AMARC
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Content

By Bettina Ruigies

To visit Central Asia's first and only community radio – one has to be an adventurous traveller. One option is crossing two mountain ranges of the Tien-Shan on bumpy roads, which at an altitude of 3500 meters also bear the risk of snowstorms during summer. The other option is to pass twice the Kyrgyz-Kazakh border, also a rather unpleasant experience after the two former Soviet countries have become independent states.

Radiomost reporter Akilaj learns to milk a horse while visiting traditional shepherd families on their summer pastures. Fermented horse milk is Kyrgyz national drink.

It is the landlocked situation of Talas Province that gave good reason to launch Radiomost in 2007. In the so-called information age, this remote region in the northern part of Kyrgyzstan seems to be spared the information that, for instance, would be vital for young parents to feed their children properly or for farmers to use their land more efficiently. Thus, bridging the information gap was the main motivation of the NGO Mediamost to start the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) funded community radio project in 2004. What seemed to be an easy undertaking eventually became a test of endurance for all stakeholders.

Radiomost reporter Nazira visits her most extraordinary listener for an interview. This farm high up in Talas hills does not have electricity for more than 24 years. But the wife listens to Radiomost thanks to battery-operated radio.

A revolution and unnecessary bureaucracy made the NGO wait three years for receiving the licence. Many of the former stakeholders had given up the project in the meantime. With the support of UNESCO and Gesellschaft fuer Technische Zusammenarbeit /Center for International Migration (GTZ/CIM) a new team of students was trained to run Radiomost. It was also very important to develop the guidelines for the community radio, which is a totally new concept in this region.

Radio is well known even in remote parts of Central Asia. In Soviet times a radio was installed in almost every household through which the citizens were informed. And to this day the local and central government are the sources of news. It is currently Radiomost's main task to explain to the citizens of Talas the mission of the community radio and how they can participate in the radio programme. Paradoxically, this community radio is looking for its community.

In a framework of a project funded by the European Union (EU) Radiomost has created a network of village reporters. During field trips the team visit villages in Talas province and prepare reports. Interestingly there was so much to discover for the radio journalists within their own district - masters of

Station Manager Gulmira Osmonova and adviser Bettina Ruigies in Bhaktapur, Nepal in March, 2009

traditional crafts, local poets, untold stories about human trafficking and migrants' problems.

By and by the village representatives gain trust in the community radio and provide local news. Also a growing number of village reporters engage in the bi-weekly talk show. They are becoming more confident in producing topics for the radio. In the framework of the International Program for the Development of Communication (IPDC) project, Radiomost is experimenting with innovative programming formats, like a soap opera for the radio. Inventive program formats should help differentiate between community radio and the conventional radio. As programme schedule is kept very flexible, the volunteers are encouraged to take a creative approach to their radio.

In March, 2009 Radiomost's station manager, Ms. Gulmira Osmonova and I had the opportunity to visit community radios in India and Nepal. During talks with leaders of community radio or related organizations, we understood that over the years, community radio has become an institution that is acknowledged by the people and by the authorities. So far, Radiomost is the only community radio in Central Asia but now we know what it takes to make it a movement as well.

Some facts about Radiomost

Owner: Public Foundation Mediamost
Launched: July 2007
Total hours of broadcast per day: 14 hours
Staff: 20
Transmitter: 250 KW
Potential listeners: 150,000 people
Website: www.radiomost.org
Email: Bettina.ruigies@web.de, mediamost@inbox.ru

Bettina Ruigies is a Journalism Expert working with Radiomost in Kyrgyzstan and can be contacted at Bettina.ruigies@web.de or bettina.ruigies@cimonline.de.

Dear Reader,

Please write to us if you are interested to publish short profiles (not exceeding 700 words) in the AMARC Asia Pacific e-newsletter. The e-newsletter is a bi-monthly publication and the next issue is due for end of June 2009. Your contributions (please send photos too) will have to be emailed to us by the first week of June for the upcoming issue. Our email address is suman@wlink.com.np.

– Editorial team.

<u>AMARC Asia Pacific Regional Conference cum Assembly 2009</u>

PARTNER PROFILE: VOICES

By Divya Wesley

Established in 1994, VOICES is a development communications NGO based in Bangalore, India. We are concerned with democratisation of the media. VOICES support the role of media in an effort to create a world without prejudice where people are empowered to make informed choices and live with dignity. To this end, VOICES advocates media for change through media production and dissemination, media training and action research, development education, and networking and consultancy. Programmes focus on community radio, community-to-community capacity building (strengthening media capacities of less privileged communities), women in media, disability, information technology and social change, campaign communications and peace.

We have partnered with the following organizations and continue to do so – PLAN International (India Chapter), International Deaf Child Society, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), Commonwealth Education Media Centre for Asia (CEMCA), Action Aid, University of Surrey, University of Colorado and World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC).

