



Journalists in exile 2013: Somalis, Syrians flee violence; Iran crackdown deepens

A special report by the Committee to Protect Journalists



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Fifty-five journalists fled their homes in the past year with help from the Committee to Protect Journalists. The most common reason to go into exile was the threat of violence, such as in Somalia and Syria, two of the most deadly countries in the world for the profession. Others fled the threat of prison, especially in Iran, where the government deepened its crackdown ahead of elections. **A CPJ special report by Nicole Schilit**



Syrians take shelter at a refugee camp near the border with Turkey.
(Reuters/Muhammad Najdet Qadour/Shaaam News Network)

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With 20 years of experience as an investigative reporter in Mexico, Verónica Basurto was well aware of the dangers when she began reporting on flagrant flaws in the Mexican judicial system. For years, she had known her home and mobile phones were tapped, and that she was often followed. But Basurto had never thought about leaving journalism, or Mexico, until this year, when she began receiving graphic text messages detailing how her family would be murdered. Terrified, she sought immediate protection from Mexican authorities, who only provided her with a panic button to contact them in an emergency. The threats continued to escalate. “And that’s when real panic set in, and I thought: I have to get out of this country,” she told CPJ in tears. “I knew I could live in fear, but what I could not bear was something happening to my family.” With help from international groups, Basurto fled Mexico for Europe in March, carrying few personal belongings. She had no other way to protect her loved ones.

Basurto is one of 55 journalists who CPJ assisted in fleeing their homes over the past 12 months, down slightly from the previous year. The top countries for exodus were Iran and Somalia, with nine and eight journalists fleeing respectively; Iran and Somalia have topped CPJ’s exile tables for the past five years. These countries were followed

by Ethiopia, Syria, Eritrea, Mexico, Sri Lanka, Sudan, and 13 others. Like Basurto, most of the journalists fled into exile only as a last resort, leaving behind careers, livelihoods, and family to escape forms of intimidation including violence, imprisonment, and threat of death.

CPJ is releasing its annual survey of journalists in exile to mark World Refugee Day, June 20. This report counts only journalists who fled due to work-related persecution, who remained in exile for at least three months, and whose current whereabouts and activities are known to CPJ. The survey is based solely on cases CPJ has supported, from which it derives global trends. CPJ's survey does not include the many journalists and media workers who leave their countries for professional opportunities, or to flee general violence, or those who were targeted for activities other than journalism, such as political activism.



A journalist photographs damage from twin bomb attacks in Damascus. (AFP/Louai Beshara)

Journalists who CPJ assisted cited fear of violence as the top reason for deciding to leave. The most deadly country for journalists currently is Syria, where at least 28 were killed for their work in 2012, according to CPJ research. CPJ supported five journalists who fled in the past 12 months and a total of 18 over time. CPJ estimates that a higher number have left, but the nature of the conflict and the refugee crisis makes confirming the precise number difficult. CPJ's work with Syrian exiles is ongoing.

Violence is also acute in conflict-ridden Somalia, forcing out 70 journalists since 2008, according to CPJ research. Somalia has also ranked in the top 10 deadliest countries for journalists every year in that period. In 2012, a record 12 journalists were murdered in Somalia, even though government forces largely ousted Al-Shabaab militants from the capital, Mogadishu, in 2011. The recent killings have raised concern that reporters are being targeted by a widening field of politically motivated antagonists.

Those who fled Somalia, Mexico, and Sri Lanka told CPJ that they made the decision to leave because they could not rely on local authorities to provide them with security and protection. The three countries all rank on CPJ's Impunity Index, which spotlights places where journalists are slain and their killers go free. Countries with high impunity rates often see an increase in violence because perpetrators feel emboldened by the slim chances of being caught. The result is self-censorship and exile. "Mexico is becoming a silent tomb where journalists are mute and authorities are deaf," Basurto said.

The second most common reason journalists gave for fleeing their homes is the threat of imprisonment. Iran is the second worst jailer of journalists worldwide, according to CPJ data. Since Tehran cracked down on journalists following the contested 2009 presidential elections, using a policy of arrests, appalling prison conditions, furloughs,

and re-arrests, CPJ has documented a series of journalists fleeing to neighboring countries. The nine journalists who CPJ assisted in exile in the past 12 months is double the number we helped the previous year, reflecting the government's increased effort to stifle the media ahead of the presidential elections earlier this month.



Somali refugees wait in line at a refugee camp in Kenya.
(Reuters/Jonathan Ernst)

Many journalists fearing imprisonment also fled Eritrea and Ethiopia—Africa's top jailers of journalists in 2012. Of the 30 journalists who CPJ assisted in exile from Eritrea since 2008, most spent time in the country's infamous prisons before escaping the country. One print reporter, who asked not to be identified for his safety, fled Eritrea for Sudan in August 2008 after nearly six years in a government detention center. He was arrested in 2002 and was never officially charged with a crime, though he said he was repeatedly interrogated, forced into labor, and tortured with restraints and suspension of his body for extended periods of time. Prior to his arrest, he had worked in the official media, and had also been a contributor to one of a handful of independent newspapers in the country. Eritrean authorities shut down all independent media outlets in a widespread government crackdown on dissent beginning in September 2001. Many journalists have languished in prison since, without charge or trial.

