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## BATKEN PRESS PRESENTLY UNABLE TO ADDRESS BURNING ISSUES IN THE REGION

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**Nowadays, Batken Oblast media in Kyrgyzstan, handicapped by logistical problems, are unable to concentrate on the burning issues of the region in spite of the public's high demand for news.**

The Batken oblast of Kyrgyzstan was established in 1999 by an edict of President Akayev to strengthen the southern frontiers of Kyrgyzstan and to prevent the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) militants from entering the Kyrgyz territory. The Batken Oblast has its own features, distinct from other Kyrgyzstan regions, that challenge the government's efforts to develop the new region. Above all, the region's area alternates chequer-wise with Uzbek and Tajik enclaves, hampering communication with other parts of Kyrgyzstan. Roads, gas pipelines, service and electric power lines, waterways of different jurisdiction run through this area. Recently, the government and the national press began to attach more importance to disputed territories, enclaves, customs stations and border control check-points, land and water disputes. Prior to addressing all these issues, the strengthening of political power infrastructure and the resolving of regional social and economic problems were placed higher on the agenda. The national budget was, and still is, too thin to support the needed huge financing. Under the circumstances, the local press could have helped spot singular oblast bottlenecks. However, due to the scarcity of the economic, technical and human resources of the Batken media, they have failed to fulfil the mission.

### OUTLETS OF BATKEN

Currently, three media outlets exist in Batken to keep the local population in the picture. There are two state-run newspapers, *Batken Tany* ("The morning of Batken"), and *Kyzyl Tuu* ("The red banner"), and *Radio Salam* which functions as a project of the Public Foundation For International Tolerance in the oblast centre. *Batken Tany* was established in mid-January 2000, backed by the oblast governor, Mamat Aibalayev. To date, its total circulation, reaching 4,000, is distributed by subscription. Public press subscribers in Kyrgyzstan are usually employees paid from the public budget. Other groups have no choice but to stay ignorant about its publications. "Those who get wages can afford the newspaper, which is usually shared with other people", says Oroz Tagayev from the Samarkandek administrative area. Another public newspaper, *Kyzyl Tuu*, distributed within a district, is in a more desperate condition. With a circulation of 1,300 subscribers - much smaller than that of *Batken Tany* - the outlet hardly makes ends meet. Established back in Soviet times, the edition has barely changed since, still being packed with the same journalists, headlines and topics. "We exist for our subscribers, informing them about local news, teachers and doctors. The first page is traditionally occupied by official news and letters from our readers concerning drinking water or transport problems, etc.", explains the publication's executive secretary, Aitbai Giyazov. The contents of both periodicals take us back to the Soviet epoch, except that words like "communist", "Soviet", or "party" are not so often spotted today as heretofore. The difference between the two newspapers is barely noticeable despite the wide gap that lies between their years of

establishment. *Radio Salam* was set up to broadcast qualitative and unbiased news for the Batken population, consolidating young people and raising their level of culture and education”, says its programme director, Maksuda Aitiyeva, dwelling on the station's ideology. The problems of drug addiction or rank-and-file people and topical programmes for youth are often on the air. The Public Foundation For International Tolerance sponsored the establishment of the *Radio Salam* Station, using grant money. This organization was the first to realize the need for an independent information source. February 2001 saw its first broadcast and the station’s call signals can now be heard in every home in Batken. The radio station’s popularity is growing not only among the youth, its target audience. Since its opening, the faces of all Batken people have become more cheerful and open.

## **MONEY TALKS**

In an economy and social sector crippled by crises, a switch over to market-led relations was a hurdle too high to clear for many media outlets. The financial and logistical standing of Batken periodicals, especially of the two public ones, leaves much to be desired. For instance, *Batken Tany* has just one PC in its office, while *Kyzyl Tuu* cannot afford even that. The staff can only dream about professional and office equipment. In the new millennium, Batken's press still employs mechanical typewriters, which are both morally and physically obsolete. The wages of media people in both outlets are very low, averaging about US\$20 per month. The *Radio Salam* channel is an exception as grant money permitted the raising of monthly salaries to \$70 - \$100. Funds from some international organizations helped the studio and radio review rooms to be equipped with state-of-the-art equipment. Unequal working conditions and payrolls have an impact on penmanship and stories published. Journalists employed at public outlets would not, for example, jolt along in an old bus to get to a remote place like Leylek and cover the local water problems of the Sumbula rural administrative area for a mere couple of dollars. Hence, the newspapers’ articles are primarily feed-back from official sources. And, the greater part of local newsmen eat their humble pie and do not seek to get out of the squeeze. Yet, things appear to look better for the electronic media. All travelling allowances, project outlays, or contingencies have been paid since a long time. All media people are eager to become real professionals, to master skills through attending international meetings. The difference is that some people venture out while others take a waiting attitude. “We’d like to attend training courses and workshops and share experiences with metropolitan colleagues. Only our superiors can take business trips to Bishkek, and the rank-and-file employees do not have any opportunity for this”, complains Aitbai Giyazov.

