How Three Journalism Advocacy Organizations Defended Journalists during the 2011 Protests in Egypt

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Abstract— **When journalists who were covering the 2011 political protests in Egypt became targets of assaults and intimidation, three journalism advocacy groups issued press releases condemning Egypt's actions, advocating for the humane treatment of all journalists, and documenting dozens of incidents of press attacks.**

Keywords- Egypt, journalism, Reporters Without Borders, International Federation of Journalists, Committee to Protect Journalists, press release

I. INTRODUCTION

Tens of thousands of Egyptians gathered in cities across that country on January 25, 2011, to protest President Hosni Mubarak's nearly three decades' rule. Under Mubarak's control, such displays of public dissent usually were quelled quickly. By the next morning, security forces responded by arresting hundreds of people, beating protesters, and firing tear gas and rubber bullets into the crowds. However, the government's actions only bolstered the movement against Mubarak. Within a couple of days, protester numbers had swelled to an estimated hundreds of thousands across the country despite the government's sustained violent response [1].

As domestic and foreign journalists reported on Egypt's political crisis, they also found themselves targeted by government security forces, mobs of Mubarak loyalists, and government-supported media outlets. Immediately, three international journalism advocacy organizations – the Committee to Protect Journalists, the International Federation of Journalists, and Reporters Without Borders – launched public campaigns against such actions. These three

organizations collectively issued more than two dozen press releases during a thirteen-day period as the number of violent acts against journalists increased and then finally tapered off. The releases denounced the violence, demanded safe and humane treatment for journalists, and documented instances of abuse and intimidation.

II. PURPOSE AND METHOD

This study uses a descriptive content analysis with a purposive sample to examine how these three organizations responded to the violence and intimidation used against journalists who were covering political unrest in Egypt in late January and early February 2011. Specifically, this research focuses on the press releases these organizations made public on their websites between January 26 and February 7, a time frame during which violence against journalists became one of the dominant reporting narratives. These press releases performed two simultaneous, yet distinct, functions. On one hand, they served a traditional journalistic role by documenting the attacks, arrests, and intimidation journalists endured while reporting in Egypt. These releases also served an advocacy role by openly condemning the violence against journalists and demanding the Egyptian government to cease such tactics.

Press releases from the Committee to Protect Journalists were found on CPJ's website (http://www.cpj.org) using the search terms "Egypt" and "News Alerts." This research specifically excluded content from CPJ's "Blogs" section because those entries were not official press releases from the organization. Releases from the International Federation of Journalists were found using the search term "Egypt" on IFJ's website (http://www.ifj.org/en). Reporters

Without Borders' releases were accessed through a link titled "Egypt" that was displayed on the organization's website (http://en.rsf.org). The releases from all three organizations were collected as events unfolded and in the days immediately following this study's time frame.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the 1950s, Egypt has positioned itself to take a leading role in Arab affairs, and the Egyptian media have been expected to support that vision. Egyptian media had astatutory mandate to contribute to the country's national development and shape the public's attitudes and beliefs on various issues. Even though certain press guarantees were built into Egypt's constitution, the amount of actual media freedom has varied depending on the president in power [2].

The Arab region's media landscape has undergone recent dramatic changes, though, in large part because of transnational satellite broadcasts and the expansion of access to the Internet. Satellite broadcaster Al Jazeera brought on the so-called "Al Jazeera effect" by introducing Egyptian audiences to higher journalistic standards. As the channel gained popularity, it forced both government and private media organizations to change their content and practices to become more competitive. This helped create an atmosphere in which alternative viewpoints and greater reporting freedoms took hold. In addition, several independent newspapers began competing with government-owned or -aligned newspapers, and media rights advocacy groups began to emerge [3].

In 2002, Egypt began an aggressive campaign to increase access to the Internet [4]. This easier access enabled government and opposition newspapers to create their own websites, which contributed to the widespread availability of various, and oftentimes competing, points of view. Increased web availability also brought about a dramatic rise in the practice of blogging, which gave the general public a greater forum for commentary, criticism, and debate, the likes of which Egyptians had never experienced. Even though this has caused considerable irritation to authorities, they have generally accepted blogging as a permanent addition to the country's media landscape [5].

