

Poison Gas Shuts Georgian TV Station

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In the latest blow to media in Kutaisi, the entire staff of a local television station are hospitalised by a gas leak.

The entire news staff of the Kutaisi television station gathered last week at midday for their traditional daily news meeting. Forty minutes into the meeting, as they were discussing the news agenda for the day, one of the journalists, 23-year-old Irma Cholodze began to feel unwell.

"First I found it hard to breathe and then I felt nauseous," Irma said later. "I wanted to go out into the corridor but I could not even stand up. I felt dizzy and my ears rang."

An hour later the studio was completely empty. Eighteen staff were taken by ambulance to the town hospital where they were diagnosed as suffering from "mass intoxication by an unknown gas".

Kutaisi television resumed broadcasting only on April 30, six days after the poisoning incident. The journalists are back at work but are still having medical tests. A week later, however, no one is any clearer as to what exactly happened to them and why.

The episode was the latest and most disturbing of a series of incidents directed against the non-official media in Kutaisi, Georgia's second city, which many are linking to parliamentary elections this autumn.

In February, Kutaisi Television had its property confiscated on the grounds that it had not paid the rent. The company rejected the charge and the dispute is being fought out in court.

The city's only independent radio station Dzveli Kalaki (which translates as Old Town) is also in court after being accused of having irradiated the surrounding region with its equipment.

The station went off the air for two weeks earlier this year before the courts allowed it to reopen. Then at the beginning of April a crowd broke into the radio station and destroyed its antenna. Dzveli Katakai is not broadcasting until it can find the money to buy a new one.

The latest incident, however, has shocked the city. A criminal case was opened on the day of the poisoning and a group of specialists inspected the radio building over several days. They discovered high levels of a carbonic gas and acetone fumes and concluded it was only possible to work in the building wearing a respirator.

However, the experts could not agree on where the gas had come from and whether its release had been an accident or a deliberate attack.

"We have had special equipment working in the television studio non-stop ever since that fateful day," Kutaisi's main sanitary inspector Tariel Svanadze told IWPR. "We are recording every second, but have not once found any alien substance. There is no doubt that the journalists were severely poisoned but we do not know how."

The local police chief has concluded that the gas leak was an accident. "The studio was hermetically sealed, its only entrance was guarded 24 hours a day, there were no outside visitors to the studio that day and every one of the guards was investigated and cleared of suspicion," said Temur Nozadze. "We can say that there is no basis to continue with the criminal case."

The criminal case was closed the day before the journalists left hospital. They themselves do not speak openly about what happened but say privately they believe they were the victims of an attack.

The head of the Kutaisi non-governmental organisation Centre for Support of Democracy Giga Shushania is convinced the local authorities are to blame, alleging that "in this incident we can detect an attempt by the local government to intimidate the journalists of Kutaisi Television, whose activities have angered the local authorities".

The city has two main television channels, Kutaisi and Rioni. The authorities openly prefer the latter, which begins its news broadcasts with news of the activities of the governor and other local officials.

Kutaisi Television by contrast broadcasts three news programmes, which have carried hard-hitting reports about corruption in the energy sector and the theft of state property.

Temur Shashiashvili, the governor of Imereti region, of which Kutaisi is the capital, frequently criticises Kutaisi Television and has promised never to give it an interview - although he does answer questions put by the station's journalists at press conferences.

The owner of Kutaisi Television is Bondo Shalikiani, a strong political foe of Shashiashvili, who calls his rival a "criminal figure" and a "shady businessman". Shalikiani is a member of the local council or sakrebulo and belongs to the opposition New Rights party.

Shalikiani is a controversial figure in Kutaisi. He won popularity in the city last summer when he funded the laying of a new power line to the Vodokanalrest water company, which considerably improved the city's water supplies. So far, however, he has not used Kutaisi Television to promote his political interests in this autumn's parliamentary elections in Georgia.

Many in the city say the problems of the media are linked to the coming poll. Irakly Machitadze, head of Dzveli Kalaki radio station, said, "The company is tiny in global terms but the organisers of the raid wanted to test how effective their method of attacking the press was - and that is to set people against the independent media. If the effect is proven then it will happen again."

Kommuna, an alternative student union in Kutaisi, printed posters of support for the beleaguered media organisations and wrote the slogan "Return us Dzveli Kalaki" in oil paints on several roads. The next day, the slogans were asphalted over in what the road workers said was "routine repair work".

The city authorities reject criticism and promise to keep up their investigation of the poisoning episode.

"The mass poisoning of the television journalists was a crime," said Lasha Kiladze, press officer with the Kutaisi mayor's office. "I don't think it was a deliberate act of sabotage but whoever put the lives of these people at risk ought to answer for that, especially as the effects of this poisoning may not be over yet. If the television journalists tell us of their suspicions about anyone, then the mayor of the town and the local authorities will help them in every way."

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