

# TAJIK NEWS MEDIA DO THEIR BEST TO DEFEND HUMAN RIGHTS

*Turko Dikayev, reporter, Tajikistan*

**Tajik journalists are more concerned with advocating freedom of expression and access to information rather than human rights at large. The economy of Tajikistan still has little to offer its citizens. Journalists make a sober analysis of the situation, trying not to aggravate it.**

*Reporteurs sans Frontieres* (France) recently publicized a document significantly headlined, "Frequently Asked Questions", which reviewed the current condition of news media throughout Central Asia. The mass media of Tajikistan, by all standards, were classified as enjoying maximum freedom (also in dealing with human rights issues). This time the US Department of State expressed no concern about Tajikistan imposing limits on freedom of the press, as would have been the case in previous years.

Lidiya Isamova, editor of the IWPR office in Dushanbe, finds the *'Reporteurs sans Frontieres'* report to be quite fair in relation to Tajikistan. She says that Tajik newspapers have become bolder and more considerate in dealing with human rights issues over the past two years. Newspapers like *Tojikiston*, *Biznes I Politika*, *Asia Plus* and *Najot* regularly publish stories on this subject.

## TOPIC NOT YET PRIORITY

"The general attitude to the press in this country has radically improved over the past year or two. The mass media, though, have yet to overcome their internal phobia, that is to say self-censorship. They still fail to publicize in newspapers or via television everything they would very much like

to. Moreover, considering that ministries and institutions open to the press are still very few, journalists who learn of human rights abuses choose the least dangerous subject for criticism. Whatever, our newspaper does not keep away from the human rights focus," says deputy editor of the newspaper *Asia Plus*, Marat Mamadshoyev. "It is our common practice to safeguard the rights of consumers and labor migrants in foreign countries (to collect evidence we even sent our correspondent to Moscow). Much to our regret, the majority of the media has yet to select this subject as a top priority."

## RESISTING HARASSMENT

Some time ago, the newspaper *Krim-Info* carried an article advocating the citizens' benefit of counsel. The newspaper's editor, Fotima Turayeva, told this reporter about what happened next. Among the players in the article was a corrupt prosecutor. Yet, even after the court found the publication to be true, the prosecutor's office issued a warrant to seize files from *Krim-Info* and started calling the editor in for questioning under the pretext that it was going to carry out its own administrative investigation.

It was only a warning that she would appeal to the President through the newspaper that some-

what cooled the prosecutors' ardor. It should be mentioned, though, that friends of the prosecutor in point are still harassing the newspaper. "We have one more subject on our hands," says Fotima Turayeva. "It dates back to quite awhile ago. A few under-age boys were accused of theft. After they grew up they were sentenced to various terms in prison. The Supreme Court let the sentence stand. There are a lot of points in the case that make the court ruling questionable. The national legislation, though, does not permit the media to run such publications prior to a ruling being made - regarding press intervention as a means of pressurizing the court. But now that the ruling has been upheld by the Supreme Court we face charges of attempting to rock the foundations of the state if we come up with another publication on this issue."

## MEDIA LEFT TO ITS OWN

Commentators point out that Tajik mass media are now quite able to stand up for themselves. As a well-known political analyst, Rashid Abdullo, put it, he would never have thought the media would dare launch debates over the unlawful decision of the license committee at the State Television and Radio Broadcasting Committee which had refused to grant a broadcasting license to the independent radio station *Asia Plus* four years ago. Or take publications sparked by the scandal surrounding a group of employees of the independent television

channel SM-1 in Sogd province. They had come close to being forcibly recruited into the military service. Not a paper left unnoticed a case where labor migrant rights were abused by Russia, when it arbitrarily deported Tajik migrants from Russian cities.

Chairman of the Independent Mass Media National Association of Tajikistan, Nuriddin Karshiboyev, also admitted he did not expect that the Association's statements over the abuses of the citizens' right to collect and spread information would be published both by independent and government newspapers like *Narodnaya Gazeta* and *Kulyabskaya Pravda*, nationally and regionally. Moreover, some news media carried their own comments on the facts in point.

### CRITICISM UNNOTICED

The weekly *Tojikiston* has carried forty-eight publications since November 2001 with more than half being devoted to human rights abuses as far as housing, benefit of counsel, employment and freedom to hold any political or religious views are concerned. According to the editor, Khurshed Atovulloyev, more often than not the weekly receives anything but serious responses to its publications. Some contain threats but none recognizes human rights violations.

Awhile ago, the weekly ran a remarkable story that is still in progress. The story featured a guy brutally beaten up by a few thugs during a wedding in a village in Sogd province. The publication triggered a statement by the General Prosecutor demanding that the Sogd provincial prosecutor's office start an inquiry into the case. The latter, though, sent a reply saying that it was quite aware

of the facts but it could do nothing as the suspects had left the district in question and the prosecutor's office didn't know their whereabouts in order to look for them. The newspaper continued its own probe only to learn from the victim's father that the suspects proceeded very coolly to live in the same district. The provincial prosecutor's office replied that it still could do nothing as one of the suspects was serving his prison term in neighboring Uzbekistan, the second shifted the blame on the first while Uzbekistan was not responding to requests from the prosecutor's office. Meanwhile, the suspects continue to live undisturbed in the very same district...

### MEDIA GETS FACTS RIGHT

The only independent information channel in the south of Tajikistan is currently the *Mavchi Ozod* (Free Wave) television studio located in the Voseh district, Khatlon province. Virtually every day it broadcasts features concerning human rights violations by district authorities. But according to the studio's director, Rustam Buriyev, sometimes they purposefully close their eyes to abuses of human rights in regard to employment, free health service and education, etc.

"Since the state is currently unable to ensure these rights in full we don't find it good to focus public attention on these issues. We will achieve nothing except depreciate the value of our programs. All the same, there is nothing we can really do to help people in this respect no matter how many kilometers of film we spend," says Rustam Buriyev. This is why the studio chooses to track the consumers' rights abuses in water and energy supplies, housing

maintenance, etc.

### HUMAN RIGHTS IN FOCUS

There are people still wondering whether Tajik mass media should regard human rights abuses as a top-priority at all. Says political analyst Rashid Abdullo: "True, in no way should human rights be ignored. Meanwhile, I should not recommend to give a dramatic turn to the situation. Look, 83 percent of the population is living on the verge of poverty or even below the poverty line. What will come out of it if all news media from issue to issue start biting the government for failure to provide everyone with a job and wages enough to lead a decent life? It is a thing impossible to do now. We'd rather give a thought to another point. The rights are guaranteed by the state and if the state during one period or another is not in a position to fulfill its guarantees this means that the state system needs to be taken care of in the first place. Let's not forget also the utter anarchy that our country was in just five years ago and that we are trying to creep out of. We have yet to change the national mentality or social psychology. At present, though, everyone is seeking to survive alone. It would be sheer Utopia and voluntarism to believe that life can be brought to normal and human rights observed overnight. Let me repeat it once again, what we need today is to ensure that our country does not fall behind other democratic nations in evolution at the same time without whipping up the democratization process. As regards the consolidation of mass media we have attained a great deal of success. On the agenda today is getting any problem treated by the media in a quiet manner - then everything will be okay."