

SOUTHERN TAJIK PRESS ALMOST DEMORALIZED

By Turko Dikaev, freelance journalist, Tajikistan

Newspapers in the Kulyab region, southern Tajikistan, are published only a few times a year. They are issued mainly when the district officials, who control the newspapers, want to address the people. At all other times the media has to solve the problem of survival on its own.

The Kulyab press, or the press of southern Tajikistan, enjoyed a high reputation from the early 1980s until 1994, (that is during and some time after the civil war). Today the Kulyab media are almost demoralized, as they have to face all their obstacles alone. Local powers - who in fact control the newspapers - provide no support to them; the advertisement market does not exist and the international organisations have thus far paid them no attention.

THE WAR-TESTED PRESS

The popularity of the Kulyab press was indeed high. Said B.Ikromov, a journalist from Khujand, "Experts assess the Kulyab press as the most independent - in terms of freedom and openness - among the media of the Tajikistan regions. This seems to be quite a paradox: freedom and openness have manifested themselves neither in Dushanbe, which is the political and economic center, nor in Khujand, Tajikistan's second city economically and culturally. Yet in Kurgan-Tyube and Kulyab there is some openness. The explanation is simple: people in Kurgan-Tyube and Kulyab have been tried and tested by the war; some of them took part in the hostilities. As in the war period the people have remained equal despite of

their social status. There were situations when an ordinary peasant or worker turned out to be stronger than an influential official. This was the background for a press-friendly environment to emerge in the region. That is why newspapers in Kulyab are more valiant than those in the capital."

Nostalgia for the former-days of the Kulyab press echoes in the words of Ms.G.Nazarova, a gender journalist of Women in the Media of Central Asia (WIMCA) in Dushanbe. "As far as the Kulyab region is concerned things are far from what is desired. There's no independent press; and the existing newspapers are few and are seldom issued due to lack of funds. Except for *Kulyabskaya Pravda* all the regional newspapers have become organs of the local *hukumats* (governments); therefore only articles about the achievements of local authorities can be found there. They do not cover the numerous social issues. It's a pity that the newspapers have to keep silent due to a lack of funds when their potential is very good. (We remember articles by the journalists in *Kulyabskaya Pravda* who were very tough and frank; we remember love and care for the nation's future in the materials published in the Tajik-language *Kulyabskiye Vesty*). It's a pity that

we're now losing a highly-skilled school of journalism such as the one in Kulyab," she said.

SUGAR AND PILLS

The area of the Kulyab districts in Tajikistan's Khatlon Region is over 12 000 square kilometers, bordering Afghanistan. Its population is more than 900,000 people. The press situation is as follows: the former regional central city of Kulyab has local newspapers *Kulyabskaya Pravda* (in Russian) and *Navidi Kulob* (in Tajik). Since June 15, 2002 the university newspaper *Anvori donnish* (Rays of Knowledge, in Tajik and Russian), re-started publishing. In addition the city has the *Kulob* government TV studio and Khatlon-press information center, and Support Foundation (backed by the Open Society Institute Tajikistan). Also, the correspondents of Asia-Plus and Novy Tajikistan news agencies and those of the state district broadcasting committee work in Kulyab.

The situation in the region's newspaper publishing area is however, far from radiant. All newspapers in the districts are only published when some authority director needs to use the press to address people. Unfortunately for the local journalists, this only happens a few times a year. In autumn and winter, when darkness envelops all Tajikistan due to energy crises, newspapers are not published at all. The case is the same for the 'large' papers published in Kulyab. It's clear that no critical materials can

appear in an irregularly issued newspaper where the address of the first district official is the feature story. One would suppose that the Khatlon (in Tajik) and Novy Khatlon (in Russian) regional newspapers, which are well-funded (in Tajik terms) by the regional budget, should satisfy readers' information hunger. However, this is not so. The regional government has circulated an instruction to local postal agencies about compulsory subscription for regional newspapers in the remote districts, thus burdening postal workers alone with all issues concerning regional newspaper subscriptions. According to the instruction one can easily find 250 enthusiastic readers of Khatlon and 100 of Novy Khatlon (in the second half of this year), in Kulyab alone.

However, the Pochtai Tochikiston department (the Tajikistan post service), despite numerous appeals by post workers to the city administration for help, has failed to find one person willing to subscribe to these newspapers. The explanation of this fact is simple: during the last eight years the regional central newspapers have not come to this area and have not covered the life and activities of people in the Kulyab area. Therefore it would be equally interesting and useful for Kulyab residents to subscribe to newspapers from Botswana or New Zealand! Meanwhile even the local administration (from whom postal workers wanted help), has subscribed to no papers over the last two and half years.

"Sometimes when despair overwhelms them I am just astonished by the isolation that the Kulyab press suffers," said R.Odinaev, Kulyabskaya Pravda editor. "Our newspaper has been

published since 1944 and has been ever since the republic's most skilled one, which I say without exaggeration. It has always employed journalists - romance-seekers - from across the Soviet Union, and we the locals appreciated the chance to learn from them. During the tragic civil war we were the first to put the motto 'For civil unity and accord', on the front-page where it remains today. At that time we received no appreciation for this motto - simply threats to kill us. However the General Agreement on National Reconciliation and Accord, signed on June 27, 1997, in Moscow proved that we were right and sagacious."

