Web Users Evade Controls to Report Turkmen Blast

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Turkmenistan has one of the world's most restrictive environments for media and free expression, but that did not stop enterprising mobile phone and internet users from swiftly spreading the news of a blast at an arms dump.

Officials say 15 people died, while other accounts suggest the death toll was as high as 200, when stocks of ammunition mothballed since the Soviet period went up in flames and a series of explosions in the town of Abadan on July 7.

The 50,000 residents of Abadan, 20 kilometres from the capital Ashgabat, were evacuated.

Predictably in a country where the government carefully controls information flows, the state-run media ignored the accident for 24 hours. The television broadcaster showed concerts instead of news, and it was not until the following evening that it carried a brief report of an accident at a storage facility for inflammable materials which had set fire to some adjacent buildings.

But by this time the foreign media already had the story, thanks to local bloggers and mobile phone users with internet access.

"Abadan residents accessed the web fearlessly, taking mobile phone and camera pictures of live ammunition lying on the ground and ruined houses with no window panes," one local commentator said. "And all this at a time like that!"

A blogger wrote about the terror he experienced first-hand, "The blast waves prevented people from escaping from their front doorways, pushing them backwards. The most terrible thing is when you're running away, you don't know where your relatives are, and there are ammunition shells flying over your head."

A resident of Ashgabat, from where the flames could be seen and the blasts heard, recalled, "Once the explosions began, the electricity and phone lines went down and it wasn't till one in the morning that I was able to log on to the internet. Before then, I had to send text messages and log on to the web on my phone phone."

Over the next three days, social networks and forums carried more postings from Turkmenistan, with news of Abadan ablaze, blocked roads, ambulances on the move. Some posters even offered blood donations for those injured.

A mere 1.5 per cent of Turkmenistan's population have internet access. The government opened up web access less than four years ago, but continues to block many websites. The popular social networking sites Odnoklassniki and Facebook are very slow to open.

That makes the achievement of the small band of web users with access via their phones all the more remarkable. Some were able to post information on the web, while others sent messages to friends abroad and got them to distribute them on social networks.

An internet club administrator in Ashgabat expressed surprise at the rapid spread of information – and at the courage of those who made it happen.

"People in Abadan proved they were free, and made use of all the modern communications available," he said.

A blogger in Ashgabat said he believed the unchecked flow of information finally forced the Turkmen government into making some kind of announcement.

On July 10, a government commission set up to deal with the accident held a meeting that was broadcast by all TV channels and covered by all other media.

The commission gave its own version of events, saying 15 people died after unspecified explosive materials combusted due to hot weather, and then scattered over an army storage facility.

President Gurbanguly Berdymuhammedov issued orders for those responsible to be court-martialled, and for Abadan to be rebuilt.

"This was the first time in many years that the authorities responded to an emergency in a civilised

manner," a local media-watcher said. "One can confidently say the authorities were prompted to do so because of the internet reporting."

Vyacheslav Mamedov, leader of the Civil Democratic Union of Turkmenistan based in the Netherlands, commented, "The actions undertaken by Turkmen internet users, however small in scale, were a kind of trial which gave people confidence in their ability to report the truth, even from a closed, authoritarian country."

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