

ACTS OF TERROR IN THE USA IN THE MIRROR OF UZBEK MASS MEDIA

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Before addressing the terrorist acts in America, a vast majority of Uzbek media has been carefully waiting for the official Tashkent reaction, and did not mention that planes crashed into World Trade Centre, even though everyone knew it.

Information on the tragedy in New York and Washington reached many Uzbek metropolitan newspaper journalists while they were following the international Uzbekistan President's Cup tennis tournament in Tashkent. On September 11, at about 7pm, local and foreign mass media correspondents were accredited to the tournament started discussing the fantastic pictures of attacks on the World Trading Centre in New York and the Pentagon building in Washington. There were satellite antennas at the tennis stadium, therefore competitors and some journalists could view the CNN and DW (Deutsche Welle) on-the-spot live broadcasts. It was later possible to watch what was happening on the Uzbekistan TV and Radio Company's 4th international channel, which selectively relays some transmissions and news programs from two Russian TV-channels, ORT and RTR. At 8pm Tashkent time, the news program "Vremya" started broadcasting on the ORT channel. The special program on the events developing overseas continued for four hours. Other Uzbekistan TV channels did not interrupt their scheduled programs with any breaking news on the events in America. A few American players were taking part in the tennis tournament. One of them, Michael Russell, was the focus of journalists' attention be-

cause he had to play just after the tragedy in his country became known. "This is something to begin tomorrow's reporting with," a central Uzbek newspaper reporter said, after hearing the American tennis player's response to the terrorist attacks, but he then added: "However, there is the question of whether censorship will allow it." Michael Russell had said nothing confusing. His was the typical reaction of a typical person to the tragedy that had befallen his compatriots. However, in Uzbekistan, where censors control the basic mass media, even ordinary human feelings can be considered improper.

A LONG-DRAWN PAUSE

What could one have read in Uzbekistan's morning papers on September 12 about the events taking place in America? Nothing, except some short news reports in the Russian-language newspapers *Norodnoe Slovo* and *Pravda Vastoka*. The former reported the events in its front page column "Panorama dnia" (Panorama of the day), under the title "Acts of terrorism in the US". The latter also published a short report on its front page -almost unnoticed - under the title "News from the Internet". Other newspapers produced in Tashkent on September 12 and distributed in the republic, the Rus-

sian-language *Tashkentskaya pravda*, and the Uzbek-language *Khalk suzi* and *Toshkent khakikati* gave no information on the attacks in New York and Washington. Later that evening reports on the terrorist attacks appeared in the Russian newspaper *Vecherny Tashkent* and in its sister paper, the Uzbek-language *Toshkent okshomi*. Both articles were printed in black font on the front page, under the column titled "World News".

With modern printing technology it was quite possible to publish reports on the terrorist attacks in the next morning's newspapers, as the *Narodnoye slovo* did. One of its employees said that the decision to publish the information was independently made that evening by the journalists responsible for the newspaper edition. No orders from the authorities had been received. Why didn't other newspapers do the same? Journalists clarified that by the time the tragedy in the USA became known in Tashkent, all the morning papers' articles, including foreign news, had been censored. Chief Editors would have had to take personal responsibility for making the decision whether to publish reports on the terrorist attacks. Though censorship did not prohibit the 4th State TV channel from relaying the Russian TV-channel ORT till midnight of September 11, with continuous reports on the developing situation.

ASKED TO KEEP SILENT

However, according to an employee of the Uzbekistan TV and

Radio Company, on the morning of September 12 they were instructed not to publish any information on reactions in Uzbekistan to the events in America before the official opinion of the republican authorities had been formulated. Nevertheless, no constraints were placed on covering the position of other countries concerning the terrorist attacks, and all governmental and non-governmental TV and radio stations in Uzbekistan did this in their broadcasts. On the evening on September 12, Tashkent radio transmitted the message sent by Uzbekistan President Islam Karimov to the USA President George Bush, with his expression of condolence as to what has happened. On September 13 the press published the message, and there later appeared other articles on the opinions of Uzbekistan's citizens about the events in the USA.

The general tone of the statements made, both in Uzbekistan's press and electronic mass media, was as follows: we condemn the terrorist attacks, and we grieve for the victims, but if the world had listened to the numerous proposals made by the President of Uzbekistan to establish an international anti-terrorist centre under the auspices of the United Nations, then there would probably have been no such tragedy. All Uzbeks, from scientists to the retired, demonstrated a good knowledge of the leader's initiatives. "We, elderly people who have passed the long course of life, recall the proposals made by President Islam Karimov at various forums concerning the necessity, first of all, to liquidate the terrorists' financial support centres to prevent such tragedies," the opinion piece of a group of retirees stated in the *Khalk suzi* newspaper on September 14. "Being a citizen and one of Uzbekistan's writers I curse the mean organizers of this act of terrorism. Let

the butchers-terrorists know the anger of Allah," is how Mir-mukhsin, an Uzbek man of letters expressed his feelings on the pages

after a meeting between Uzbekistan President Islam Karimov and Vladimir Rushailo, the Secretary of the Russian Security Council.

