

One year on, Reuters Baghdad marks death of two newsmen

2008-07-15 17:59:35

By Dean Yates, Reuters Baghdad bureau chief

14 Jul 2008

Reuters Baghdad bureau held a special commemoration on July 12 to mark the first anniversary of the deaths of Iraqi photographer Namir Noor-Eldeen and his assistant and driver, Saeed Chmagh. Noor-Eldeen, 22, and Chmagh, 40, were killed in a U.S. helicopter air strike in eastern Baghdad.

Around 80 people from Reuters News, other foreign media in Baghdad and members of the two families attended the commemoration. A number of speeches were read, praising the dedication of the two men and deeply mourning their loss.

Reuters Editor in Chief David Schlesinger sent a tribute saying: "Namir and Saeed's deaths were a tragedy. Their energy, their professionalism, their friendship, their personalities - these are the memories that represent all that is best about our colleagues in Iraq and our colleagues around the world."

A collection of Noor-Eldeen's news photographs was shown in slide-show format on a large screen, underscoring the immense talent he had for someone so young. His photographs chronicle in haunting detail the violence and suffering Iraqs have endured in the past five years. But a few photos also show another side to Iraq, such as fishermen rowing their boat out on to the Tigris River in Baghdad at dawn.

The Iraqi Photographers Association presented the bureau with a plaque to mark the commemoration, which ended with a traditional Iraqi lunch.

Reuters News is seeking video footage from the U.S. military and other materials relating to the killing of Noor-Eldeen and Chmagh. The footage was taken by cameras on board the U.S. helicopters involved in the incident, in which nine other people were killed. The U.S. military said last week it is still processing the request.

The two Reuters men had gone to eastern Baghdad after hearing of a U.S. military raid on a building around dawn, and were with a group of men at the time. It is believed two or three of these men may have been carrying weapons, although witnesses said none was assuming a hostile posture.

The U.S. military says the helicopter attack occurred after security forces came under fire.

(see below for the double entry for Noor-Eldeen and Chmagh in Reuters In Memoriam book, which records the life and death of all Reuters newsmen who have died covering conflicts dating back to the 19th century).

END

From Reuters *In Memoriam* book

Namir Noor-Eldeen

Born: Iraq, 1st September 1984

Joined Reuters: 2003

Died: 12th July 2007

Saeed Chmagh

Born: Iraq, 1st January 1967

Joined Reuters: 2003

Died: 12th July 2007

“He lived more in twenty-two years than most people do in a lifetime.” So said a colleague of Reuters photographer Namir Noor-Eldeen, who was killed in Baghdad with his assistant and driver Saeed Chmagh in what witnesses said was a U.S. helicopter attack. Their deaths raised to six the number of Reuters newsmen killed in Iraq. The four previous victims – two Iraqis, a Palestinian and a Ukrainian – were killed by American soldiers.

“Namir was an editor’s dream ... on top of every story,” said Bob Strong, former Chief Photographer in Iraq. “His nose had been broken more than once, he’d been shot in the leg, detained, harassed and threatened, but his quick smile and energy never faded.”

Of Saeed Chmagh, aged 40, devoted family man, father of four, Strong said: “Saeed was such a gentle man in a chaotic and violent world.”

The deaths of the two men brought an outpouring of tributes. “Namir was our favourite little brother with a big heart and a great talent who achieved great things in such a short time,” said former Baghdad bureau chief Alastair Macdonald. Steve Crisp, Middle East Pictures Editor, added: “I can still see him walking out of the (Reuters) compound with his cameras slung over his shoulders laughing with Saeed on his way to his last assignment.”

That was the morning of Thursday, 12th July 2007, in the fifth year of the U.S. and British led campaign to pacify Iraq and restore democracy after the overthrow and execution of the dictator Saddam Hussein. Noor-Eldeen and Chmagh drove to the al-Amin al-Thaniyah area of eastern Baghdad to check on reports of a dawn air strike on a building by the American military.

There had been reports of clashes between US forces and insurgents in the general vicinity but there was no fighting on the streets in which Noor-Eldeen and Chmagh were moving about.

There were other people in the street, including a number of men. It is believed that two or three of these men may have been carrying weapons, although it was clear from witness statements that they were not firing them nor were they held in a firing-ready position.

The men congregated on a corner and Chmagh and Noor-Eldeen chatted with them for a few moments. Noor-Eldeen looked around a corner to take a photograph from a distance of a U.S. Humvee vehicle several blocks away.

The apache helicopter then opened fire, killing both Reuters men and nine others.

Reuters said the evidence "raises real questions about whether there was fighting at the time the two men were killed," and asked the U.S. military for a full and objective investigation.