This does not mean that they stopped trying to silence their critics, however. By 2007, Egyptian authorities began what cyber-activists have called the "War on Bloggers" [6]. State media began portraying blogging as "cyber-dissent" and bloggers as "activists," and the government used intimidation and legal loopholes to squelch bloggers who had become irritants [7]. Independent news organizations also continued to endure significant government control. That

same year, the watchdog organization Freedom House noted that despite having more than 500 newspapers and periodicals and a large number of private broadcasters, the Egyptian government continued to exercise a large amount of censorship over the press [8]. This created a situation in which many topics remained off limits for public discussion, prompting journalists to either censor their work or expose themselves to corrective action for their "transgressions" [9]. Such correction sometimes involved extrajudicial violence. As evidenced by the Committee to Protect Journalists' "Attacks on the Press 2010: Egypt" report, the government's use of coercion and violence to control the media was still a regular practice leading up to the political protests of January and February 2011 [10].

IV. JANUARY 26

"The Committee to Protect Journalists condemns the violence against journalists covering demonstrations in Egypt." This was the first sentence from CPJ's first press release regarding violence against reporters covering the political protests, and it was issued on Wednesday, January 26. CPJ reported at least 10 journalists had been "beaten" by Egyptian security forces and other journalists had been detained since the previous Tuesday. The websites of two newspapers and several social media sites had also been shut down. Mohamed Abdel Dayem, CPJ's Middle East and North Africa program coordinator, appealed to the Egyptian government to halt such activities. "We call on Cairo to bring to an immediate end all forms of violence against the media, release all detained journalists, and lift online censorship," he said. The press release also included interviews with some journalists who had been assaulted by security forces. "I started running but four policemen pulled me by my hair and kicked me in my face and back," said Lina Attalah, managing editor of Al-Masry al-Youm's English edition. "I tried telling them that I'm a journalist but they were too busy kicking me" [11].

Reporters Without Borders also issued a strongly-worded release on the same day. "Reporters Without Borders firmly condemns the arrests and physical attacks that journalists suffered while covering demonstrations yesterday and today in various Egyptian cities," it began. The release detailed the government's efforts to jam mobile phone signals and block websites, and it included information that Egypt is on the organization's "list of Enemies of the Internet, above all for harassing and arresting bloggers…." Similar to CPJ, Reporters Without Borders reported on the attacks and arrests of several journalists who were covering the protests, including a *Cairo News Company* cameraman who "was hit

in the face, stomach, shoulder and back" when 11 rubber bullets were fired at him [12].

V. JANUARY 28

Two days later on Friday, January 28, Reporters Without Borders and CPJ issued their second press releases. That day also marked the first Egypt-related release from the International Federation of Journalists, which began with a harsh assessment of the country's police force. "The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) today accused security forces in Egypt of indiscriminate violence after scores of journalists were forcibly detained and beaten during recent protests in the capital, Cairo, calling for political change in the country." Organization president Jim Boumelha invoked professional solidarity in condemning the violence against reporters. "Journalists, the world over, are appalled by the thuggery of Egypt's state security officers and riot police, beating and arresting protesters as well as journalists and photographers in Cairo," he said. "We hold the government primarily responsible for directing the police charge and call on them to order an immediate halt to these attacks." The release also included information about recent arrests and subsequent releases of several journalists [13].

The Committee to Protect Journalists once again blasted the Egyptian government's efforts to control the press and demanded swift change. "CPJ condemns Cairo's news blackout and calls for authorities to immediately restore Internet and mobile phone services, end the targeting of the press, and allow media to conduct their work freely." CPJ announced it had begun tracking the methods Egypt was using to shut down Internet and mobile phone usage, and the organization quoted Samir Ali, a correspondent for Al Jazeera, who had been having difficulty with communications. "There is no greater disruption for the work of journalists than the disruption of mobile phone services and text messages," he said. "This in itself constitutes an attack on journalists and their freedom to cover the events that are shaking Egypt now." The release concluded with a list of journalists who had been attacked by state security forces [14].

Reporters Without Borders issued two press releases. The first one "firmly condemns the arrests of four French journalists as they were preparing to cover protests in Cairo today." Calling it "completely unacceptable," the organization lambasted Egypt's effort to disrupt the flow of news and information. "By blocking the Internet and by attacking and arresting Egyptian and foreign journalists, the Egyptian government is trying both to prevent the protests from being organized and to prevent them from being

covered internationally," said Jean-François Julliard, Reporters Without Borders secretary-general [15].