Our stakeholders are our trustees. We are a small team situated in:
No 361, I Floor, 3rd A Main,
2nd Block, 1st Stage,
HBR Layout
Bangalore – 560043
India

You can contact us through phone on: +91-80 – 25442707. For more information you can visit our website: www.voicesindia.org or mail us at: voices4all@gmail.com

Divya is the Project Head of VOICES and can be contacted at divya.wesley@gmail.com The Second Regional Conference cum Assembly of AMARC Asia Pacific to be held in Bangalore from 10 to 13 October, 2009 is being hosted by VOICES, India.

For regular updates on the Second Regional Conference cum Assembly of AMARC Asia Pacific, please visit: http://asiapacific.amarc.org/index.php?p=2_Conference_Asia_Pacific_2009

You can also contact the following for information:

❖ AMARC Asia Pacific Regional Office, Kathmandu, Nepal,
   email: Prativa_chhetri@asiapacific.amarc.org

❖ Ms. Divya Wesley, VOICES, Bangalore, India, email: divya.wesley@gmail.com,

❖ AMARC International Secretariat, Montreal, Canada, secretariat@si.amarc.org

AMARC EXPRESSES SOLIDARITY AND SUPPORT FOR FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IN FIJI ISLANDS

27 April 2009, Kathmandu. The World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC) is seriously concerned by the deteriorating political situation in the Fiji Island and by the state of freedom of expression following the 30-day state of emergency declared on 10 April, 2009. Under the decree of emergency, local news reports critical of the government have been banned and international media coverage subjected to censorship.

Ashish Sen, Vice-President for the Asia-Pacific Region of AMARC has said that the worsening situation in Fiji coupled with widespread media censorship and harassment of journalists has seriously jeopardised the functioning of the free media in Fiji. Extending his support and solidarity to the people of Fiji, Ashish has commended the continuation of women's community radio broadcasts pioneered by the AMARC member femLINKPACIFIC. "We view the work being carried out by femLINKPACIFIC as an important step towards empowerment of the Fijian society and leading towards reconciliation and harmony. I call upon the Fijian authorities to recognize community radio as a distinct sector of communications and to support its inherent capacity to promote peace by enabling women and other marginalised groups to participate in conflict prevention, conflict resolution and peace building," he said.

AMARC has taken serious note of the curtailment of media access and freedom of speech, and the disregard for judicial independence in the Fiji Islands. The World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters is particularly concerned that the recent developments have placed serious restraints over the community media sector. AMARC calls for the protection of civilians including media personnel, and safe guarding of constitutional rights and freedoms as underpinned by principles of democracy, justice, transparency, and accountability.

AMARC and its members all over the world will continue to carefully watch the unfolding situation in Fiji, and support human rights and freedom of expression in the Fiji Islands.

AMARC is an international non-governmental organization serving the community radio movement in over 110 countries, and advocating for the right to communicate at the international, national, local and neighbourhood levels. AMARC has an International Secretariat in Montreal. It has regional sections in Africa, Europe, Latin America, and Asia Pacific and offices in Brussels, Buenos Aires, Kathmandu and Nairobi.

For more information, please go to www.asiapacific.amarc.org or contact: Suman Basnet, Regional Coordinator, AMARC Asia Pacific, Kathmandu, Nepal, suman@wlink.com.np

COMMUNITY RADIO STATIONS UNDER ATTACK IN NEPAL

Cases of harassment of community radio stations continue to grow at an alarming rate in Nepal. Between March and April this year, at least three community radio stations were threatened with closure and the staff intimidated with threats of dire consequences.

On April 22, 2009, Radio Parbat, the only community FM radio in Parbat district was shut down indefinitely following threats from local Maoists cadres. The station went off-air after cadres of the ruling Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) threatened to bomb it. According to Tulasi Ram Sharma, Vice Chairman of Rural Awareness Society that runs the radio station, phone calls had been received with threats to bomb the station if it did not stop broadcasting immediately. The Maoists had been

issuing threats against the station alleging irregularities in dismissal of the station manager and accountant of the station. Earlier, a group of youths vandalized the main door of the station and warned of serious consequences. Later a torch rally was staged in front of the radio's office.

