

Namir Noor-Eldeen and Saeed Chmagh

By David Viggers JULY 13, 2007

So frequent is the incidence of violent death in Iraq now that news media tend to report only multiple fatalities — fifty killed by a truck bomb, the bodies of thirty workmen found in a Baghdad suburb, five killed by an improvised roadside bomb. These numbers have no faces and it is left to the photographers and camera crews to show us the people behind the statistics. Even so these events are unfolding a world away from many of us but when colleagues and friends are among the victims the scale of the suffering is brought into pin sharp focus.



Yesterday two Reuters colleagues, photographer Namir Noor-Eldeen and driver Saeed Chmagh were killed in Baghdad. Namir was only 23 but had already produced a body of work which stands as testament to his talent and energy and the potential he will never now fulfil. Saeed, 40, married with four children was not a journalist but no less dedicated to covering the news and one of the largely unsung local heroes without whom it would be impossible to report the story on the ground.

The following are among the tributes to the two men received from colleagues and friends.

Dean Yates, Baghdad bureau chief: "Namir and Saeed were much loved members of the Baghdad bureau. They were always smiling and cheerful despite the horror in their country and the risks they took in their work. Their deaths leave a big hole in the Baghdad operation that will never be filled. We deeply mourn the loss of our colleagues and friends. The Baghdad bureau has been flooded with messages of sympathy from Reuters staff all over the world. This is a testament to the bravery and dedication of our Iraqi staff."

Alastair Macdonald, former Baghdad bureau chief: "It seems like yesterday Namir was dancing with us in the garden, taking pictures all the while, and Saeed was smiling proudly, always seeming like he was looking after us all. We are all going to miss them both terribly. Namir was our favourite little brother with a big heart and a great talent, who achieved great things in such a short time."

Steve Crisp, Middle East Pictures Editor: "On Namir, what can I say but such a tragic waste of such an outstanding young talent. Namir had boundless enthusiasm and always wanted to help. I will treasure the time I spent sat in the garden in 45 degrees plus heat filing pictures from my laptop over the satphone because the office comms were down and watching him work on setting up colleagues laptops and satphones into the early hours. I can still see him walking out of the compound with his cameras slung over his shoulders laughing with Saeed on his way to his last assignment."

Tributes specifically to Saeed Chmagh:

Thaer al-Sudani, 30, Reuters photographer, Baghdad:

“Saeed was a driver who truly protected us photographers. He would always be at our side no matter how much risk he was putting himself in. Many of us felt he was a better shield than an armoured vehicle. He would always tell me that he would not hesitate to lose his life to protect one of us. Sadly, he was right.”

Saad Shalash, 28, Reuters driver, Baghdad:

“Abu Salwan had a kind heart with no sectarian hatred. He loved his work and always protected the journalists. He would never stay out of contact with his friends for too long and would always strive to be there at your time in need. He never upset anyone and was always a very quiet man.”

Muhannad Mohammed, 35, Reuters driver, Baghdad:

“He was a very simple person who avoided trouble at all costs. He helped everyone and would never let two colleagues argue. Whenever someone did he would mediate to ensure we kept a friendly atmosphere in the bureau.”

Atheer Salim, 28, Reuters driver, Baghdad:

“I knew him before the war even began. He was a man of principles and high values. He used to always think of his family, especially his mother and father who needed constant medical care after his younger brother died in an accident. He was the only man who supported them and three other families. He was the peacemaker of the office.”

Mussab Al-Khairalla, 25, Reuters reporter, Baghdad:

“Saeed was a very humble and polite gentleman. He was a very loyal friend who was there for you at every moment. Saeed supported three families as well as his parents but never complained of the burden and even committed himself to helping other families in his neighbourhood.”

Tributes to Namir Noor-Eldeen:

Thaer al-Sudani, Reuters photographer, Baghdad:

“Namir was a brother before he was a colleague. His presence always lightened up the mood in the office. He was a very courageous man who had a great eye for a photograph. He was a very generous man who began to give away a lot of his belongings to friends. He had all the attributes of a great gentleman.”

Sattar Raheem, 40, Reuters cameraman, Baghdad:

“We always remember his smile. He was a special man who was trustworthy and always keeps his word.”

Saad Shalash, Reuters driver, Baghdad:

“However I describe this man I will not be doing him justice. If you asked him for money, he would borrow off someone else to help you out. He always felt an obligation to help the weak.”

