to think that their fate was the result of their decision to inform, that is, to exercise one of the essential human rights. Those who continue to work in the Gaza Strip also continue to face enormous risks in securing information that is currently under threat, but remains essential. They always maintain that will to fulfill the profession. And I am also challenged, and I reiterate it a thousand times, that these colleagues are also civilians, not soldiers; They are professionals and human beings just like us.



The International Federation of Journalists demands that the Government of Israel grant the right to the free exercise of one's profession in the Gaza Strip. Photo: FIJ

Q: On December 1, after a week of a ceasefire that brought partial relief to the Palestinian population, Israel resumed its bombardment of Gaza, with the corollary of hundreds of new casualties.

AB: I note that this is still an unimaginable situation, which has no comparison with other conflicts, especially because of the direct impact on the civilian population and, in particular, children, since no one can enter or leave Gaza. It is an open-air prison that has been turned into a large mass grave. As for the press, since the beginning of October we have counted an average of one death per day. We are approaching the number of journalists killed during the entire Vietnam War. Other brutal confrontations in the Middle East have not come close to the intensity of the current one in terms of its impact on the press.



On October 27, Israel told AFP and Reuters that it could not secure journalistic work in Gaza. Photo: Mohammed Abed_AFP_FIP-2 website

In spite of everything, we remain convinced to continue to strive for peace and to support our members, strengthening efforts with international organizations. During my visit, together with a delegation from the Palestinian trade union, we met in Ramallah with the head of the UNESCO office, the United Nations agency responsible for the protection and safety of journalists. They secured the upcoming delivery of first aid kits, mobile phone batteries, bulletproof vests and helmets. Consideration is being made in the future of the installation of a "safe house" in Khan Younis, in southern Gaza, so that journalists can work in a protected environment.

Q: On more than one occasion in recent days, the IFJ has reminded all parties to this conflict of the importance of the press and journalists respecting the principles and ethical values of the profession.

AB: That's right. This is a current challenge for all press workers, especially in a situation as complex as that in Palestine. The IFJ has a [World Charter of Ethics for Journalists](#). If we manage to get everyone to comply with it, we will avoid what is now happening in many cases: that information is distorted and falls into pure propaganda. We know that one of the hypotheses of every war is to control information in favor of one's own camp. That is why, as FIP, we insist on the responsibility of all men and women to allow and ensure accurate information, from the field.



[Global Charter of Ethics for Journalists](#)

Q: Despite this dramatic situation in Palestine, a significant number of governments are not raising their voices enough to stop this human and humanitarian disaster. What was your perception of the Palestinians' own sentiment about international dynamics?

AB: In Palestine they do not understand what is happening at the international level, in particular with the position of the European Union, the United States and Canada, which they call "the West". The Palestinians have the impression that they are left to fend for themselves. The Government of Israel and its far-right allies are wiping out a people and razing a territory, and violating international humanitarian law, and no one is able to stop them. The Palestinians feel that much of the international community fears Israel, making it easier for the Israeli government to do what it wants.



Karim Khan, Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, met with Nasser Abu Baker, Vice-President of the International Federation of Journalists, in Ramallah on 2 December. Photo: PJS

A positive sign, although we hope it will be expressed in concrete effects: Karim Khan, chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC), met on 2 December in Ramallah with Nasser Abu Baker, president of the Palestinian Journalists' Syndicate. Abu Baker, who is also vice-president of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), briefed Khan on the situation of journalists and media workers in Gaza and the West Bank, reminding him of the two ICC complaints filed by the IFJ and its union in April and September 2022. Karim Khan's engagement with the cases of Palestine is vital. For months it seemed that the ICC had time for other conflicts, but not for this one. I hope that this meeting will speed up the process of investigating allegations that predate the current crisis, as well as the terrible events that have taken place in Gaza since the beginning of October.

Q: A final thought?



A young man watches the destruction of the Ta al_Hawa neighborhood in Gaza City.

Photo: Eyad El Baba _UNICEF

AB: To repeat once again that the duty of the International Federation of Journalists is to stand by its members; in this case, Palestinian journalists, whether in the West Bank or in Gaza. We call for a definitive ceasefire. This massacre must stop immediately and we reiterate to the Israeli government that it must respect international law and protect civilians, including journalists. Solidarity is at the heart of our actions, and we will continue to work with the United Nations and its affiliates to ensure a dignified future for the press and the right to inform.

Sergio Ferrari from Bern for La Pluma

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