On March 21, 2009, Radio Mukti, run by a women's group and located in Butwal in Central Nepal was vandalised by a group of students from the Butwal Multiple

UN Special Rapporteur Mr. Frank La Rue visited the AMARC Asia Pacific Regional Office in Kathmandu. Mr. La Rue was in Nepal in February 2009 in support of the International Press Freedom and

Campus for broadcasting news about the postponement of counting of votes of Free Student Union election in the Campus. Windowpanes were smashed and a vehicle was damaged by the assailants. According to Ms. Kabita Sharma, Station Manager of Radio Mukti, Bimal Giri, who identified himself as Deputy President of All Nepal National Independent Student Union (ANISU-Revolutionary), the student wing of the Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), made several phone calls to the station threatening it of serious consequences. "I urged him to stop threatening us over the phone. Instead, I invited him for an on-the-air discussion on the matter, which he declined. He spoke very rudely and threatened me of rape and death." Earlier that same day, a top level Maoist leader Bam Dev Chhetri had condemned Radio Mukti and several other media outlets in a public rally in the same district. He had accused Radio Mukti and the others of working against the ANISU-R and the Maoist party.

Earlier in March, Mahakali Community Radio located in Kanchanpur district in far Western Nepal was harassed by group of people associated with the Unified Communists Party of Nepal (Maoist). According to Khem Bhandari, Executive Director of Radio Mahakali, the station sought police protection when a group of people announced their intent to attack the radio station saying that it did not agree with the radio's position on the ongoing campaign for establishing a University in that district. Local residents of Kanchanpur district, unhappy with the delay by the Government in setting up a proposed University in the district, had been carrying out a series of protest programs. The station supported their campaign. The Maoist, who had earlier extended their support withdrew it later and announced that it would attack the radio station for supporting the campaign. The following day, large group of people armed with sticks and canes moving towards the station were intervened by the police and curfew was imposed following clashes. However, a group of about 100 persons continued to approach the station from another side following which the station appealed to the police as well as the listeners for protection. "About 80 listeners arrived at the station after the appeal," said Bhandari. The police protection was removed from the station on March 16, after the matter seemed to have quietened. "However, we are constantly under fear of attack and are working under great risk. We have not heard anything from the Maoists so far but it's very hard to say what they might do next," said Bhandari.

PS: Kabita Sharma was awarded the Freedom Forum Award for Bravery in Journalism for this year on the May 3, 2009 on the occasion of World Press Freedom day. On May 4, 2009, the Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) led Government resigned and continues to function as the caretaker at the time of publication.

Community Radio Solu FM has been awarded the Best Community Journalism Award for 2005 by Nepal Press Institute and the Local Media Recognition Award from Shikhar Sangam Nepal in Solukhumbu for 2006. The station has also been awarded by the Communication Corner (of Ujjyalo FM Network fame) as best partner on the occasion of the CC's eleventh anniversary. Solu FM is situated in the Solukhumbu district of Nepal, home of the tallest mountain of the world, Mt. Everest.

Community Radio Malika (FM 102.8 Mhz.) announced test transmission from April 5, 2009. It is run by Karnali Integrated Rural Development and Research Centre (KIRDAC). The station will cover communities in far western region of Nepal and can be accessed by around 300,000 listeners of that region. It will work to ensure people's right to information, support freedom of expression and human rights, and promote democracy and rule of law. For further information, please contact the following: Gorkha Bahadur Thapa, Email: rkfm105.2@gmail.com

FIJIAN MEDIA: GROPING IN THE DARK

By Nina Somera

Two weeks since the proclamation of the 30-day state of emergency, scores of Fijian media and social movements continue to grope in the dark, performing their duties albeit with extreme caution.

A few weeks ago, the country's Supreme Court deemed the current administration illegal, prompting Fiji's President Ratu Josefa Iloilo to dismiss the 1997 Constitution and members of the judiciary and reinstate the 2006 coup instigator and military chief Frank Bainimarama as the Prime Minister. Declared last 10 April 2009, the state of emergency prohibits both local and foreign media from reporting news that put the military and the police in a bad light. Some editors and journalists have already felt the whip of censorship through suspension and deportation.

Amnesty International's researcher Apolosi Bose claimed a palpable climate of fear throughout the islands these days. "There is a very strong military and police presence on the streets, particularly around strategic locations such as government offices and in the nation's newsrooms. That is a constant and intimidating reminder that the new military regime will not tolerate dissent and will follow through on the warnings it has issued to critics."

femLINKPACIFIC, a feminist communications organisation that runs a community radio is among those subjected to censorship by the military. As Coordinator Sharon Bhagwan Rolls shared, "[We send] our broadcast log and community news collation to the Ministry of Information prior to each broadcast. We are also being intently monitored when we are on air (a community radio volunteer received a phone call when she was on air and was told we were being monitored). I have subsequently had to clarify with the Ministry that they channel all communication to me rather than cause extra anxiety to our young women volunteers who, I have to say, are coping marvelously."

She added, "Even if we are communicating within an eight - 10 kilometer radius, it is an important space that we will work hard to retain. We just hope the rural broadcasts can continue too...Ultimately though, with information and communication channels being tightly controlled rural women will be (are being) further marginalised and isolated."

femLINKPACIFIC has also been advocating the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UN SCR) 1325 which mandates the meaningful participation of women in peace-building processes.

