

Associated Press wants probe into Israel's bombing of its Gaza office

By Raphael Satter
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Washington: The Associated Press' top editor wants an independent investigation into Israel's bombing of a building in Gaza that was home to her news organisation as well as broadcaster Al Jazeera.

AP Executive Editor Sally Buzbee said that her organisation had not yet seen any evidence from Israeli officials to justify the bombing, which levelled the 12-story al-Jalaa tower block on Saturday.



Workers clear the rubble of a building that was destroyed by an Israeli airstrike on Saturday, that housed The Associated Press, broadcaster Al-Jazeera and other media outlets, in Gaza City.

Israeli officials said they carried out the strike because Hamas was operating an intelligence cell out of that office building.

“We’ve heard the Israelis say they have evidence,” she told CNN’s *Reliable Sources*. “We don’t know what that evidence is. We think it is appropriate at this point for there to be an independent look at what happened yesterday.”

Israelis provided advanced warning to civilians in the building, allowing them to get out before missiles obliterated the structure.



The Associated Press' Sally Buzbee, in 2016, left, wants an independent investigation into the IDF's bombing of the building housing the AP.

Speaking Sunday on CBS' *Face the Nation* program, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that there was "an intelligence office for the Palestinian terrorist organisation housed in that building that plots and organises terror attacks against Israeli civilians so it's a perfectly legitimate target."

Buzbee told CNN that while her journalists were unhurt and were now operating out of rival media group Agence France-Presse's offices in Gaza, the attack destroyed a critical node for newsgathering out of the territory.

"We're not taking sides in the actual conflict," she said. "But we are in favour and what we do believe in is protecting the world's right to know what is going on in this conflict or any conflict. This is an important story and because of the actions yesterday, the world is going to know less."

The attack took place one day after Israel's military was accused of misleading foreign journalists by announcing it had launched a ground invasion of the Gaza Strip, then retracting that claim an hour later.

While a spokesperson blamed internal confusion, Israeli media outlets have suggested that officials were deliberately spreading misinformation that would encourage Hamas militants to position themselves where they would be vulnerable to airstrikes.

In the wake of Saturday's airstrikes, some observers pointed out that the Associated Press was one of the few international news outlets that responded to the announcement with scepticism and did not report that a ground invasion had begun.

On Friday, the Israeli military had abruptly announced that its ground forces had begun “attacking in the Gaza Strip,” saying it on Twitter, in text messages to journalists and in on-the-record confirmations by an English-speaking army spokesman.

Several international news organisations, including *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* immediately alerted readers worldwide that a Gaza incursion or invasion was underway, a major escalation of Israeli-Palestinian hostilities.

Within hours, those reports were all corrected: No invasion had taken place.

Rather, ground troops had opened fire at targets in Gaza from inside Israeli territory, while fighters and drones were continuing to attack from the air. A top military spokesman took responsibility, blaming the fog of war.

But by Friday evening, several leading Israeli news outlets were reporting that the incorrect announcement was no accident, but had actually been part of an elaborate deception.

The intent, the media reports said, was to dupe Hamas fighters into thinking that an invasion had begun and to respond in ways that would expose far greater numbers of them to what was being called a devastatingly lethal Israeli attack.

The military’s English-language spokesman, Lieutenant Colonel Jonathan Conricus, insisted that the false announcement had been his own mistake, but an honest one, telling foreign correspondents in a tense conference call early Friday evening that he had misunderstood information coming in “from the field” and had released it without adequately verifying it.

But in the Hebrew-language press, the military was simultaneously being praised for luring Hamas fighters into a network of tunnels in northern Gaza that was pounded by some 160 Israeli jets in a fury of airstrikes beginning around midnight.

“This is how the tunnels became death traps for terrorists in Gaza,” Israel’s Channel 12 news station headlined a report by its military reporter, which called the spread of misinformation to foreign journalists a “planned ploy.”

The Israeli press cited the military as saying the plan had worked. That claim could not be independently verified.

But the possibility that the military had used the international news media to rack up a bigger body count in Gaza generated sharp questions for Conricus in the conference call.

Israeli officials insisted that the call be held off the record, but a *Times* reporter who did not join the call obtained a recording of it from another news organisation. Representatives of the *Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *National Public Radio* and *Agence France-Presse*, all of which had mistakenly reported a ground invasion early Friday, peppered him with questions about whether

they had been turned into accessories to the military, why it had taken hours for the invasion report to be reversed and how they would be able to trust the military's statements going forward.

On Saturday US Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke with the AP's president, Gary Pruitt, and offered his "unwavering support for independent journalists and media organisations around the world," a State Department spokesman said in a statement.

AP, Washington Post, New York Times