In its second release, Reporters Without Borders once again condemned police violence against journalists who were covering the political protests, and the group demanded change. "We urge the Egyptian authorities to allow journalists to work without fear of being arrested or attacked by those who are supposed to protect them." The statement also called for "the immediate release of all the media workers still being held and an end to the blocking of communications." Reporters Without Borders bolstered its position by citing similar concerns from the governments of the United States and France. The press release concluded with six bullet points of recent journalist arrests and an update on the thenunreliable status of communication via Facebook, Twitter, and telephone within Egypt [16].

VI. JANUARY 30-31

None of the three organizations issued a press release on Saturday, January 29, and Reporters Without Borders was the only one to publish a statement on Sunday, January 30. This time, Reporters Without Borders responded when the Egyptian government shut down all of Al Jazeera's operations within the country. Using the word "condemns" and specifically mentioning Egypt's information minister, Anas elFekki, by name, Reporters Without Borders accused the government of squelching coverage of the protests. "By banning Al Jazeera, the government is trying to limit the circulation of TV footage of the six-day-old wave of protests," the group's secretary-general, Jean-François Julliard, said. "[This] totally archaic decision is in [complete] contradiction with President Hosni Mubarak's promise of 'democratic' measures on 28 January. It is also the exact … opposite of the increase in freedom sought by the Egyptian population." The press release quoted Cairo-based Middle East News Agency as reporting that Fekki had ordered "the suspension of operations of Al Jazeera, cancelling of its [licenses] and withdrawing accreditation to all its staff as of today." The release concluded with a very brief review of Al Jazeera's recent troubles in other Middle Eastern countries and an update on the current status of Internet and telephone communication systems within Egypt [17].

All three organizations issued releases on Monday, January 31, and Reporters Without Borders again took aim at Egypt's continuing efforts to control protest coverage. The organization "condemns the arrest by the military today of five journalists working for the English-language service of the Qatar-based television station *Al Jazeera*." Both Egyptian and foreign journalists were part of the group, and they were arrested as they were returning to their hotel. After being

questioned for about 90 minutes, "they were released but their cameras and recordings were seized." Reporters Without Borders reported that *Al Jazeera* journalists were trying to get around the government's ban against their network by asking Egyptian citizens for information, videos, and photographs of the protests. The release also revealed that the government had pressured *Cairo News Company* to not share any footage with *Al Jazeera* [18].

In a release that lambasted Egypt's "desperate tactics" to stop media coverage of the protests, the International Federation of Journalists "called on Egypt to end the crackdown on journalism and media which has led to numerous beatings of media staff and censorship of television and communications networks." IFJ reported on studio shutdowns of both Al Jazeera and French TV's France 2. "Shutting down media as a public space for dialogue is no way for showing genuine commitment to a tolerant debate on the country's future," IFJ General Secretary Aidan White said. "The authorities are failing the basic test of open democracy by stifling free press" [19].

The Committee to Protect Journalists issued two releases on January 31. In the first, titled "Attacks on journalists in Yemen, Sudan amid street protests," the organization expressed concern that "those governments seem to not have learned anything from the mistakes made by the governments in Tunis and Cairo." Mohamed Abdel Dayem, CPJ's Middle East and North Africa program coordinator, said he was "disturbed" that journalists across the Arab world were being targeted [20]. CPJ's second release that day called on the Egyptian government to stop obstructing reporters' work, return all confiscated newsgathering equipment, and restore Internet and telephone SMS messaging services "without delay." CPJ's Mohamed Abdel Dayem commented on the government's efforts to systematically block all newsgathering and broadcasting operations. "This is part of a wider and ultimately futile attempt to prevent Egyptians from witnessing the political history that is being made around them," he said. The Committee to Protect Journalists also reported on several detentions of foreign journalists but quoted a member of the Egyptian Journalists' Syndicate as saying that no journalists were in jail that day [21].

