

Crime reporter “in critical condition” after Amsterdam shooting

By William Horsley, AEJ Media Freedom Representative

Dutch crime reporter Peter R. de Vries, one of the Netherlands’ best known journalists, was shot and seriously injured on Tuesday evening in a street in downtown Amsterdam minutes after leaving the studios of RTL TV.

Amsterdam’s mayor, Femke Halsema, said Mr de Vries was “fighting for his life” in hospital after reportedly being shot five times at close range, including once in the head. De Vries has been the target of numerous death threats during his long career in connection with his exceptional record of exposing the activities of organised crime in the Netherlands.

The BBC reports that police chased and arrested two suspects on a motorway as they drove from the scene, and the men are to appear in court this week <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-57743233> .

The Dutch prime minister, Mark Rutte, called it a shocking attack on a courageous journalist and on “the free press that is critical to our democracy”.

Reacting on social media, European Commission Vera Jourova called it an attack on freedom of the press and democracy, and said those responsible must be brought to justice.

Peter de Vries has an almost legendary reputation for covering high-profile crimes, including the kidnapping of beer magnate Freddy Heineken in 1983. The kidnapper, Willem Holleeder, one of the country’s most notorious gangsters, was later convicted of making threats against the journalist, and in 2019 he was sentenced to life imprisonment for his part in five murders.

In recent years media organisations in the Netherlands have suffered a series of major attacks attributed to organised crime gangs. In 2018 the Amsterdam offices of Panorama and other news publications was shot at with an anti-tank missile https://www.coe.int/en/web/media-freedom/detail-alert?p_p_id=sojdashboard_WAR_coesojportlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&p_p_col_id=column-1&p_p_col_pos=1&p_p_col_count=2&sojdashboard_WAR_coesojportlet_alertId=37599653 , and a van was deliberately rammed into the front of the headquarters in the city of De Telegraaf, the largest Dutch newspaper.

In December last year a hand grenade was found outside the house of De Limburger crime reporter Jos Emonts. The newspaper’s editor called it an attack on the free press and independent journalism <https://ipi.media/increasing-threats-and-violence-against-journalists-in-the-netherlands/> .

The International Press Institute also reported evidence from Dutch monitoring groups showing as many as 141 threats and acts of aggression against journalists during 2020, including many during street protests. IPI said the surge in violent reflected a decline in public trust in the media during the Covid pandemic, linked to conspiracy theories about the media’s role and anti-press sentiment on right-wing social media networks.

The Netherlands has also been in the forefront of coordinated efforts to protect journalists who specialise in crime reporting. In 2018 the Journalists' Association of the Netherlands (NVJ) and the Society of Chief Editors signed a wide-ranging agreement to strengthen protections for journalists' safety with the Justice Ministry, the General Prosecutors office and the National Police <https://europeanjournalists.org/blog/2018/12/05/dutch-journalists-sign-agreement-to-improve-safety-of-journalists/> .

That agreement has led to what are seen as ground-breaking safety mechanisms, including close police protection, a 24-hour emergency hotline, new networks of mutual protection among journalists, protocols to activate rapid response by law-enforcement, and improved access to legal support. However, reports indicate that Peter de Vries was unprotected when he was attacked.

The rise in deadly violence against journalists in all parts of Europe was symbolised by recent cases including the 2017 assassination of Maltese investigative journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia

<https://go.coe.int/fQW09> , the mafia-style killing in 2018 of Slovak crime reporter Ján Kuciak and his girlfriend Martina Kušnírová <https://go.coe.int/kGHvX> , and the murder of veteran journalist Giorgos Karaivaz outside his home in Athens in April this year.

Like Peter de Vries, Karaivaz was shot dead at point blank range by assassins shortly after appearing live on a national TV programme <https://go.coe.int/vwTAM> .

The AEJ and other journalists' and press freedom organisations have repeatedly called for much stronger national and international actions to provide effective protection for threatened journalists and ensure that the killers and would-be killers of journalists are brought to justice. Impunity is seen as fuelling rising levels of violence and abuse directed at journalists only for performing their necessary work of informing the public.

Several suspects have been convicted for the Kuciak and Kušnírová murders, and three men have been charged with the killing of Daphne Caruana Galizia. But in none of the cases cited above have police and prosecutors succeeded in identifying and convicting the instigators or masterminds of the murders.

The Council of Europe's Platform for the Safety of Journalists <https://www.coe.int/en/web/media-freedom> has recorded as many as 33 killings of journalists since 2015. Fatal attacks have taken place in every part of Europe during those 6 years, in Azerbaijan, Greece, Turkey, Malta, Slovakia, Russia, Albania, the UK, Sweden, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Denmark, Serbia, France and Poland.