



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
The Representative on Freedom of the Media
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15 June 2005

Coverage of the Events and Governmental Handling of the Press During the Andijan Crisis in Uzbekistan

Observations and Recommendations

The OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media has previously issued two reports on the press coverage of events related to crisis situations, and the governments handling of the press during and after such events. Those reports concerned the Kosovo events of March 2004, and the terrorist attack in Beslan, Russian Federation, in September 2004. This is the Representative's third Report on the same subject.

This Report was prepared based on information provided by several international news media outlets, Internet web sites, the *Centre for Journalism in Extreme Situations* of the *Russian Union of Journalists* and on an official answer by the Uzbek Delegation to the OSCE to a letter from the Representative dated 18 May.

Background

The tragic events of 13 May were triggered by the trial of 23 local businessmen in Andijan, who were subsequently given prison sentences.

The information provided by the Government clashes in several respects with the few press reports available. What seems to be certain is that several hundred people, some of them armed, stormed a local jail, and released the 23 businessmen and, according to some estimates, close to 2000 other prisoners. They also occupied official buildings. Several sources report that almost 10,000 people gathered in the city squares (some sources estimated the crowd as being much bigger).

The response of the government security services was to restore order by force.

Lack of public accord on the nature of the events and the number of casualties

There is no accord between the official and the press accounts on the sequence and the nature of the events. The Government neither confirmed nor refuted several reported atrocities.

Similarly, the number of casualties is still a disputed issue. According to the latest government sources, 173 people were killed, 32 of them police officers. According to human rights groups, however, close to 750 died during these violent events.

The gap between the government and press reports on the events, and the differing casualty numbers, are telling signs of a lack of mutually-agreed verification procedures. Information discrepancies are the result of an information blockade; of an incoherent government communications policy; and of a lack of cooperation between the authorities and the press.

The coverage of the terrorist attacks in New York, Madrid, Moscow, and Beslan showed that it was possible for the government and the press to come to an agreement about the number of casualties and their identities only after a while. That did not happen without a conflict of viewpoints either, but ultimately could only happen as a result of restoring freedom of movement for the press, a working government infrastructure for responsive communication with society, and a government policy that is specifically geared to cooperating with the media.

Good co-operation between the government and the press is an important contribution to peaceful solution of crises, and it is part of society's right to information. Working with the press in times of crisis is a learning process, and training could help to ensure it. The Office of the Representative on Freedom of the Media can help organize such training courses.

Information blockade and harassment of journalists

On 13 May, local Internet providers blocked access to the majority of Russian web sites, including the leading news sources www.lenta.ru and www.gazeta.ru.

The leading local web site www.fergana.ru also had problems and at some point had to change providers. Nevertheless, during these events, it was the main most reliable source of information on what was happening in Andijan.

In an official letter to the Representative the Government said that the reason for lack of access was because of heavy Internet traffic.

According to *AFP*, a warning posted on the door of an Internet cafe in the Uzbek capital, Tashkent, read: "Logging onto pornographic websites is prohibited and punished by a fine of 5,000 soms" (4.4 dollars, 3.6 euros). And, further down: "Logging onto political websites, such as www.fergana.ru is strictly prohibited and punished by a fine of 10,000 soms."

Broadcasting of Russian TV programmes in addition to *CNN*, *BBC*, and *Deutsche Welle* was cancelled on cable TV, and replaced by music videos and Uzbek programmes. In its official answer to the Representative the Government informed that the blocking of these programmes was the decision of the private cable owners whose work was not regulated by the state.

Russian TV channels *REN-TV* and *NTV* had several problems. On 14 May, Uzbek police detained a crew from *NTV* at the outskirts of Andijan, confiscated their papers, and told them to leave the city. Police officers escorted the crew back to Tashkent and returned their identity documents five hours later, *NTV* reported.

President Islam Karimov criticised *REN-TV* and *NTV* for “spreading insinuations about the events in Andijan.” At a press conference on 17 May he also questioned what country would allow journalists to cover “military activities.” *REN-TV* was not allowed to cover the briefing.

On 14 May, Reporter Dmitry Yasminov and cameraman Viktor Muzalevsky, from *REN-TV*, were detained as they were trying to enter Andijan. They had travelled for several hours from the capital, Tashkent, and had reached the outskirts of the city when they were stopped by local officials who confiscated their documents and took them to a police station. The journalists were released after several hours but officials banned them from filming in Andijan. Later they were escorted back to Tashkent, according to media reports. According to *REN-TV*’s website, they were not given any reasons for their detention. Since then, they were forced to leave the country.

The Government told the Representative that the reason *REN-TV* personnel had to leave the country was because of a lack of accreditation.

A popular local radio station *Didor* was closed down on 13 May.

On 13 May, Shamil Baygin, a *Reuters* correspondent, and Galina Bukharbayeva, a correspondent for the London-based *Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR)*, were detained by Andijan police and released on 14 May. The Government confirmed the detention for two hours because of the need to check their “identities.”

A journalist from the Russian newspaper *Komersant* was also forced to leave the city. On 15 May, according to the *Centre for Journalism in Extreme Situations*, the head of a local company *SAIRO* that owns the weekly *BVV*, ordered his editorial staff to stop publishing any information on the events in Andijan except for reports coming from official sources.

In an article in *Izvestia* published on 16 May two correspondents reported that local police were checking all cars entering Andijan, asking if the passengers were journalists. Those who acknowledged that were immediately turned back for “security reasons.”

