**Punishing journalism**

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On March 9, 2015, five men driving a white truck with a concealed number plate abducted Itai Dzamara, a Zimbabwean journalist and activist, from a barbershop in the Zimbabwean capital Harare.

Within seconds, he was bundled into the unmarked car and driven to an unknown location. Dzamara has not been seen ever since. Eight days before his enforced disappearance, he had called on Zimbabweans to demonstrate against the tough and deteriorating socioeconomic conditions in their country.

And he had called on then-President Robert Mugabe to resign. His forced disappearance was not an extraordinary event in a country where journalists were (and still are) routinely harassed and detained by authorities for publishing stories deemed to be “politically sensitive” or damaging to those in positions of power.

Sixteen years earlier, in January 1999, two journalists, Mark Chavunduka and Ray Choto, who worked for the Standard newspaper, were forcibly disappeared for 10 days. While under illegal detention, they suffered electric shocks to their hands, feet, and genitals and their heads were submerged in drums of water. When they eventually appeared in court, they both had burn marks on their bodies. Their alleged crime was to publish a story about 23 army officers being arrested for plotting a coup against President Mugabe.

In 2008, Jestina Mukoko, a prominent former TV journalist, who also runs an NGO, was abducted from her home in the middle of the night, detained incommunicado for days and tortured by alleged state agents, for her alleged involvement in planning anti-government protests.

She thankfully survived her horrific ordeal, and returned to her family and advocacy work. But Dzamara has not been as lucky. He has never returned home to his wife and two young children. Every year on the anniversary of his disappearance, Zimbabweans take to social media to remember him and to vent their frustrations about Zimbabwe’s seemingly never-ending war on journalists, and truth.

Despite efforts by civil society and the main opposition party, the state appears extremely reluctant to solve Dzamara’s case and finally deliver justice to his long-suffering family. Mugabe has been out of power since 2017, and Zimbabwe is supposedly a changed country, but to date, the Zimbabwean government has not even bothered to launch a high-level investigation into Dzamara’s violent abduction.

This speaks volumes about Harare’s unrelenting contempt for the truth, and war on those who dare to speak truth to power. Whoever disappeared Dzamara clearly intended to instil a great deal of fear in media practitioners and kill journalism in the small southern African country.

To some extent, they have succeeded. As recently as this February, a local paper, the NewsHawks, was forced to abandon its investigations into the Zimbabwe National Army after subtle threats from senior army officials.

Journalists who dare to investigate military and government corruption in Zimbabwe still expect to be harassed, unlawfully arrested, tortured or worse to this day.

Regrettably, Zimbabwe is not an outlier. This proclivity to threaten or kill the messenger to conceal bitter truths appears to be endemic across Africa and around the globe.

Joao Chamusse – a veteran Mozambican journalist, and the co-owner and editor of online newspaper Ponto por Ponto – was found dead in the backyard of his house in KaTembe, Maputo City, on December 14, 2023. His neighbours said they heard him scream for help before falling silent.

His horrendous murder came on the back of a wave of intimidation against journalists and media outlets in the run-up to this year’s general election.

In Lesotho’s capital Maseru, Ralikonelo ‘Leqhashasha’ Joki, who was a prominent reporter for Ts’enolo FM radio station, was shot at least 13 times by unknown assailants as he left the studio after a show in May 2023. Joki was highly critical of state officials, and his death appears related to his endeavours to expose the truth and hold government officials accountable for their actions.

It would be amiss to speak of the war on truth tellers without paying homage to the Palestinian journalists killed in Israel’s war on Gaza. At least 88 Palestinian media workers have been killed as they braved shelling to expose Israel’s genocidal violence.

Israel’s war on journalists who expose the injustice of its occupation and its abuse of Palestinians did not begin with this latest war, either. Shireen Abu Akleh, a Palestinian-American journalist and correspondent for Al Jazeera, was shot dead in May 2022 while reporting on an Israel raid in the Jenin refugee camp. And Israel had killed dozens of media workers before her.

I despair at the loss of Abu Akleh, and all the other brave, admirable Palestinian journalists who had been silenced by Israeli bombs and bullets.

I mourn for Leqhashasha, Chamusse and all the others who have been slain for exposing corruption or speaking truth to power.

My heart bleeds for the family of Dzamara, and those of other ‘disappeared’ journalists across the globe, who will likely never learn what actually happened to their loved ones.

I feel the deepest pain, however, for those journalists who I fear will meet similar fates in the coming months and years. Indeed, in the absence of strong legal repercussions, there is every chance that other journalists will go missing or be killed by ‘unknown’ people in Zimbabwe. The same is true for those working in Lesotho, Mozambique and elsewhere. And we know Israeli bombs continue to fall on Palestinian journalists as I write these lines.

When a journalist is killed or disappeared, people are quick to express sympathy and voice condemnation. Following such news, our social media timelines always fill with messages honouring their lives and achievements. Governments, NGOs, and international institutions issue statements, and vow to hold those responsible to account.

Words of empathy and condemnation are of course commendable, but what is needed above all is simple: justice.

Excerpted: ‘The never-ending war on truth’. Courtesy: Aljazeera.com