GOOD BASE, NO FUTURE

"The civil war ended and so ended our editorial activities. For me as an editor it is a nightmare to recollect 1995 when we failed to produce even one issue. We had to hide away from the city residents: I had no answers for the whys and whens. After all newspapers had abandoned their titles, when all of them went back to their owners - the local authorities - we kept on sticking to our principles: we have not changed our title and we've not become the organ of the local administration. We've merely signed a founding agreement with the administration. However, over the nine year period our co-founder has never deigned to support us with money or logistics - it has never shown any care about our issues. So that is the alliance. The peanuts allocated to us by the Ministry of Culture and Information are not sufficient even to cover printing costs.

With absolute economic collapse and the lack of any small businesses in the region, no ad-related incomes are possible. So we're struggling with the sole

issue: how to provide at least two issues a month." "However, today there are no privileges either for the organs of administrations," says H.Goib, editor-in-chief of *Navidi Kulob*. "We have no confidence in the future. With every issue one has to bow down, asking for money at each of the administration office's numerous doors." All newspaper editors with whom I spoke are sure about one factor: unless district leaders change their policies and begin to use newspapers in their jurisdiction for adjusting dialogue with the people, the situation will not improve in either media policy or in people's confidence in the authorities.

The region suffers month-long cuts in water, natural gas and power; infectious diseases and unemployment are widespread. No less than 35,000 people have left Kulyab city over the recent two to three years. Total unemployment throws young and energetic men out of the city and the country. Since June 25, 2002 Kulyab has had air communication with Moscow and rail communication Kulyab-Astrakhan is soon to be opened. Given the current migration rates one can easily predict that soon no one but old people and children will remain in the region.

NO CRITICISM BUT HINTS

"Sometimes my heart aches when I see how people suffer," says M.Soniev, veteran of Kulyab journalism. "I'd want to write and to shout for the whole region! However there are no regular newspapers and besides, even if I were to write, it is not every editor that would risk bringing my 'cry' to the reader. This despair is oppressing; the lack of regular practice results in skill degradation. So it may happen that if sometime later they need us it may turn out

that we've lost all our skills." "Unfortunately this is true," admits R.Odinaev, Kulyabskaya Pravda editor. "Some ideas in journalistic materials have to be 'combed'. There's a strict necessity to do this. Whereas we have no helpers or partisans in the administration office, every room in this office has someone willing to close a newspaper on any pretext (or without a pretext). So we have to use Aesopian language in order to say something between the lines, to hint at the authorities' inertia." The Kulyab mayor office director, Sh.Kakimzoda, is sure that all newspapers must be liquidated. Not only does he use any pretext to disallow independent journalists from any of the official action (whether it is the visit of a high-ranking official or a celebrity), but he also creates all possible obstacles for journalists of his own district newspaper. "It's clear that they will not close the newspaper but this careless attitude is unsettling," Kulyabskaya Pravda editor continues. "I've already forgotten that I'm a newspaper man," journalist D.Shamsov says. "I work for television, for radio, and I go to Kazakhstan and Russia in search of a living. It's difficult to define the authorities'

attitudes, but they neither help us nor congratulate us on our professional holiday on March 11. If information comes saying that the President is going to meet with journalists in Dushanbe, the authorities quickly begin to arrange some 'action'. However, journalists themselves gather money for such actions. But even then, such actions are extremely rare; I don't remember when it last happened."

LOCAL MEDIA IN DANGER

"It's a problem only if there is a need for a regional press as it looks now," said Prof. I.Usmanov, the President's State Adviser, at the conference held by the Association of Independent Media of Tajikistan in Kulyab in January 2002. "Probably it would be more reasonable that two or three districts share one newspaper. Different options are possible. We'll try to answer this question in the uniform information space concept now developed by the analysis and information department of the presidential executive office." "While we have been waiting for mercy from local administrations, the other media have made good progress," R.Odinaev says. "We feel envious when we read about some newspaper rehabilitation

projects exercised by some international organisations in Dushanbe and in the north. We've written a project to rehabilitate our newspaper, and we hope it will find support in the UNDP Tajikistan office. If we only gain at least minimum financial independence from official structures we will have some things to tell our readers."

Probably the UNDP Mission would provide support to the southernmost Tajikistan region, where the media development situation is very problematic. Yet journalists realize that a one-off aid project would hardly solve the whole situation. The media and information department of the presidential executive office has for several years been talking about developing its said, "uniform information space concept". Not only are 11 newspapers in Kulyab waiting for media activity support, but so are 250 newspapers all around the country, the overwhelming majority of which are regional ones.

"I'm just sick and tired of being in a sort of nowhere land: am I a journalist or someone else?" a former journalist, now a security worker, told me. "So I've quit - but my heart and soul is still with you, believe me!"