



When Anton Hammerl left for Libya at the end of March, he had a tiny budget and his cameras. He had contacted a few media organisations to say he was going and there was tacit agreement that they would use his work. But, essentially, he was on his own and the only person he was in regular contact with outside Libya was his wife, journalist Penny Sukhraj, who was on maternity leave after the birth of their then six-week-old baby.

That would have been fine if he got the shots he wanted, sold them to publications around the world and got home with a smile on his face, some published photographs and some money in his pocket.

But that didn't happen. Instead, Hammerl was gunned down by Muammar Gaddafi's forces just five days after he arrived and was left to die in the desert. The journalists he met there and travelled with were witness to his shooting and were then captured by the loyalists and held for six weeks. All the while, Hammerl's family and friends were led to believe the Libyan government had captured Hammerl and were holding him as well.

For six weeks, a small group – including his wife and a few other former colleagues and friends – did whatever we could to try and find him, free him and bring him home. As we were all journalists, we did what we do best and kept Hammerl's plight alive in the media. We also contacted people we knew in governments, and in human rights and journalist organisations around the world, asking for help. We contacted the United Nations, Reporters without Borders, the Red Cross and many others to see if they would help. Many offered to help and some went out of their way to do what they could.



Unai Aranzadi

Anton Hammerl, above, was photographed in Libya by Unai Aranzadi. All the pictures in this section are Hammerl's, supplied by Africa Media Online.

But, there was no media organisation behind him and there was no powerful media mogul who could throw his or her weight around with the government. It was just this small group of journalists who were doing what we could but didn't really have any firm plan or strategy in place. There were times we believed that if our campaign was being run by a national media organisation, Hammerl would have contacted home and more information would have been disseminated about his whereabouts and situation.

Despite this, we gave our all because we had a real sense that the campaign wouldn't last long before Hammerl would be able to go home to his family. We held protests, vigils, sent letters to the South African president and numerous other powerful people, and we wrote copious press releases.

After the fifth week of no news about Hammerl, we asked members of South African National Editors' Forum (Sanef) to arrange a meeting with the Minister of International Relations and Co-operation to find out what the government was really doing about Hammerl's situation.

It was clear that once Sanef was involved and making waves, the South African government wanted to prove it was doing something and was concerned about its seeming inaction with regard to Hammerl.

But the night before the scheduled meeting – which had already been postponed a week – the journalists who were in captivity in Libya were released.

And then the truth came out...

The next day, Sanef still met with the minister who was hopelessly apologetic and blamed the Libyans for lying. The minister was concerned about the potential bad publicity and power behind Sanef.

Had there been a huge media organisation behind Hammerl all along, would we have known the truth earlier? It wouldn't have

saved him, that much we know. But it certainly would have put more pressure on our government to act faster and sooner. It would have alleviated the pressure on this tiny group to make things happen. It would have given Sukhraj a sense of not being alone in this fight.

So, if there is one thing we have learnt in this horrendous situation it is: there needs to be an organisation set up to safeguard and protect freelancers in conflict areas – whether this is in a protest in downtown Johannesburg or the deserts in Libya.

In less than six months after October 2010, South African conflict photographer Joao Silva was severely wounded when he was blown up in a landmine in Afghanistan, South African CNN television reporter Lara Logan was sexually assaulted in the Cairo uprising and Hammerl was killed. Logan was working for CNN and they did what they needed to in order to help her. Silva was a freelancer on assignment for *The New York Times*. The newspaper immediately put him on staff so they could provide the necessary medical and financial help he needed. But Hammerl did not have this.

With newspaper and magazine budgets being cut more and more, they are not sending their own staff to countries in conflict and are relying on freelancers like Hammerl who are willing to take the risk. So, the South African media needs to look after their freelancers so that they are not alone.

We need to make sure that they are trained (as far as possible) to deal with the situations they encounter. We need to ensure there are funds to help them if they are in difficult situations and we need to have funds to help their families do what it takes to get them out, if need be. There are such organisations around the world but not here.

So, there is now a drive to set up the Anton Hammerl Foundation and Trust. The initial idea is that it will provide support for South African freelancers covering conflict. Discussions around this are in their infancy but if anyone is interested in helping with this project, email me on peta@mediak.co.za