

Reuters employees killed in Iraq

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-Text+LONDON (Reuters) - An Iraqi photographer and driver working for Reuters in Iraq were killed in Baghdad on Thursday in what police said was American military action and witnesses described as a helicopter attack.

Photographer Namir Noor-Eldeen, 22, and driver Saeed Chmagh, 40, were killed in eastern Baghdad, the international news and information company said.

The U.S. military said it was looking into the reports but had no immediate statement.



A preliminary police report obtained by Reuters said Noor-Eldeen and Chmagh had been killed by a "random American bombardment" that killed nine other people.

The report was issued by the al-Rashad police station, the closest station to the scene. Reuters obtained a photocopy of the report. It was based upon witness accounts of the incident and signed by a lieutenant-colonel, the head of the station.

Noor-Eldeen had called a Reuters colleague to say he was taking photographs of a damaged building.

Witnesses interviewed by Reuters in the al-Amin al-Thaniyah neighbourhood said Noor-Eldeen and Chmagh, who also worked as a cameraman's assistant, were near the building around the time a U.S. helicopter fired on a minivan.

"The aircraft began striking randomly and people were wounded. A Kia (minivan) arrived to take them away. They hit the Kia and killed ... the two journalists," said one witness, Karim Shindakh.

Shindakh and three other witnesses said U.S. soldiers came and took Noor-Eldeen's camera equipment, which has not been recovered.

A witness has returned Noor-Eldeen's press cards to Reuters.

TV footage showed the front of the minivan had been badly mangled. There was a large hole in the roof. A pool of blood lay near the curb, while shrapnel marks pocked the wall of a house.

The deaths take to six the number of Reuters employees killed in Iraq since U.S.-led forces invaded the country in 2003 to topple Saddam Hussein.

"Once again we are left mourning colleagues who have met an untimely death while doing their job in Iraq," said Reuters chief executive Tom Glocer.

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"Our sympathies and thoughts are with their families, friends and colleagues today," added Glocer.

"Noor-Eldeen and Chmagh's outstanding contribution to reporting on the unfolding events in Iraq has been vital. They stand alongside other colleagues in Reuters who have died doing a job that they believe in."

Reuters Editor-in-Chief David Schlesinger said the deaths were a tragic reminder of the risks journalists face in covering the war in Iraq.

"The job our reporters do is a critical one - telling the world what is happening on the streets of Iraq on a daily basis," said Schlesinger.

"Reuters will continue to do all it can to protect journalists who must work in dangerous and difficult conditions but still have a right to do their jobs."

Noor-Eldeen was single. Chmagh was married with four children.