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IWPR reporting of interethnic clashes in Kyrgyzstan during the summer held up as paradigm of responsible journalism.

Activists, analysts and journalists say they relied on IWPR reporting as a rare, unbiased source of information during the interethnic conflict in southern Kyrgyzstan this summer.

They all pointed to IWPR as one of the few sources that managed to produce calm, balanced and accurate reporting during a period of apparent chaos.

The turmoil started in April this year when the authoritarian Kyrgyz president Kurmanbek Bakiev was ousted from power.

This was followed by interethnic fighting in and around the southern cities of Osh and Jalalabad in June, which left at least 330 people dead and homes, shops and official buildings ruined by looting and arson attacks.

"When colleagues from abroad turned to me with questions what was happening here in Kyrgyzstan I sent them IWPR reports received via email and told them that this information is the most trustworthy," said Lira Karagulova, head of the NGO Intercultural Education.

Karagulova was among activists who arranged for a team of military psychologists, who worked with survivors of the 2004 Beslan tragedy, to visit Osh in the wake of the conflict.

While she also reads Russian and Kyrgyz media outlets, "when it comes to events in the south that were a painful topic for the whole country I would prefer to turn to IWPR reports".

These articles reflected the reality in southern Kyrgyzstan as described by colleagues who live and work there, she said, adding that she attributed this to IWPR's neutral, unemotional style of reporting.

"I like that your journalists also raise the questions, like what should be done to help solve the conflict," she continued.

Observers described an apparent sense of disorientation among journalists due to the unprecedented scale of the conflict in Kyrgyzstan.

"International, as well as local media, faced problems," said Sania Sagnaeva, senior Central Asia analyst with the International Crisis Group. "Access to information was restricted, particularly to official sources."

This meant that many media outlets presented a biased view, she said, a problem exacerbated by a scarcity of reliable sources.

"Mass media were easily supporting any version, having talked, let's say, with one expert or with one official representative, glad that it was possible to get a comment from someone," said Sagnaeva.

Moscow-based Alexander Sobyenin, head of the strategic planning service with the Association of Border Cooperation and also an expert with the analytical group Pamir-Ural, said he found IWPR coverage one of the most objective sources of information on the political turmoil in Kyrgyzstan.

"If in other media outlets the tendency was visible to present one side of the conflict as suffering more than the other, in IWPR reports there was absolutely no sign of siding either with Uzbeks or Kyrgyz," said Sobyenin, who is originally from Osh.

Sobyenin said he read with great interest the views of ordinary people from the local community who talked about their first-hand experience of violence and the cost the devastation had caused to their lives.

"As a reader I liked to read about the personal view of a person who has been there and had to live through it," he said.

Aida Baijumanova, the executive director of the NGO Citizens Against Corruption, and a regular IWPR reader, who frequently forwards IWPR reports to partner organisations and foreign colleagues, singled out the Osh coverage.

“Out of all IWPR articles that I read in your newsletter and receive via e-mail list, I especially liked those about the Osh events,” said Baijumanova.

According to Ayzatbek Beshov, Bishkek-based correspondent for BBC Russian Service, who also covered the interethnic clashes, IWPR’s conflict reporting should be held up as an example for local media.

Beshov said that the reports were well-balanced and gave views of all sides involved in the events, adding, “It seemed to me that, overall, journalists who wrote the reports stood outside the story, without prejudice, the way it should be.”

Dina Tokbaeva is IWPR Kyrgyz editor.

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