

Tajiks Urged to Stop Attacks on Free Media

October 19, 2010

The  Moscow Times

DUSHANBE, Tajikistan — Europe's main human rights and security body, the OSCE, has criticized Tajikistan over its maltreatment of independent media and urged it to improve its record.

Since Sept. 29, several Tajik and foreign news web sites have been inaccessible in the Central Asian nation, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe said Monday in a statement.

A number of independent newspapers and printing houses had been subjected to tax inspections, after which the printing houses refused to print a number of independent newspapers, citing technical reasons, the OSCE said.

"The practices of blocking web sites, preventing newspapers from printing and launching tax or prosecutorial inspections ... are serious non-compliance with Tajikistan's OSCE media freedom commitments," senior OSCE official Dunja Mijatovic told Foreign Minister Hamrokhon Zarifi in a letter.

Mijatovic, the OSCE's representative on freedom of the media, urged Tajik authorities to recognize the importance of media pluralism and "reverse the ongoing deterioration of the media freedom situation in Tajikistan."

Foreign Ministry spokesman Davlatali Nazriyev said the Tajik authorities had received the OSCE letter but denied the charges.

"I dare say, Internet sites are not mass media, according to legislation," he said. "This is not only our legislation that states this, but also the legislation of countries in Europe. As for newspapers, no newspapers were shut down, while the suspension of some of them is due to purely technical problems."

In the letter, Mijatovic raised cases pending against several local papers, several of which were facing closure because of disproportionate damages award by courts in libel cases brought by officials.

"I believe such actions [against media] are an initiative of some state officials responsible for the country's ideology and keen to show that they are handling the situation in conditions of political instability," said Zafar Abdullayev, director of private news agency Avesta.

Avesta's site has been also blocked by the authorities. The agency had published critical opinions about official policies.

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