VII.   FEBRUARY 2

However, that situation did not last very long. Two days later on Wednesday, February 2, the International Federation of Journalists, in conjunction with the European Federation of Journalists, "called for the immediate release of Belgian journalist Maurice Sarfatti, also known as Serge Dumont, who was arrested in Cairo by security forces and is being held

at an unidentified military facility." While covering a rally of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's supporters, Sarfatti was arrested and accused of being a spy. "These accusations of spying are absurd and prove the arbitrary nature of our colleague's arrest," IFJ President Jim Boumelha said. "Maurice is a bona fide journalist who was reporting on the unfolding crisis in Egypt like many other journalists. We urge the authorities to release him immediately and to end violence against media." Condemning "these desperate tactics," Boumelha said the arrest provided "clear evidence of police's attempts to intimidate media through violence in a bid to suppress independent reporting in the Egyptian crisis" [22].

By this time, the Committee to Protect Journalists was accusing the Egyptian government of making a tactical shift from merely censoring journalists to attacking them violently. "The government has resorted to blanket censorship, intimidation, and today a series of deliberate attacks on journalists carried out by pro-government mobs," said Mohamed Abdel Dayem, CPJ's Middle East and North Africa program coordinator. "The situation is frightening not only because our colleagues are suffering abuse but because when the press is kept from reporting, we lose an independent source of crucial information." CPJ also called on the Egyptian military to protect journalists who were covering the protests. The organization included eleven bullet points on its February 2 release, ten of which detailed specific attacks against journalists. The final bullet point provided an update on Al Jazeera's continuing efforts to reestablish its broadcasts within Egypt [23].

Reporters Without Borders issued three releases on February 2. Just as IFJ had done, Reporters Without Borders "firmly condemns" the arrest of Belgian journalist Serge Dumont (also known as Maurice Sarfatti). "We urge the Egyptian authorities to free Dumont immediately and to return all the equipment seized at the time of his arrest," the group stated. "The accusation of spying is both false and utterly farfetched. Dumont has been a well-known journalist for years, one who is widely [respected] by his colleagues." Reporters Without Borders concluded the release with a telephone interview excerpt between Dumont and Le Soir, the Belgian newspaper for which he worked as a correspondent. He described his arrest as heavy-handed and violent. "I was hit several times in the face," Dumont said. "I was then taken to the military in one of the barracks on the outskirts of the city. I was given a glass of water from the Nile, they told me, so that I would catch diarrhea. I am being guarded by two soldiers with Kalashnikovs and bayonets. They say I will be taken before the intelligence services. They say I am a spy" [24].

The organization's second release reported that it was "pleased that Internet access was restored this morning in

Egypt after being blocked for five days….” Twitter, Facebook, and websites for Al Jazeera and other news organizations were available once again, and Reporters Without Borders appealed to Egypt's government to leave the Internet alone. “We urge the authorities not to give in again to the temptation to block the Internet or use any form of filtering in response to political developments in the days to come.” Reporters Without Borders then expanded its scope beyond Egypt to “[condemn] the repressive reactions of various governments which, fearing that the demonstrations in Tunisia and Egypt could spread to other countries, are censuring reports about these events and are tightening their control of the Internet.” The group accused governments in Syria, China, Iran, and Gaza of intimidating people and disrupting the Internet. The release concluded with a series of phone numbers that journalists and Egyptian citizens had been using to circumvent Egypt's Internet blackout [25].

“Reporters Without Borders unreservedly condemns today's shocking attacks on BBC, Al Jazeera, CNN, AlArabiya and ABC News journalists by Mubarak supporters who were reportedly accompanied by plainclothes police.” That is the lead sentence from the organization's third and final release on February 2. Calling violence against journalists “especially shocking,” Reporters Without Borders secretary-general Jean-François Julliard reminded the Egyptian government “that journalists are external observers who under no circumstances should be identified with one side or the other. These attacks seem to have been acts of revenge against the international media for relaying the protests calling for President Mubarak's [resignation].” Such attacks were also designed to silence journalists and gag the news media, he said. The release concluded with accounts from two journalists who asked to remain anonymous for fear of reprisals. “As soon as they see a camera, they hurl themselves at it,” said one journalist, who reported having stones thrown at him. Another said he was kicked and “his camera was ripped from his hands” [26].

