

Hamas disbands journalists union amid continuing incidents



Reporters Without Borders today condemned Hamas' decision on 3 September to dissolve the Gaza Strip branch of the Union of Palestinian Journalists, most of whose members are affiliated to Fatah or support it. At the same time, Hamas has decided to create a Government Committee for the Media.

"Even if the union was very pro-Fatah, this interference in a journalists organisation is unacceptable," the press freedom organisation said. "After its decision to apply a press law going back to 1995 that allows it to step up control of the media, Hamas has again adopted arbitrary measures designed to restrict journalists' freedom even more."

Hamas deputy information minister Abu Hashish said on 3 September that the government would refuse to talk to the union "as long as the journalists are incapable of restoring order in it." Hamas spokesman Tahir Al Nunu, who heads the new Government Committee for the Media, announced later the same day that the union was being disbanded.

This decision comes after widespread criticism of abusive treatment of journalists by Hamas in the Gaza Strip. The union, most of whose leaders fled to the West Bank after the Hamas takeover in June, has already been targeted on several occasions by the Hamas paramilitary Executive Force. Some 15 armed members of the Executive Forces tried in vain on 25 August to arrest Sakher Abu el-Oun, the head of the union's Gaza branch.

The union said in a statement that “those in control of Gaza do not have the right to intervene in the internal affairs of journalists, who are being constantly harassed on a daily basis.”

Meanwhile, two journalists with the Franco-German TV station Arte, Barbara Lohr and Fr d ric Bak, were slightly injured by an Executive Force stun grenade while covering a demonstration by about 10,000 Fatah supporters who had gathered for a collective prayer meeting on a Gaza street on 31 August in protest against Hamas’ control of prayer sites.

It was the biggest demonstration since the Hamas takeover, and 12 people were injured when it was dispersed by the Executive Force. Earlier in the day, Hamas sent an SMS message to mobile phone owners in Gaza advising them not to attend.

In a separate development, radio Sawt Al Hurriya’s Gaza correspondent, Tawfik Abu Jarad, was detained by the Executive Force from 2 to 4 September. He was arrested at his home near Jabalia, in the north of the Gaza Strip, and was taken to a Hamas detention centre for questioning about his work for Sawt Al Hurriya, which has been closed since 14 June.

The Union of Palestinian Journalists condemned his arrest and demanded his release, while Jarad himself went on hunger strike from the first day of his detention.