

KYRGYZSTAN MEDIA REPORTING ON THE AKSY EVENTS

By Elena Buldakova, Editor of Salam Asia information and analytical bulletin, Bishkek.

The way the Kyrgyz media reported about events in the Aksy District has once again proved the evident thing: information uncertainty around extraordinary events - resulting from the constraints depriving the media of unimpeded work - can only aggravate the existing social contradictions.

On March 17 this year an armed clash between a special police detachment and Kyzyl-Tuu village residents took place in Kyrgyzstan's southern Jalal-Abad Province. The residents were on their way to Kerben village, center of the Aksy District, to take part in the rallies in defence of Azimbek Beknazarov, the parliamentary Legislative Assembly deputy arrested for alleged abuse of office: seven years ago he was an investigator and concealed a specially dangerous crime. In addition the Aksy residents put forward a demand to allocate extra plots of land and re-establish freedom of press and guarantee rights for independent media to obtain and disseminate information.

INACCESSIBLE TRUTH

Radio Azattyk (Radio Liberty) was the first to report about the events. The correspondent cited Stamkul Omurbekov, post office director in Kyzyl-Tuu village of the Jalal-Abad Province, as saying that "special police detachment March 17 brought down fire on Kyzyl-Tuu villagers who were on their way to Kerben village, center of the Aksy District."

Next day it was absolutely impossible to obtain any information from the scene. Telephones of

Kerben village administration office, district department of the interior and other structures either did not answer altogether or a polite voice in the receiver answered the line is crowded. Many journalists could not rapidly go to the place of events. Therefore most of the media during first days of the tragedy mainly used official information in their reports, which was rather scarce and contradictory.

People in Jalal-Abad's neighboring Osh Province first learned about the Kerben events from a short TV report. A range of reasons explains the absence of online reports about the clashes. Firstly, presently the 'southern capital' has no daily periodicals. The most rapid are the newspapers *Ush Sadosi*, *Ekho Osha* and *Osh Janyrygy*, published twice a week. The first issue after the Aksy events were to be released on March 20, or three days later, but they were fully dedicated to Nooruz holiday and hence prepared beforehand. So they did not provide even a short report about the Kerben happening.

Secondly, the concept 'other province's topic' has played its role. Even the leading local journalists were restrained in this respect as though willingly giving the reporting palm to their Jalal-Abad

and Bishkek colleagues.

Thirdly, given their scarce opportunity to touch the ground of the clash, i.e. having almost no access to information, local press has decided not to add fuel to the fire by hasty and unreasoned guesses and conclusions. As far as the media of the Jalal-Abad Province is concerned, they just disregarded the events. The directors explain their stands either by the lack of opportunities for online reporting or by bans from 'the top' to show the videotape, as was the case of the provincial broadcasting company.

WHAT REAL REASONS?

Different versions to explain the Aksy events sounded in the Kyrgyz media. E.g., *Ferghana* weekly published chronicle of events where an interesting detail was reported: "the now former district prosecutor brought his family and belongings and left for an unknown direction on the eve of the events." To all appearances the mass rallies in the Aksy District were prepared far before the bloodshed took place.

Vecherny Bishkek daily (March 18) referred to the clashes between local people and law enforcement detachments in the Aksy District as the "action of hooliganism" and blamed a crowd of hooligans who "started a fight with policemen". The same newspaper stated, "according to preliminary data the main culprit is Tursunbek Akunov (Kyrgyz human rights activist – author) who in every way provoked the crowd for several days running by

making the gathering believe that Beknazarov would certainly be imprisoned.” The governmental news agency Kabar reported the opposition as the culprit of the incident, which “for several months has been blowing up situation in the republic.”

BEKNAZAROV: A PRETEXT

In a majority both public and the media believe that the Beknazarov case was the last straw. According to Arkady Gladilov, editor-in-chief of Komsomolskaya Pravda Kyrgyzstan, the beknazarov case is far not the cause. “People are harassed by poverty and despair, and a smallest thing is enough for people’s patience to be exhausted. Another trouble is that our politicians and law enforcement workers do not know people’s psychology; they are unable to use crowd control methods. In such a situation no other region is secured against this sort of incident.”

The newspaper *Agym* believes, “there were numerous factors of tension – the arrest was just a pretext. (...) the power was less and less listening to public opinion and was mainly engaged in discrediting its opponents.”

A. Abdugafurov, editor-in-chief of the Osh provincial Uzbek-Language *Ush Sadosi*, asks in his article ‘Reason will leave in anger’:

“Isn’t the Beknazarov conviction a fabricated ‘pretext’ for some power-seeking groups to hit their undercover goals?” Same is the opinion of T. Slashcheva (‘History is no lesson for them’ in Slovo Kyrgyzstana, March 19): “Beknazarov is just a next guise for those who are tooth-and-nail seeking power.”

POLITICAL ORIENTATIONS

The redistribution of land units is most likely to be another cause of the Aksy tragedy. It was not by accident that people put forward related demands. As writes a reporter in Slovo Kyrgyzstana, “now that unemployment and internal migration of Kyrgyzstanis prevail the land issue was quite a trump for instigators of disturbances.” As to the district’s sole newspaper *Aksy Turmushu*, published in Kerben village, answering to ‘Whose fault?’ question in the article entitled ‘Anger is enemy, reason is friend’ wrote: “So far no one can give proper answer to this question.”

While regarding other reasons the local media generally keep to the line corresponding to their engagements either with the government or the opposition, all of them are anyhow unanimous concerning ‘the main culprit’: even if all those events were reaction to the Beknazarov arrest, or consequence of ‘ac-

tions of hooliganism’ or were provoked by certain forces, anyway the situation where such things became possible was primarily the result of the policy of local authorities that showed incompetence – or unwillingness – to resolve the imminent issues.

SEEKING OBJECTIVITY

What draws attention in analyzing the Aksy events reporting is the continuously emphasized urge of the Kyrgyzstan media towards objectivity. Editor-in-chief of the capital city’s governmental Slovo Kyrgyzstana, Alexander Malevany, has commented the role of his edition in reporting the Aksy events in the following way: “Our role was looking into the events without bias, without spasms, not rendering a verdict.”

Meanwhile Delo No..., an independent newspaper of the ‘disgraced’ category, has limited itself to publishing different opinions: along with all news conference reports it gave a chance to speak to the representatives of governmental structures, the opposition, and the public. “Given significance of the event we tried to approach it without bias and from different sides,” said Viktor Zapolsky, Delo No... editor-in-chief. “Is it bad or good – let the readers themselves judge it.”