

NEW CONSTRAINTS FOR BROADCASTERS IN UZBEKISTAN

By Charos Abdullayeva, Journalist, Tashkent

In October 2001, the Uzbek Government brought in a policy that indirectly impedes the development of the domestic telecom market. This policy, to raise license tariffs, particularly hurts the operations of private television companies.

The Uzbek Cabinet decision, 'On Sanctioning National Duty for the Right of Telecommunication Activities' (October 24, 2001) raised license tariffs for all telecommunication operators to new high levels. This decision also now impacts on the whether or not private operators can continue operations. All sectors are hit badly by the government legislation. They are the internet operators and providers, the satellite communication providers, and also the radiotelephone and pager service providers.

PAYMENT UP, PAY DOWN

This decision has been especially difficult for private operators; many of them will now have to end their activities. Previously the annual national rate for use of a TV transmitter was about \$US300, equal to roughly 30 minimum salaries. Now it is equal to about 340 minimum salaries. The government has refused to comment on the rate increases. However the director of a private TV company, wanting to remain anonymous, said that this 'effort' of the Cabinet had sought to "turn off oxygen for the media". As censorship is prohibited in Uzbekistan, no one is entitled to interfere with media activities,

especially the independent media. "But the operation of our TV station, like probably that of others, is always unofficially controlled by municipal authorities," our interlocutor has said. They believe they have the right to interfere or dictate conditions for broadcasting. Should critical material about drawbacks in the activities of the local administration not be withdrawn from the broadcast schedule the 'war' between the parties would, at best, result in the closure of the TV station."

That was exactly the case of ALC TV company (in Urgench, Khorezm Province), which closed several years ago. However, now some international human rights agencies are doing more to advocate the rights of independent media in the country. Yet, some believe that the Uzbek government has decided to use new methods to impede media development.

Technically, no human rights crusaders could now pounce upon anything in the Cabinet decision despite the problems the new rates are causing. Meanwhile directors of Uzbekistan's private TV companies are wrestling with the problem of where to find money to pay the new rates. It is only a myth that telecasters make big

money on advertisements. As a matter of fact it is the national broadcasting company alone that profits from showing commercials.

Hence private telecasters mainly have to rely on founders and sponsors, but even these are now unable to provide them with sufficient financial support.

For example, Orbit TV company (in Angren), one of Uzbekistan's most successful telecasters, is planning to cut the already low salaries of its staff. Tamara Prokopyeva, Director of Orbit, said the annual license is now equal to two months of the station's budget.

FUTURE DECISIONS

"Whereas previously we used to pay some \$US 300 (in equivalent national currency) for licensing, now according to the governmental decision we have to pay up to \$US 1,706.

This is nearly six times more," Tamara Prokopyeva said. "It means that we have to accordingly raise prices for our services in order to stay afloat; otherwise staff will receive no salaries for four months."

Many other private stations have a double headache: those of them who have failed to pay for re-registration or last year's national duty in time will now have to pay according to the new tariffs.

It means they either have to pay a large amount of money or stop operations until better times rolls on.