Muhannad Mohammed, Reuters driver, Baghdad:

"I treated Namir like a younger brother. He always asked me for his opinion and I felt he was very happy with his successful career and had huge ambitions for his future."

Atheer Salim, Reuters driver, Baghdad:

"I loved his outgoing personality. He loved to help whenever he could. The nice thing about him was his unlimited generosity in addition to his bravery and cool head. We used to nickname him "The Tiger" in the office because the word fear doesn't appear in his dictionary."

Namir was one of the first Iraqi photographers that I met in Baghdad's office before my embed with U.S. troops this March and he was so curious how to fix Kareem Raheem's, another wide angle lens with a simple mini screwdriver. So I made him happy to check his photo equipment to tie up all his screws. Following his work over the past it was fantastic now to know personally the face behind his pictures, to talk about photography, laugh about the life during dinner in the courtyard of the Reuters office and to discuss about the daily life in Iraq. I was curious to listen when he was talking about his daily life during this terrible war. The hard working circumstances when he got out to cover a story and he was like sponge when I told him about how it is to life and work in a peaceful country, like Germany. What a gap, but both of us are journalists and Iraqi journalists are risking daily their life to witness the war for the world that we don't forget what really happens in the streets of Baghdad.

Every one of us has to have a lot of respect about their work! Saeed Chmagh was one of the drivers, who drove me back to the airport before leaving for Amman and before we said good bye, we said to each other: take care and be safe! Sometimes it's just a catchword, but when you work and live in Iraq you hope always that you return home safe and alive. We lost two fantastic colleagues and persons.

Chris Helgren, Reuters Chief Photographer, Rome:

"In the world's most dangerous country, where the death toll is more of a statistic than tangible reality, it would be easy to shuffle off the memories of another two journalists. But this is more difficult given the body of work produced by photographer Namir Noor-Eldeen, who was killed along with longtime driver Saeed Chmagh. While the questions of who did it or why is up in the air, friends and colleagues are grieving, and photographers will see yet another great portfolio pass into the archives.

When he first came to my attention, Namir was an energetic teenager in the northern city of Mosul whose family was involved in photography and video. He took an interest in the trade and with training, and a few critiques, it quickly became obvious he was going to become one of the new stars in Iraqi photojournalism. He had an urgency that suited the front pages of the news business but also a tender eye that brought humanity via quiet moments to a vicious war. One of the first pictures he sent me was of bewildered U.S. Army soldiers surrounded by a flock of sheep, another I remember was of a wounded Kurdish girl with her legs in bandages while wrapped in a faux fur coat, or one of a boy picking up shards of broken plates in the family dining room after an ammunition dump blast rocked their house.

Unfortunately, instead of the sight of UK photographers arriving en masse to a football match or entertainment event, Iraqis head off to work to document tragedy. There are few "good news" stories to be had in this war, and wars by definition are tales of violence. And to get there, drivers like Saeed Chmagh are indispensable. Saeed had a reputation of being fiercely loyal, and appeared fearless to me. If you ever needed to get quickly to a dangerous area, passing chicanes of barbed wire and boobytraps, Saeed was your man. But he also had a very quiet, loving side and spoke often of his kids. He leaves a wife and four children.

The deaths of these two men will hit the small photographic community in Baghdad very hard. They are the latest in a far too long list of our colleagues, from several news agencies, who have fallen in this war. They will not be the last, but I would hope that they would be remembered as people and not numbers."

Bob Strong, former Chief Photographer, Iraq

Namir was an editors dream. He was the best photographer in Mosul, he was on top of every story, and if he didn't shoot the pictures himself, he knew where to find them. His nose had been broken more than once, he'd been shot in the leg, detained, harrassed and threatened, but his quick smile and energy never faded. He lived more in 22 years than most people do in a lifetime and it's very very sad to know I'll never get one of his bearhug greetings again.

Saeed was such a gentle man in a chaotic and violent world, I sometimes wondered how he managed to survive. He took me to the Green Zone one day in 2004, and on the way back he got a call from his wife. His face lit up as he spoke to her, and when the call ended he turned to me smiling and said by way of explanation in his broken english, 'my habibt, my wife, my love'. In the midst of suffering and daily carnage, Saeed could still laugh and show up for work everyday.

My deepest sympathies to the families of Namir and Saeed.

A tribute to Namir's work has been compiled by his colleagues.