

## **New Paper Promises Independent Voice**

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The first daily paper in the north of Afghanistan promises to take on local commanders who still dominate the region.

Shafiq Payam, the editor-in-chief of Baztab, Reflection, a new daily newspaper in Mazar-e-Sharif, is a man with a mission – to break the hold that local warlords have on the media.

“Through Baztab, we want to establish freedom of expression in the north,” Payam told IWPR. “Even though it could be dangerous, we think that if we publish facts and reflect the demands of the community, people will support us and no powerful figure will be able to keep us from doing our job.”

In addition to Mazar-e-Sharif, the capital of Balkh province, the paper is available in the neighbouring provinces of Samangan, Jowzjan, Faryab and Sar-e-Pul.

There are currently about 60 publications in these northern regions, but Baztab is the first daily to be published there.

In its very first edition on April 14, the paper included a piece highlighting complaints by local people that a militia commander in Sar-e-Pul was extorting money through violence and intimidation.

Judge Sayed Mohammad Samay, head of the northern branch of the Independent Human Rights Commission, pointed to the article, which carried the name and picture of the accused commander.

“It is a fact that some local commanders are oppressing people in the northern provinces, but up until now no one has published anything about it here,” he told IWPR.

People need to know what is happening, but the media is often too timid to take on local strongmen.

“The media situation in the north has improved, but journalists do need to be more daring in publishing facts,” he concluded.

At an informal monthly press club, journalists told IWPR that they are reluctant to cover sensitive or controversial issues for fear of reprisals.

In November, a local journalist, Islamuddin Mayel, claimed that he was detained and beaten by men loyal to General Abdul Rashid Dostum, a former military commander whose support base is in Jowzjan. Mayel’s alleged offence was to steal and publicise a videotape said to implicate Dostum’s men in war crimes.

Another publication in Mazar-e-Sharif, called Andisha-e-Nawin, was taken to court after publishing allegations that a local hospital was mistreating patients.

Baztab is a four-page tabloid printed in black and white. The first issue had a print-run of 1,000, but

demand has risen so quickly that Payam is planning on printing 5,000 a day in the near future. The paper has a total staff of seven, who used their own money to start it up.

Baztab focuses on social and political themes and includes international news culled from the internet as well as locally produced pieces.

But Payam is not opposed to a lighter touch, since he was editor of the satirical *Kilk-e-Rastgoi* (The Finger of Truth) before taking on this venture.

“Truth for the people, education and entertainment are the main functions of this daily,” he said.

Payam has five reporters on staff, four men and a woman. All have received training in journalism from various international organisations including IWPR and the BBC.

“All the journalists who work with us are aware of international press standards, so our publications are going to be based on international journalism,” he said.

The local government claims to be pleased with the latest addition to the media scene, saying it reflects favourably on progress in the north.

“The government has no problems with the media and will cooperate with them in any way we can,” said Atta Mohammad Noor, the governor of Balkh province. “This daily can criticise any government structure in order to make officials aware of their faults and to make people see the facts.

“The appearance of an independent daily in Balkh shows that freedom of expression is assured in this province.”

Ordinary people welcomed the appearance of Baztab.

Mohammad Azam, a shopkeeper in Mazar-e-Sharif, speaking for many, said he’s pleased with the new paper, “At least I can now get information about daily events through the paper.”

Although the paper is sold at the affordable price of two afghanis, Payam believes he will be generate adequate revenues through paid circulation and advertising.

Northern Afghanistan has long needed a daily paper, said Qayoum Babak, chief editor of the *Jahan-e-Naw* (New World) monthly.

“Publication of this daily is the beginning, and it will encourage journalists and other media outlets to publish the facts,” he said. “The effect of a daily in this region is like a nuclear bomb.

“I think that if this type of publication spreads, the warlords’ hold on the north will collapse.”

Sayed Yaqub Ibrahimi is an IWPR staff writer in Mazar-e-Sharif.

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