## **DUMB WITNESSES**

Journalists from Batken seem to shun burning and sensitive issues. An area with complicated border, communications, resources problems like Batken would open up opportunities for local media people and, above all, attract the attention of the public at large to these problems. Local journalists prefer to keep away from matters related to inter-ethnic relations, border, customs, land and water disputes, incursions of Islamic militants. “ We seek to avoid heightening tension in any situation. We do not rush to give a critic without checking the evidence thoroughly”, says Tashmahamat Orozov, editor-in-chief of *Batken Tany* . Sometimes these checks drag on and the material loses its topicality. Meanwhile, other media do not waste an opportunity to look into the topic. In spite of logistical independence, *Radio Salam* is also cautious in handling sensitive themes. That stems from the scarcity of skilled staff and the Radio’s status. “ We avoid publishing items that might lead to a conflict.”, says Maksuda Aitiyeva. “ To put it more precisely, our station does not look into topics related to religion or ethnicity as the atmosphere in the region is tense enough as it is, and the latter is staggering under economic difficulties. We are aware that our publications can provoke clashes”, continues the Programme Director. However, topics like activities

of the oblast authorities or the invasion of Islamic militants receive extensive coverage. The *Kyzyl Tuu* newspaper also gives rare attention to specific topics of the region. Preference is given to news coming from official sources. “In order to dispel rumours, we use information furnished by the press secretary of the governor, military units, and local district administrations”, says Aitbai Giyazov. But, the readership opts for diversified sources. “ Non-governmental media give a more reliable account of events. Independent newspapers, unlike the official press, draw more interest from the public ”, mentioned Raushan Tolubayeva, leading expert at the social sector department of the Batken region state administration.

### THE FOUNDER RUNS THE SHOW

Relations between the editorial staff and the founders are quite usual for the local media as the latter are prone to have a finger in the editorial policy. For example, *Batken Tany* managed to capture the attention of the public, nation-wide, just once. It happened when it made public a secret memorandum between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan permitting the passage of the Uzbeks to their Sokh enclave located in the Batken area. Kurmanbek Bakiyev, Prime Minister of Kyrgyzstan, who signed the Memorandum had to answer unpalatable questions raised in Parliament. A scandal like this would have had grave consequences for some officials. Nevertheless, the Batken Region Governor, Mamat Aibalayev, and Mr. Tashmahamat Orozov, editor-in-chief of *Batken Tany*, are still in office. The editor-in-chief claimed that old local men had got hold of a copy of this memorandum in Uzbekistan and had brought it to him. The story does not sound very plausible since the governor had participated in the negotiations on the Sokh enclave and, spilling the beans, would have jeopardized his staying in office. And, on his part, the editor-in-chief would not have dared to make it public without receiving the go-ahead from his boss. The assumption about the paper arriving from across-the-border had not a leg to stand on either. It is more probable that Mr. Mamat Aibalayev, himself, gave sanction to publish the evidence to achieve his own ends as relations between the governor and the prime minister were heard to be strained, to put it mildly. The presence of the founder at *Radio Salam* is felt, notwithstanding it being a non-governmental media. The station, operating under a Public Foundation for International Tolerance project, is designed to focus on the social problems of Kyrgyzstan’s society and to stave off inter-ethnic tension. Since maintaining good relations with power is instrumental, *Radio Salam* cannot afford to assault the local government. A story, broadcast about skirmishes between the militants and the regular army on the night of 25 July 2001 in Kadamjay district, showed who was the master in the oblast. A few hours later, special service agents and employees from the press department of the governor arrived at the radio office. The visitors 'midly' rebuked the radio staff for undue haste in releasing the news. Otherwise, *Radio Salam* has not had any serious problems with the authorities. Maksuda Aitiyeva attributes that to the need for the Foundation itself and its activities.