Various national governments and international organisations have criticised Iloilo's latest move in an apparent series of media repression in Fiji. The World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) has urged churches and leaders to articulate their concerns on Fijian's struggle to "regain their right to communicate." The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) also asserted, "The introduction of blanket censorship during the emergency calls the government's commitment to restoring democracy into serious doubt." Meanwhile, Reporters without Borders observed, "The military government is heading dangerously towards a Burmese-style system in which the media are permanently subject to prior censorship."

Iloilo has remained the Head of State since the December 2006 military coup led by Bainimarama. The "new" administration which now continues to govern through Presidential Decree has stated that they plan to remain in power until 2012.

With these latest political developments and pronouncements, the Fiji dollar has plummeted by 20 per cent, most likely to cause grave impact on women who are already struggling to cope with a very depressed economy. Bhagwan Rolls reiterates that what is needed now is critical mediation and dialogue in the true "pacific way" by the Pacific Forum Leaders and the UN and Commonwealth Secretariat.

"There really is no self-correction mechanism. What is needed is not just platitudes but real action to support civil society and women to engage in providing alternatives to what has been decreed towards a return to parliamentary democracy," she said.

This article was published in we! e-Newsletter on 23 April, 2009. Nina works as Media and Information Communication Associate at Isis International and can be contacted at nina@isiswomen.org

Feature

INFO SANS FEAR OR FAVOUR

By Ashish Sen

In a welcome move, private FM channels in India will be able to broadcast news freely

Amidst the media's understandable pre-occupation with the recent global melt-down and continued terror threats at home, an important news byte seems to have been relegated to the back-burner. After years of advocacy and lobbying, it seems that news will soon be allowed to be broadcast on private FM radio. According to recent reports, the Information and Broadcasting Ministry has approved 261 private FM channels to broadcast news.

The endorsement is long overdue. For a country that prides itself on democratic precepts, it is baffling why news broadcast over radio should remain the monopoly of AIR (All India Radio) alone. Article 19 of

our Constitution celebrates the right to communicate without fear or favour. But there seems to be substantial disparity between its letter and spirit.

The ban on news broadcast and private radio seems even more schizophrenic since the same rules do not apply to television. Private and community television channels have broadcast news since their inception. At a time when the right to information has formally entrenched itself as a critical ingredient for good governance, it would not take more than common sense to realize that the right to communicate the requisite information is provided an equal playing field. After all, information without communication can be relegated to gathering dust on the shelves or being reduced to dead wood.

There are other factors that indicate it is still too early to cheer, leave alone celebrate. News broadcast and news reportage cannot be equated with breaking news. The fact that private players will be allowed to use news feeds from All India Radio and Doordarshan does not substantially demonstrate media democratisation or equity. First, does this mean that all news sources would emanate from AIR or Doordarshan? If so, there would be no breaking news or original news stories from our private players in radio. Admittedly, an umbrella that spans AIR, Doordarshan, United News of India, Press Trust of India and other "authorised news agencies" represents a considerable clutch. But is it sufficient?

The good news is that private radio stations will be able to go beyond music, music and more music. But these tunes will not be sufficient to address the issues of media pluralism and diversity. Most of the agencies that have been specified fall under the umbrella of government agencies.

There are other issues that need reckoning with. For instance, why has the community media tier been given short shrift? Given that the government recognised public, private and community radio as legitimate entities in their own right, why should the latter be denied the right to broadcast news?

A year and a half ago, in a national consultation on enabling community radio to strike deep roots in the country, the government emphasised the relevance of local information for local needs and went as far as to articulate that the country had room for about 5,000 community radio stations across the country. Confronted by the question why news should be banned on community radio, the official response was that the whim of a pen could not silence freedom of expression.

However, more than a year later, "mum" continues to be the word as far as news broadcast and community radio are concerned. The only difference is that the silence on the community front seems to be more deafening now that the green signal has embraced both the public and private tiers.

There is also a larger question that is bound to strike home if you read between the lines. The government's treatment of news as a "precious" commodity would certainly undermine the vitality of news in terms of access, reach and even credibility. Moreover, the official definition of what constitutes news remains unclear. As a participant at the same national consultation raised, "The marriage of my sister in the village constitutes news. Should this be banned?" Further dialogue on the issue could well move from the sublime to the ridiculous. Experiences across the world have demonstrated that, there are ways to circumvent bans without breaking the law. An example from Nepal during its tryst with monarchy and emergency come to mind. To control news, broadcasts were banned from local and community radio. But their efforts came to nought when community radio stations started to "sing" the news. We may not want to dance to this tune — but then necessity is well known to be the mother of invention.