Journalists in the East Africa nations of Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Rwanda fled in high numbers over the past 12 months, as they have in prior years. Since May 31, 2012, CPJ supported 18 exiles from East Africa, making the East Africa region responsible for the highest number of exiled journalists for the sixth consecutive year—as long as CPJ has been collecting this data. The majority have relocated to the capitals of Kenya and Uganda, where they live under very difficult conditions.

Somalis living in Nairobi told CPJ they face continuous threats from multiple actors. Several said they have been physically abused, extorted, or illegally detained by Kenyan security forces, who discriminate against refugees in the capital city. In December 2012, the Kenyan Department of Refugee Affairs issued a statement blaming Somali refugees for contributing to Kenya's insecurity problems, and ordering all in Nairobi to relocate to refugee camps, where journalists have told CPJ there is acute violence. According to CPJ interviews, refugee journalists believe members of Al-Shabaab—the group they fled in the first place—are active in the camps. Some said they receive threats from perceived Al-Shabaab militants in Nairobi, forcing them to stay indoors and have very little communication with the outside world.

Iranian journalists in exile have similar concerns. Of those who fled Iran in the past couple of years, at least three are living in Malaysia, where there is a growing population of exiled Iranians because visas are relatively easy to obtain at entry points. Iranians in Malaysia told CPJ that they live in fear due to threats of violence and legal action from

individuals who they believe work for the Iranian government.

Other Iranians fled to Turkey, where entry visas are not required but where there is no government support or protection. Turkey does not offer permanent asylum to non-Europeans; Iranian refugees are not allowed to settle there permanently or to work. To get resettled to a third country, they must be registered as refugees with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), but journalists told CPJ that there is a two-year wait to complete registration. The U.N. agency in Ankara, in response to CPJ's questions about the lengthy wait time, said there has been over a 500 percent increase in applications from "certain nationalities" since last year. The agency told CPJ that it is re-organizing its procedures and all Iranians will conclude the registration process within 18 months.



A prison official guards a corridor in Tehran's Evin Prison, where many journalists have been jailed over the years. (Reuters)

Turkey has also seen an increase in exiled journalists fleeing Syria, while other Syrians have gone to Jordan. Among those who CPJ assisted after fleeing Syria is broadcast journalist Rania Badri, who told CPJ that in 2011 she was among the highest paid women in the Syrian media. Badri hosted a popular morning talk show on Ninar, a radio station owned by the governing Assad family, where she included the day's headlines but did not focus on politics, she said. However, not long after protests began in Syria, the station's manager informed Badri that she should report that there were no demonstrations in Syria. The journalist initially refused but quickly realized that she would face serious repercussions, possibly including prison, if she did not comply with the government. She told CPJ that she left Syria because she could not continue to work in a country where there was no press freedom.

Badri arrived in India in September 2011. In January 2012, she went to Jordan, where her brother, also a journalist, was living. A month later, Badri, her brother, and other colleagues launched New Start, an independent online radio station where they reported on news coming from Syria, including where demonstrations were happening and details about daily arrests and deaths, she told CPJ. They also interviewed journalists, activists, and opposition politicians who remained inside the country. But quickly, several of New Start's staffers received threats from perceived Syrian agents who told them to leave Jordan or face the consequences, Badri told CPJ. So Badri decided to go to Tunisia, from where she continued to Paris. New Start has since stopped operating.

In France, Badri continues to write and give interviews about the situation in Syria. However, she said that she does not consider herself a working journalist anymore. "The answer is to forget that you were a journalist," she said. "You are now a refugee. Forget about your life before."

Only about 20 percent of the exiled journalists in CPJ's survey have been able to resume work in their field. Many are forced to take up menial labor to survive. The Eritrean journalist who fled via Sudan is currently working in a

technology job in the U.S. that he describes as being “too far away from journalism.” Some journalists said they felt that by leaving behind their careers, they had abandoned the respect and esteem that come with being a professional. Many said they feel as if they have lost a part of their identity.

In fact, all of the journalists who spoke to CPJ said life in exile has taken a great psychological toll. Basurto said she feels like an eggshell that is about to break. “There have been so many nights since I left when I haven’t slept,” she told CPJ during a recent telephone interview. “I still feel that I’m being followed, even walking in European streets, and I know how absurd this is.”

CPJ Journalist Assistance Associate Nicole Schilit received her Masters of Public Administration from the School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA) at Columbia University. She has a background in documentary photography and focused her graduate work in human rights and international media, advocacy, and communications.

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