IN MEMORY OF FREELANCE PHOTOGRAPHER MOHAMED BEN KHALIFA

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This week, the global journalism community is mourning the loss of Libyan freelance photographer and videojournalist Mohamed Ben Khalifa, who was killed by shrapnel on 19th January while documenting a militia patrol in Tripoli.

Mohamed, one of Libya’s leading photojournalists, had freelanced predominantly for The Associated Press since 2014, contributing over 260 photos and numerous videos that documented the country’s political and humanitarian turmoil. The AP said they were “devastated” by his death and have paid tribute to his "important, impactful" work.

Mohamed’s death brings to the fore the severe threats and challenges that local freelance journalists routinely face in Libya. He was a central and highly respected member of Libya’s shrinking, embattled journalism community – a skilled and safety-conscious photographer who was committed to the power of the camera and to getting stories out of his country, despite the increasing dangers and hostility towards journalists.
Libya’s escalating violence is a major theme in Mohamed’s work, but his images also provide a rare insight into the everyday lives of Libyans during the country’s past decade of instability. He spent years working alongside Libya’s coastguard, producing a unique body of work that documents their ongoing struggle with people-smuggling and captures the plight of refugees and migrants along Libya’s shoreline.

The Rory Peck Trust got to know Mohamed when he attended a five-day workshop that we ran in 2015 as part of an UNDEF-supported project to strengthen the professional and safety skills of Libyan freelancers. Our connection and support continued over the years that followed. As well as being an enormously talented photographer and journalist, he was also a very kind and charismatic man. We send our deepest condolences to his wife, Lamya, and baby daughter Rayan.

During the last few days, Mohamed’s freelance colleagues and friends shared the following memories with us:

RPT’s former MENA Programme Officer Nader Elgadi: “Mohamed was loved by almost everyone in the freelance community and beyond. He was a peacemaker, bringing everyone around him together, and he was greatly valued for his high-quality work. This is a big loss for Libya, both generally and for its already shrinking freelance community. Sadly the conditions are worsening for journalists; many have had to flee or change careers due to the violence and a lack of protection.”

Freelancer Zuhair Abusrewil: “I never met anyone like Mohamed: creative, hard-working, independent, ambitious, brave and a very good colleague, who became one of my closest friends. Mohamed was careful and responsible, so when I was told about his death I kept saying, “It’s not possible”…. He was the best photojournalist I ever knew, and he earned it; he had a sharp eye in capturing life and death, beauty and horror; the apparent and the hidden. Mohamed was, as all journalists in Libya and particularly in Tripoli are, always worried about the insecurity and the arbitrariness facing journalists. But when we were returning from a recent trip he said to me: “What’s important in life if not to leave a good impact and a valuable trace on people?”

Freelancer Bashar Shglila: “Mohamed was very loved by all his friends and colleagues. He was always smiling and welcoming. His death is a very big loss for Libya and for the photojournalism field in Libya.”

Freelancer Abdurrauf Ben Madi: “I still don’t want to believe it. Mohamed’s death is a huge tragedy. He was a true friend, human being and a talented photographer … Mohamed always motivated me to produce stories and photos that show Libya and the Libyan people to the world.”

Freelancer Taha Jawashi: “In his energy, ambition, courage and quality of work, Mohamed went so far – further than all of us here – in the field of photojournalism.”

Freelancer Muhammed Gheith: “It’s so tragic to lose such a good friend and one of the most talented photographers in the country. We all admired his work during these years we got to know him. He loved what he was doing and I believe he became a professional quickly; his work grabbed the attention of many who worked in the media. The Libyan community has felt very sad for his loss. The safety of journalists and photographers here is complicated and needs to be taken in consideration. In my opinion, that complicated environment is an obstacle to many photographers being able to do their best in the field.”