VIII. FEBRUARY 3-7

As the number of violent acts against journalists increased in Egypt, Reporters Without Borders, the International Federation of Journalists, and the Committee to Protect Journalists issued a total of eight releases decrying the trend between Thursday, February 3, and Friday, February 4. It was also during this period when the first death of a journalist was announced. CPJ's one release that Thursday featured a headline that placed blame for the attacks squarely at the feet of Egypt's president: “Mubarak intensifies press attacks with assaults, detentions.” He was accused of unleashing “an unprecedented and systematic attack” against international journalists, and CPJ Executive Director Joel Simon called it “a dark day” for journalism. “The systematic and sustained attacks documented by CPJ leave no doubt that a governmentorchestrated effort to target the media and suppress the news is well under way,” he said. “We hold President Mubarak personally responsible for this unprecedented action and call on the Egyptian government to reverse course immediately.” At the time of the release, CPJ had recorded “30 detentions, 26 assaults, and eight instances of equipment having been seized” during the previous twenty-four hours. Labeling it as “a round-up of attacks on the press,” the release contained thirty bullet points detailing specific actions against journalists and the government's various efforts to stop the flow of information. Among them was the story of Petros Papaconstantino, a correspondent for the Greek daily newspaper Kathimerini. Papaconstantino was “briefly hospitalized with a stab wound to the leg” after a group of Mubarak supporters attacked him in Tahrir Square. “I was spotted by Mubarak supporters,” he wrote on Kathimerini's website. “They … beat me with batons on the head and stabbed me lightly in the leg. Some soldiers intervened, but Mubarak's supporters took everything I had on me in front of the soldiers” [27].

Reporters Without Borders used its February 3 release to describe the campaign against journalists as a “witch-hunt.” The group stated that it “is horrified by what appears to be an all-out witch-hunt against news media that are covering events in Egypt and is very concerned for all the journalists currently in Cairo.…” Just as the Committee to Protect Journalists had already done, Reporters Without Borders accused Egypt's government of changing its tactics from mere censorship of reporters to outright attacks on them. “After shutting down the Internet and then reconnecting it at the start of this week, the regime has decided to target media personnel physically by unleashing its supporters in an unprecedented campaign of hatred and violence,” said Reporters Without Borders secretary-general Jean-François Julliard. “This has gone beyond censorship. This is now about ridding Cairo of all journalists working for foreign news media.” Julliard urged news media organizations to do all they could to protect their employees, and he called on diplomats to support journalists who found themselves in difficult situations. He blamed President Mubarak for the escalating violence and asked other governments to express similar displeasure. “The highest level of the Egyptian government must be held responsible for this policy of physical attacks,” he said. “We urge the international community to adopt a strong unanimous position quickly, to draw the appropriate conclusions from the events of the past few days and to consider sanctions.” The release concluded with fifteen short paragraphs detailing known instances of intimidation or violence against journalists [28].

A total of six releases were issued on Friday, February 4: one from the Committee to Protect Journalists, two from Reporters Without Borders, and three from the International Federation of Journalists. IFJ's first release was a letter from its president, Jim Boumelha. Describing the attacks against journalists with the same "witch-hunt" terminology used by Reporters Without Borders, Boumelha urged journalism unions worldwide to appeal to Egypt's government to stop the violence. He also provided a very brief overview of IFJ's efforts to provide safety advice to journalists in Egypt and to establish an emergency hotline for them [29].

IFJ's second release that day repeated Jim Boumelha's appeal for solidarity among the world's journalism unions against Egypt's strong-arm tactics, and it provided more details concerning the hotline IFJ established for journalists in need. And, for the first time, IFJ accused Egypt's state television of inciting violence against foreign journalists by blaming them for the country's unrest. "This is a false and dangerous claim," said Aidan White, IFJ General Secretary. "The uprising of the people that threatens to engulf the regime of President Mubarak is not caused by the media. Journalists must not be made scapegoats of this crisis and the violence we see now" [30].

The organization's third and final release on February 4 briefly explained the organization's appeal to European Union heads of state who were meeting that day in Brussels. IFJ, in coordination with the European Federation of Journalists, wrote the group of leaders a letter asking them to "raise the public voice of the European Union loud and clear to condemn these various actions" and to place "sustained international pressure" on Egypt's government. Signed by IFJ President Jim Boumelha, EFJ President Arne Konig, and Aidan White, IFJ/EFJ General Secretary, the release ended with the following statement: "We ask you to make a clear and categorical demand to President Hosni Mubarak and to Egyptian authorities to end the violence and targeting of media, to lift all forms of censorship and to allow all journalists, including Egyptian journalists to work freely" [31]. At their meeting, European leaders called not only for an end to the violence but also for Mubarak to step down as president [32].

