

Afghan Government Issues 'Guidelines' Forbidding Filming of Taliban Attacks, Citing Journalists' Safety

On March 1, 2010, Afghanistan's National Directorate of Security (NDS) announced a ban on news coverage showing footage of live attacks by Taliban insurgents. Afghan officials claimed that the images embolden Islamist militants, a March 1 Reuters report stated.

According to the Reuters report, Afghan officials said journalists will only be allowed to film the aftermath of attacks, and only then after receiving permission by the NDS. Journalists filming while attacks are underway will be held and their gear seized. "Live coverage does not benefit the government, but benefits the enemies of Afghanistan," NDS spokesman Saeed Ansari said, according to Reuters.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai's office defended the new policy as benefiting both journalists and the Afghan people. "While there is an operation going on, the journalists' lives are always in danger; it doesn't mean we are censoring the media," said Waheed Omar, a spokesman for Karzai, in a March 2 *New York Times* story. "We will find a way to protect journalists' lives and to prevent enemies from using those live broadcasts for their benefit."

The announcement followed widespread "minute-by-minute" news coverage of two deadly suicide attacks in Afghanistan on February 26, the March 2 *Times* story reported. According to *The Times*, the coverage "provided ammunition" to Karzai's opponents who have criticized the ineffectiveness of the Afghan government.

"The government should not hide their inabilities by barring media from covering incidents," said Laila Noori, who monitors media issues for the Afghanistan Rights Monitor, according to the March 1 Reuters story. "People want to know all the facts on the ground whenever security incidents take place."

Afghanistan's Interior Ministry denied that the new measures amounted to censorship. "The letter from the police chief does not say that we ban media coverage," said Zemary Bashary, the ministry's spokesman. "When there is a suicide attack, the journalists will not be allowed to get into the scene of the attack for their own safety."

"Secondly," Bashary said, "live coverage of the attacks is prohibited because of recent attacks in Kabul, which showed that the insurgents were using the live broadcasts to their own benefit."

The prohibition on coverage was criticized by several media groups, including some who called the measure illegal. "Any limitation on freedom of speech and freedom for journalists contravenes the Afghan Constitution and the media law," said Mohammad Abdullah, a legal adviser to an independent Afghan television channel, in the March 2 *Times* story. "No one can stop the broadcast of television, and no one can

make an obstacle for giving information to the people of Afghanistan . . . it not only contradicts Afghan laws, it contradicts the international principles of freedom of speech.”

In a March 2 Reuters story, Omar said the new guidelines had not been finalized yet, but preliminary reports had been misunderstood. “I think I can ensure you [sic] that it’s not the way it’s been interpreted. This is not an attempt to restrict the work of the media,” Omar said. “I would not call it restrictions. There is nothing even discussed or conveyed to the media called restrictions on the media.”

Robert Mahoney, the deputy director for the Committee to Protect Journalists, criticized the uncertainty created by the new measure in a March 2 statement. “It is for news organizations to determine whether it is safe for their staff to report,” Mahoney said. “The Afghan authorities should allow reporters to work freely and clarify whether it is considering restrictions on broadcast coverage.”

According to the website for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), the Taliban itself criticized the ban. The site included a statement in a March 3 story in which the Taliban called the new measure “a flagrant violation of the recognized principle of freedom of speech.”

“The monopolization of activities of independent mass media outlets by the Kabul Puppet Administration is a clear-cut violation of norms and regulation of neutrality, independence, and liberty of speech and has no justification in the light of national and international laws,” the statement said, according to the RFE/RL story.

Farida Nekzad, editor of the Kabul, Afghanistan-based Wakht News Agency, said she was concerned the media situation could worsen, according to the RFE/RL story. “These kinds of signals raise concerns,” she told RFE/RL. “I think these are the restrictions that begin with requests and suggestions but eventually might have very serious consequences for the journalists. I don’t see a good year ahead for the journalists.”

In a March 5 interview on National Public Radio’s “On the Media,” Saad Mohseni, the director of the Afghan-based Moby Media Group, said the ban could backfire on the Afghan government.

“In a city the size of Kabul, you can’t avoid hearing the explosions and the gunfire. The public doesn’t want to watch this because they’re bored. They want to watch what’s going on because they need to know. They have kids at school. They have partners at work. People get very, very stressed not knowing,” Mohseni said. “The government could use this medium to reassure the public. It can cordon off the area to ensure that the media doesn’t get too close, but it cannot ban the media. You cannot kill the messenger.”

The Silha Center *Bulletin*

Winter/Spring 2010: Volume 15, No. 2

Silha Center Staff