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of the same newspaper on September 18. Such articles mentioned that the face of terrorism is well known to the people of Uzbekistan, in particular following the explosions in Tashkent on February 16, 1999. Then the authorities found one of the opposition leaders currently living abroad, Mr. Muhammad Solikh, guilty of the attacks. However, in September the Uzbekistan mass media made no attempt to openly include the opposition amongst the ranks of international terrorists.

LOCAL MEDIA SILENT

On Monday September 17, those sections of the Tashkent population who had access to satellite and cable TV started discussing the reports on Russian TV-channels that Uzbekistan had placed its military bases and air space at the disposal of American aircraft in order to make reprisal attacks against Afghanistan. The TV reports referred to news in the *Washington Post*, which in turn, had referred to the Uzbekistan Minister of Foreign Affairs. Uzbekistan's mass media remained silent. The country's mass media adhere to one rule: only debate political issues after high-ranking governmental officials have given clear public explanations of the event. In this case, explanations were not given until September 19,

The President stated that Uzbekistan did not grant the use of air space and military bases from which aircraft may attack Afghanistan. This was transmitted by local TV, and on the morning of September 20 it was published in the press. However, less than two days later the foreign mass media had sewn seeds of doubt in the Uzbekistan consciousness. They reported that during the weekend three American Hercules aircraft landed at Tashkent. A disclaimer by the American ambassador to Uzbekistan appeared in the *Khalk suzi* newspaper on September 25, where he strongly rejected the reports. Meanwhile, the mass media reported no official reaction on the Hercules story.

NO COMMENTS IN MEDIA

Finally, on September 28, the national press published a statement made by the Uzbekistan President at the extraordinary session of the Tashkent city kengash (a council) of the People's Deputies. Speaking about cooperating with the leading powers in the struggle against international terrorism, Mr. Karimov emphasized: "Everyone should understand that in a time of need we are ready to consider the question of giving our air space for the struggle against terrorists, both to provide security and for humanitarian purposes." No

comment on the President's statement appeared in the newspapers. In his statement, Mr. Karimov also mentioned newspaper and TV reports on the situation in neighbouring Afghanistan. "Our compatriots should clearly realize," stated the President, "that alongside objective, correct reports there are lots of fabrications. The political forces distributing them should first of all

result is that the public cannot distinguish between which those foreign mass media reports which are true, and those which are not." An employee of the Uzteleradiokompany responded: "What could we do, if all our attempts to clarify the situation with the help of the official administration ran into a wall of silence?" A source in the news agency of the Ministry of Foreign

Karimov's speech at a press conference on October 5, where he has expressed his concern that "information attacks and distribution of lies" raised panic and alarm in the the population. At the same press conference President Karimov reported that Uzbekistan had put its air space and one of its airports at disposal of the US Air Force for humanitarian and search and rescue operations.

"Our compatriots should clearly realize that alongside objective, correct reports there are lots of fabrications. The political forces distributing them should first of all seek their own benefit, and act in the information space in their own interests."

President Islam Karimov

seek their own benefit, and act in the information space in their own interests." Obviously President Karimov had the foreign mass media in mind, access to which can be found in Uzbekistan. The Uzbekistan mass media did not rush to understand what was going on. As a result, the Head of State severely criticized the mass media at a press conference on October 5, the day before the American military operation in Afghanistan commenced. He said: "Unfortunately, our press and TV are not providing the population with the necessary information and are giving no explanations about the situation. The

Affairs of Uzbekistan, *Zhakhon*, has stated that they were barred from making any comment concerning foreign mass media reports on the possible placing of air bases at the disposal of the USA.

FEAR FROM REACTIONS

According to the analysis of the International Crisis Group (ICG) of September 28, Uzbekistan kept its mass media under rigid control during the developing events in the USA because it hoped to minimize any possible condemnation of cooperation with America by the population. An indirect confirmation of this can also be found in Islam

While covering the events related to the terrorist attacks in the USA, Uzbekistan's mass media acted at all times with a backward glance to the authorities. Newspapers' world news sections on the developing situation contained no information on any specific forms of cooperation between Uzbekistan and the USA in the course of preparing and carrying out reprise attacks. The reaction of the Uzbek public to the situation was reduced to condemnation of the acts of terror and the necessity of creating an international anti terrorist structure, which the leader of the country repeatedly emphasized. The mass media presented no analysis or expert opinion on the probable negative consequences for Uzbekistan in the event of reprise attacks. For this, the main sources of information for the Uzbek public on the events developing around the terrorist attacks in the USA became Russian TV-channels and the different voices of foreign radio.