

U.S. official says Washington is not seeking probe in murder of Shireen Abu Akleh

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Palestinian schoolgirls at an art exhibit honouring slain Al Jazeera journalist Shireen Abu Akleh in May 2022 at the spot where she was killed in Jenin, in the occupied West Bank.

Washington, August 5 (RHC)-- Despite growing calls for an independent probe into the killing of Al Jazeera journalist Shireen Abu Akleh, who was fatally shot by Israeli forces in May, a top US official has

suggested that Washington does not back such an investigation.

At a hearing on Capitol Hill, Senator Chris Van Hollen grilled Barbara Leaf, assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, over the Biden administration's handling of the incident, raising concerns that the issue is "not getting the attention it deserves."

Van Hollen, a Maryland Democrat, noted to Leaf that Secretary of State Antony Blinken had previously called for an "independent, credible investigation" into the killing of the veteran journalist, who was an American citizen.

"Just a simple yes-or-no question, is that still the position of the Biden administration?" Van Hollen asked.

"We have asked that there be a credible investigation," Leaf responded, seeming to correct him. When pressed further, she added: "I will have to come back to you on that, senator, because that has not been my understanding of where our position was."

Back in June, Blinken said Washington was calling for an "independent" probe into the killing. "When that investigation happens, we will follow the facts, wherever they lead. It's as straightforward as that," he said.

But since then, the State Department has backtracked, telling Al Jazeera that there has been "no change" in the Biden administration's initial approach, which stated that Israel has the "wherewithal and the capabilities to conduct a thorough, comprehensive investigation." That position angered Palestinian rights advocates who argue that Israel cannot be trusted to investigate its own abuses.

Abu Akleh, who was renowned across the Arab World, was shot while reporting from the occupied West Bank on May 11th. Israeli forces attacked her funeral later that month and beat the pallbearers, pushing them so that they nearly dropped her coffin.

On Thursday, Van Hollen told Leaf that many US legislators would be "very disappointed" if the administration is not pushing for an independent probe. "There are a number of us that are not going to allow this to be swept under the rug, and we're looking for answers," he said.

On July 4, the Department of State acknowledged that the bullet that lethally struck Abu Akleh probably came from an Israeli army position, but it framed the killing of the journalist as the unintentional "result of tragic circumstances." The U.S. administration also said a "detailed forensic analysis" of the bullet concluded that it was too damaged to determine its source.

The determination on the lack of intentionality in the killing came despite the US administration's acknowledgement that it did not conduct its own probe. Instead, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said at the time that the conclusion was based on a "summation" of investigations by the Palestinian Authority and Israel.

But the probe by the Palestinian Authority had found that Israeli troops deliberately shot Abu Akleh, who was in full protective press gear. Moreover, several investigations by independent media outlets concluded that there were no armed Palestinians or clashes in the area where the journalist was killed. After Abu Akleh was shot dead, Al Jazeera Media Network accused Israeli forces of assassinating the correspondent "in cold blood."

Van Hollen and other key Democrats wrote to Blinken last month to stress that the July 4 review "does not meet any plausible definition of the 'independent' investigation that you and members of Congress have called for".

Dozens of other U.S. legislators, including some staunchly pro-Israel legislators, had also urged an independent probe with U.S. involvement. Last week, Abu Akleh's family visited Washington, DC, to

press officials on pushing for accountability and demand a US-led investigation. But the slain journalist's relatives were not granted a meeting with President Joe Biden despite repeated requests.

"We want to know who pulled the trigger, and why," Victor Abu Akleh, Shireen's nephew, told reporters outside the US Capitol building on July 28. "And we want there to be accountability for the system that gave the green light, so that other families don't suffer the way that we have."

Abu Akleh is the second U.S. citizen to be killed by Israeli forces in the occupied West Bank this year. Israel receives \$3.8 billion in U.S. military aid each and every year.

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