A *Reuters* correspondent near Pakhtabad, a town north of Andijan, said the town was sealed off on 17 May. Local residents said they heard shooting there on Saturday, according to reports from the news agency. *Reuters* correspondent Dmitriy Soloviev was detained for several hours in Bogushamol.

On 18 May, a TV crew from Ukraine's *Fifth Channel* was detained. Prior to this detainment, they had been searched six times and had had to change cars seven times.

Russian Newsweek correspondent Alexander Raskin reported that he was woken up in his hotel by security officers. He asked them what all of the shooting was about. "Oh, we are just finishing off all the ones that made a break from the prison... You should get out of here to Fergana or Namangan, it's safer there. And in five days come back, when we will be finished. Now we can't guarantee your safety... Leave, we won't allow you to work anyway."

The Uzbek media basically had to report only the official views on the events in Andijan. According to www.fergana.ru, Deputy Prime Minister Rustam Azimov sent a letter to local media telling them that the coverage should be based "solely on statements made by our President during the 15 and 17 May press conferences."

The web site itself became a target of an attack in the government newspaper *Pravda Vostoka*, which accused www.fergana.ru and its correspondents in Uzbekistan Kudryashov and Volosevich of "'being ready to sell their mother' to earn their 'thirty pieces of silver.'" "It is known that money does not smell even if it is covered with the blood of dozens of people whose death was also caused by such 'defenders of freedom of expression.'"

This web site was one of the main sources of information for the public; on 13 May alone it received approximately 45,000 hits, six times its daily average. However, it had difficulty getting information. According to the website's correspondent Volosevich "people were afraid to talk to journalists. Security service officers threatened people with harassment and murder if they were to talk to us."

The same newspaper accused *IWPR*, which it referred to as the "Institute for Instigating War", of being a "provocateur." It suggested that the Institute's correspondent Bukharbayeva should try "living in Afghanistan under the Taliban to fully understand the "beauty" of medieval Shariat." *IWPR* was accused of conducting an "information war against our state."

Pravda Vostoka suggested that the names of journalists "who earn their cheap authority on the blood and grief of people" and their photographs should be shown on television.

The editor of *Novosti Kazahdarja* refused to publish his correspondent's report of the events, citing that "during these days we should calm the people, not steer them up. Such stories only inflame the situation."

Local journalist Dzhamil Karimov was fired for reporting on the Andijan events.

On 21 May, cameraman Vladislav Chekoyan of Russian *TVTs* was assaulted by Uzbek border guards on the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan border. Chekoyan was filming a demonstration by about 1,000 people on a bridge in Kara-Suu which separates the two countries. The guards also seized Chekoyan's camera and mobile phone.

In a street meeting in support of the President held on 2 June in the Dzizak region, the local governor accused Uzbek Internet journalists of being "America's lackeys." "All of them are enemies of the Motherland," he told the demonstrators.

On 4 June, Tulkin Karaev, a correspondent with *IWPR* and the Uzbek service of Iranian radio in Karshi, was arrested. He was taken into custody for ten days and was accused of "hooliganism."

The Government should ensure that the harassment of journalists is stopped. The information blockade should be lifted and all journalists should be allowed to exercise their right to freedom of movement as set by relevant OSCE commitments.

18 May press trip

On 18 May a press trip was organized by the authorities that allowed some 30 journalists and foreign diplomats to visit Andijan for 45 minutes. None of them was allowed to talk to residents or to visit School No 15 which was used as a morgue after the 13 May events. Not all journalists were allowed to participate.

Accreditation

Several outlets and journalists complained of having visa accreditation problems. For example, as of 20 May the following numbers of journalists were waiting for visas for Uzbekistan:

17 from Italy;
Several from the UK;
1 from Switzerland;
10 from Japan;
1 from France;
1 from Slovenia;

A group of Ukrainian journalists were stopped at the airport on 19 May. They were only allowed into the country after their Embassy intervened.

Eight *AP* journalists had asked for Embassy assistance in obtaining accreditation; four *New York Times* reporters and one from *Chicago Tribune* are also awaiting accreditation. Requests for accreditation have come from the *Wall Street Journal* and the *BBC*.

The Government in its response to the Representative's letter said that foreign journalists in Uzbekistan can only work after proper accreditation, calling this an "international practice."

All journalists awaiting accreditation should be granted it without delay. Accreditation should be used to facilitate access of journalists to officials and lack of it should not be used to deprive them from the possibility to work.

Legal norms

According to several experts, the legal norms governing the work of journalists in Uzbekistan are considered acceptable if properly implemented. Since no special regime or curfew had ever been introduced in Andijan, the journalists should not have been prevented from doing their job.

Censorship is prohibited under Article 4 of the Uzbek Law on Defending the Professional Work of Journalists.

Article 29 of the Constitution declares that every citizen has the "right to seek, receive and distribute information."

Legal experts believe that the blockade of web sites and TV programmes was in direct violation of the Constitution.

Confiscation of equipment was in violation of Article 5 of the Law on Defending the Professional Work of Journalists, the detention of journalists was in violation of Article 8 of the same Law.

The authorities at all levels should adhere to the laws protecting the rights of professional media workers.

Recommendations

- ***Good co-operation between government and the press is an important contribution to peaceful solution of crises, and it is part of society's right to information. Working with the press in times of crisis is a learning process, and***

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