Reporters Without Borders took a more direct approach on February 4. Its members and supporters "demonstrated outside the Egyptian embassy in Paris at midday today to express their outrage at the systematic use of violence against journalists in Egypt…." Reporters Without Borders secretary-general JeanFrançois Julliard said the group went to the Egyptian embassy "to denounce the campaign of hate and violence" against foreign journalists in that country. "The photos of journalists who have been injured, beaten, roughed up and arrested testify to an alarming situation of constant harassment designed to stifle news coverage and rid Cairo of the journalists," he said. According to the release, protesters chanted "The news is being killed" and "Egypt, stop violence against journalists." Protesters also carried posters showing journalists who had been physically attacked [33].

The group's second release tallied all of the known "abuses" journalists had suffered while covering the protests in Egypt. Though it was "far from final or definitive," Reporters Without Borders said it provided a "picture of the incredible scope of the campaign of hate and violence unleashed against the international media." The release also included an announcement of the death of journalist Ahmed Mohammed Mahmoud from Al-Ahram. [34]

As Reporters Without Borders noted, Ahmed Mohammed Mahmoud was the first journalist to die during the Egyptian crisis, and he died on Friday, February 4. The Committee to Protect Journalists, which issued a revised release later that evening, recounted the circumstances surrounding Mahmoud's death. He had been shot on January 29 while filming confrontations between security forces and demonstrators near Cairo's Tahrir Square. Though it briefly noted his passing, the primary purpose of CPJ's release was to continue bringing attention to the numerous assaults against the press. The group observed that even though "the extent of attacks lessened after a peak on Thursday," Mohamed Abdel Dayem, CPJ's Middle East and North Africa program coordinator, said it was "stupefying that the government continues to send out thugs and plainclothes police to attack journalists and to ransack media bureaus." He called the situation "doubly outrageous" because Egypt's top leadership had expressed regret for the attacks and promised that such assaults would not happen again. The release concluded with a bulleted list of 14 new attacks against members of the press [35]. The period between February 5 and February 7 marked a gradual decline of widespread violence against journalists, and the three organizations released a total of four press releases during those days [36, 37, 38, 39].

IX. CONCLUSIONS

Reporters Without Borders, the Committee to Protect Journalists, and the International Federation of Journalists issued a total of twenty-nine Egypt-related releases between January 26 and February 7. Even though Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak did not resign from office until Friday, February 11, widespread violence against the media had reached its peak about a week before. Between Tuesday, February 8, and Friday, February 11, CPJ and Reporters Without Borders issued one release each that was directly related to events in Egypt. IFJ issued none.

The press releases analyzed in this research performed two primary functions. All three organizations obviously served as advocates for the domestic and foreign journalists who were reporting from Egypt, and the language used in the releases reflected this. Words such as "condemns," "accuse," "brutality," "witch-hunt," "censor," and "intimidation" have negative connotations and were used often – sometimes repeatedly – throughout these releases to describe or respond to the actions of Egypt's government. These organizations also made direct appeals to international governments and, in the case of Reporters Without Borders, protested at the Egyptian embassy in Paris. These actions clearly go beyond the bounds of traditional ideas of journalistic balance, but this should not come as a surprise. Reporters Without Borders, CPJ, and IFJ were all established in part to support journalists who are under duress, not to function as traditional newsgathering entities.

However, all three organizations did operate as news gatherers during this period, and their releases also reflected that. Each group engaged in the traditional journalistic role of documenting dozens of attacks, detentions, and threats made against journalists who were reporting on the Egyptian protests. The releases included eyewitness testimony, reports from other media organizations, and compilations of everexpanding lists of assaults and arrests. Because they remained primarily focused on what was happening to the journalists who were covering the political story, Reporters Without Borders, the Committee to Protect Journalists, and the International Federation of Journalists were among the most comprehensive sources for that type of information. Through their releases, these three groups consistently held Egypt's government accountable for its actions, demanded safe working conditions, and kept journalists' experiences with harassment and violence in front of the international community.

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