

News site blocked after covering Tajik official's murder

New York, July 24, 2012—Authorities in Tajikistan blocked domestic access to the independent regional news website Asia-Plus on Monday after the outlet reported on the murder of a high-ranking security official and its aftermath, according to news reports. The Committee to Protect Journalists calls on the government to immediately restore access to the site.

The Tajik state communications agency told local Internet service providers to block access to the site, the Tajik service of the U.S. government-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty reported. Asia-Plus reported that authorities had not provided them with an official explanation for the blocking. The censorship order was imposed after Asia-Plus reported on the murder of Abdullo Nazarov, a top regional security official, in Khorog, the capital of the southeastern Gorno-Badakhshan region, news reports said.

After the murder, Tajik authorities sent military forces to Khorog, where at least 40 people were killed in clashes with local militants reportedly responsible for Nazarov's death, news reports said. Authorities had accused Tolib Ayombekov, a local border guard commander, of being involved in the murder plot and refusing to hand over the suspected killers, the reports said. But in an interview with Asia-Plus, published Monday, Ayombekov denied it all and called for an independent probe into the murder.

Asia-Plus was the only local news outlet that reported on both sides of the conflict in Gorno-Badakhshan, according to Nuriddin Karshiboyev, head of the Dushanbe-based National Association of Independent Mass Media in Tajikistan. Karshiboyev told CPJ that the blocking was related to the outlet's independent coverage of the clashes. "It is not the first time that the state agency acts as a censor, and imposes restrictions against the independent media without an official probe or a court order," he said.

"The murder of a security agent and the ensuing violence demand independent reporting that reflects all sides, and Tajik authorities should not be blocking this information from reaching the public," CPJ Europe and Central Asia Program Coordinator Nina Ognianova said. "We call on the government to restore access to Asia-Plus without delay."

It is the second time this year that authorities censored the independent press, CPJ research shows. In March, the state communications agency temporarily blocked domestic access to several independent news websites as well as Facebook, citing scheduled technical maintenance as the reason, news reports said. Authorities did not explain why those particular websites had to be shut down.

Tajik authorities have also imposed media blackouts in the past, CPJ research shows. In September 2010, the government told local Internet providers to temporarily block access to Asia-Plus, Ferghana News, and several other news websites after they accused the defense ministry of botching a counterinsurgency operation.

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