

## Middle East Report by Christophe-Bachir Vigna

### Lebanon: the last reporters

*The first casualty of the nation-wreckers has been the once-prestigious and modern press community.*

In Beirut, journalism is a high-risk pursuit. Before the war Lebanon had 448 publications and 42 press agencies. As modern as they were prestigious, they became the first target of the shipwreckers of Lebanon.

In 1966, Kamel Mrowa, founder of the journal *Al Hayat*, was assassinated in his office by hired PLO killers. Dozens of others followed—"warning" murders. Called to choose sides, the pens were sharpened and dipped in vitriolic ink. And there was good reason.

In 1976, the pro-Syrian Saika forces carried out a raid on two pro-Iraq publications. Death toll: ten. Months later, a bullet shot from a nursery hit Edouard Saab, correspondent for the Paris daily *Le Monde*, right in the face. The editor of *An-Nahar* is held in Damascus, and will only be released in exchange for 17 post office functionaries who had been arrested for having wiretapped President Franjeh.

After seeing his newspaper blown up, the editor of *Al Hawadat*, Salim el Lozi, anti-Syrian, was also kidnapped and his body later found, atrociously mutilated. Other great professionals of Lebanon journalism, such as Zouheir Chalak or Khalil Brayez, simply and purely evaporated. And that's just a drop in the bucket among the 2,521 disappeared persons reported between 1982 and 1984, including Russians, Kuwaitis, North Koreans, Englishmen, and Frenchmen.

The only remaining reporters are the "scoop" nuts, not content with covering the news from Cyprus or set-

ting up quarters in one of the camps, who go everywhere and take all risks.

The press has become a ghost in Beirut. Once bustling with activity, the Naggat building of the Information Ministry is half deserted. In West Beirut, there are no communications functioning. In the East, you wait for hours for communications and almost all the telephone lines are cut. More terrifying yet is the border between the two sectors, where snipers practice on those who have drunk too much Arrak (the local anisette liqueur). Edouard Iranian, an American freelancer, went to Damascus with a phony passport and thus found himself stuck in East Beirut. The Swiss TV newsman Michel Castelain met the same fate.

In revenge, all the seasoned reporters, who have become masters of the art of managing their sources, are crossing the green line in their own way. We cite Marc Kravetz of *Libération*, or Françoise Chipeaux, whose voice, broken by too many Gitane cigarettes and the vicissitudes she lived through as mistress of a Syrian general, is known all over Beirut. These journalists are often driven around by the chauffeur of Agence France Presse, which, together with the embassy where the Anda generators power the photo lab, is the last symbol of France in Lebanon. The darkroom is fed images by Joseph Barrak, who goes out protected by a helmet and bullet-proof vest—very useful against ambushes and car bombs. Patrick Baz and Karim Daher (Gamma-AFP) use no other armor. Karim sleeps with his two

Canons in his Achafieh apartment, where the shutters remain twisted by the explosion of the nearby refinery. On the floor, artillery debris and the remains of a car-bomb have made their hole among the stocks of film and Coca-Cola. That gives you an idea of the working conditions.

To stay alive in Beirut is to know how to walk on a knife's edge. To interview Walid Jumblatt in the Shouf, we had to go through Aley under General Aoun's artillery. With the escort, we shelled this completely ruined village at 400 ISO, from the church to the cemetery. The earth vibrated as the explosions got closer and closer together.

Nabib Ismail, photographer in Lebanon for 15 years, dreamed of artistic images. Today he runs the AFP photo agency for West Beirut. He lived through his baptism by fire in 1975, when the Palestinians battled the Army in front of the Lebanese Parliament. The journalists went to take cover in the building but he stayed outside, hypnotized, firing his dual-cartridge machine gun until he crumpled, his foot shattered. Carried off on a stretcher by the Red Cross, he has kept a cynicism from that incident that has become celebrated. He is the guy who phoned the Boeing TWA hijackers and asked them to pose with a pistol at the temple of a hostage. The photo went around the world.

Another Beirut "crazy," Issam Dakroub, took a bullet in the thigh one month after he put together the paper *Visnews*. Four months later, he went off to film the battle of Tripoli. Karim and Issam, but also Riad, Ali, and Nadim for UPI, or the Palestinian Sana Issa for *Newsweek*—today, the majority of the press agencies and the papers are represented by locals. Journalistic reality from Lebanon has gone back into the hands of the Lebanese. Getting back to the sources, in a way.