Reporting the War in Iraq: Personal Safety vs. Journalistic Courage – Part A

(This case was assembled by University of Georgia journalism student Natalie Fisher for JOUR 5170, Advanced Studies in Journalism, using various articles and sources. See Works Cited for a complete list.)

The McClatchy Company purchased Knight-Ridder in 2006 and is the third-largest newspaper company in the United States. It also runs Inside Iraq, a blog written by Iraqi reporters who venture outside of the heavily fortified Green Zone to areas that many Western reporters no longer feel safe to go. The journalists who write the blog and report the news for McClatchy's Baghdad bureau expose the dangers of everyday life in Iraq by writing about their personal experiences. Often, they continue reporting in spite of threats and personal attacks. Although they are targeted because they are journalists, they are more closely watched because they work for American organizations. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, more than 100 journalists and news staff have been killed in Iraq since the beginning of the war. 80 percent of those who died were Iraqi. The conflict is the bloodiest for journalists since World War II.

Because of the increasing threat to personal safety in Iraq, turnover rates at McClatchy's Baghdad bureau are extremely high. Beginning in 2004, Ban Adil Sarhan, a 29 year-old Iraqi woman, worked as a translator and intermediary for Hannah Allam, the Baghdad bureau chief of Knight-Ridder Newspapers. At the time, Ban's husband, Selwan Abdulghani Mahdi, worked as a freelance reporter for Voice of America radio.

In a 2005 interview with Becca Rothschild, Ban explained the gravity of reporting the situation in Iraq: "…the insurgents were first killing just U.S. soldiers…Then we started worrying when they started killing American reporters, foreigners, even contractors. Then they started killing the Iraqi translators who were working with the Army, because the insurgents thought of them as spies working with the occupying forces. Then they started attacking the Arab media--Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabiya, targeting the satellite dishes on top of their cars. "

She adds: "Before, it was so easy to wear my press ID. Now I started hiding my ID. We started telling people we were working with a Turkish newspaper or Canadian newspaper. We couldn't even say we were working with an American paper. This means death for us--death for the reporter, the photographer or for the whole staff."

Discuss:
Should Ban and Selwan continue their work?
What makes reporting the news important enough to risk personal safety?
Why not report for a non-American organization?
Does the fact that Ben and Selwan have two children change the circumstances?

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With the violence in Iraq escalating and the danger increasing, Ban and her husband continued their work, despite their knowledge of its risks. Ban gradually noticed a change in her husband's behavior. "He started calling me everywhere, checked on me everywhere, without telling me the reason," she says. "Before he'd call once or twice, now he was calling every hour: 'Where are you? Where's Hannah? Where's the driver? Is there anyone around you?' Sometimes, when I'd wake up in the morning, he'd say, 'Can you stay home today?' and I'd say, 'No, I have work to do. ... I'd never leave my job.' And he'd say, 'OK, but be careful.' But he never told me the reason why."

Soon after Ban noticed these changes, Selwan began wearing a bulletproof vest. Not long after that, gunmen attacked his car when he was on his way home from a hotel where American journalists were staying. Ban and Hannah were also followed for more than an hour when they drove in Selwan's car. Clearly, Selwan was being targeted.

Discuss:
Before, the family knew there was a danger of being attacked. Now, it is reality. What should they do?
In the weighing process, what wins? Personal safety or having a job/reporting the news?

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Soon after Selwan's attack, Hannah, the woman who Ban worked for, asked her to come on a working vacation in Jordan and Egypt. She agreed, leaving her 4-year-old daughter and 4-month-old-son, with their father, grandmother and nanny. This was the first time Ban had ever traveled outside of Iraq.

On a morning shortly after their arrival, Hannah burst into Ban's room crying. She had just received news that Selwan and his mother were dead. Ban immediately called home. Her daughter was also dead. Ban says, "There were no flights to Baghdad until the next morning because of the mortar attacks. I was on the phone the whole time, begging my brother-in-law not to bury them. But in my religion, you can't wait. I said, 'You can bury your mother, you can bury your brother, just leave my daughter until I get home.' He said, 'No, it is done.'"

When Ban finally got to Baghdad, she was informed that a car behind Selwan flashed its lights as if it wanted to pass him. When Selwan allowed it to pass, the car stopped and the people inside opened fire. Six bullets were found in Ban's mother-in-law, eight in Selwan's head and chest and two in her daughter's head. The witness was also shot later.

In addition to this, Ban's brother-in-law found a letter under Ban's gate that read: "Your husband is in hell. Your turn is next. You and your son will be the next killed." The note included a verse from the Koran that read: "Those people who work with the infidels, they deserve to be killed and they will be killed."

Clearly, the attackers knew Ban was back in the country, although she had only been there for a few hours. They killed three members of her family. She later learned that Selwan had been receiving death threats for months, but never told her. They had family in Jordan and Sweden and could have run away.

Discuss:
Why did Selwan choose to stay?
What would you have done?
What should Ban do now?
What is the courageous thing to do? Is there a difference between personal and journalistic courage?
When should you distinguish between courage and foolishness?

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Personally threatened and dealing with the loss of her family, Ban called Hannah. Through various contacts, they, along with Ban's son, a photographer and another reporter, flew to Jordan, where they remained for 45 days in a hotel with unlisted names. They didn't leave until they received a visa to the U.S. Ban told no one where she was going except her brother-in-law and a police officer.

In the States, Ban lived with Hannah's mother in Oklahoma until she was able to get a green card, an apartment, food stamps and health insurance. She also got a driver's license and a car and went to school to learn computer skills while her son was in day care.

Soon after, the Iraqi elections approached. Ban voted in Detroit. It was too dangerous for her father, who had lived in Iraq for 35 years, to even register.

Ban later discovered that some of her husband's cousins were involved in his killing.

She was awarded the International Women's Media Foundation Courage Award in 2007.

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