

# Covering conflict & crisis: a dangerous mission

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Peter Cave reporting in Libya, 2011.  
Photo: Wayne McAllister.



Journalists play a vital role in armed conflicts, bearing witness to the consequences of war and ensuring that its impacts on the most vulnerable are not forgotten. Due to their responsibility to report, they maintain close proximity to armed actors and situations of violence and are consequently among the most at risk of harm. Since 1992 over 1100 journalists have been killed and many more injured, kidnapped, detained or otherwise mistreated.

**Journalists' rights and responsibilities** In recognition of their role and the risks they face, journalists are explicitly protected under the Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocols.

- In war zones journalists are considered civilians (provided that they don't take up arms themselves or contribute directly to military objectives) and must be protected against direct attack.
- Journalists accompanying the armed forces of a state (termed 'war correspondents' in the Conventions) are also considered civilians and must be protected from direct attack. If captured, they are granted prisoner of war status, with corresponding protections and guarantees on conditions of detention.
- Radio and television facilities must be protected from direct attack unless used for military purposes.
- Media facilities distributing propaganda can retain protection; however they may lose it if used to incite crimes or acts of violence. Journalists may also be held liable for their conduct—in 2003, two Rwandan Hutu radio journalists were sentenced to life imprisonment for calling for the extermination of Tutsis.

**Protecting journalists in war** The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is mandated under the Geneva Conventions to inform all parties to conflicts, as well as media, about their rights and responsibilities under the law.

The ICRC also maintains a journalists' hotline to provide support and follow-up when journalists or their crews are arrested, captured, detained, missing, wounded or killed. ICRC also assists by seeking confirmation of reported arrests or detention, providing information to next of kin and employers on the whereabouts of journalists, maintaining contact between family members, recovering and transferring mortal remains, and evacuating wounded journalists.

For example in 2003, ICRC evacuated injured ABC reporter Eric Campbell from Suleimaniyah in Iraq, along with the body of cameraman Paul Moran (who was killed by a suicide bomber). They were taken to Iran, to safety in the Australian embassy.

**Educating journalists in the law** While ensuring compliance with the laws of war is the responsibility of armed actors, journalists play a vital role educating the public, as well as promoting accountability and respect for the law. It is critical that journalists understand these laws, so that they can report accurately and impartially on armed conflicts with full understanding of the obligations of all parties. It is also crucially important that journalists, along with all groups working in areas of armed conflict, understand their rights and responsibilities so that they can keep safe in difficult and dangerous operational environments.

For this reason the Australian Red Cross, together with other National Societies around the world, engages with these groups (including militaries, humanitarian workers, journalists and police among others) to raise awareness of the law as it applies to them or to those they encounter in the field. This legal education takes place in every state and territory in Australia as well as overseas.

*If you are interested in learning more about the laws of war, contact Anna Foster at [afoster@redcross.org.au](mailto:afoster@redcross.org.au)*