

ACTIVITY REPORT - ASSISTANCE DESK

SUPPORTING JOURNALISTS IN DIFFICULT SITUATION

//////// ACTIVITY REPORT BY PISCA ORSONNEAU, MARTIAL TOURNEUR AND ALEXANDRA TRYJANOWSKI //////////////////////////////////////
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**REPORTERS
SANS FRONTIERES**
POUR LA LIBERTE DE LA PRESSE

PORTRAITS OF EXILED JOURNALISTS



Agil Khalil

AGIL KHALIL - AZERBAÏDJAN

A young man of around 30 with long hair and a checked shirt outside his jeans, Agil does not draw attention among the students at the Sorbonne, where he is studying French civilisation. His story is nonetheless worthy of a novel, a story of violence that exposes one of the darkest sides of his country, Azerbaijan, a former Soviet republic on the Caspian Sea. After ending up in France almost by chance, Agil is slowly rebuilding his life: "Now I have a girlfriend and plans for the future... I did not choose France. I am here because it was the first country to offer me refuge. What mattered was to get out of Azerbaijan at all cost."

Azadliq was Azerbaijan's first independent daily when it was launched in 1991 and has been targeted by the authorities for years because of its investigative reporting and revelations. Fines, judicial harassment and imprisonment have all been used in an attempt to beat it into submission. "It now has a print run of 20,000 copies. My editor spent time prison. Several of the people I worked with are still detained."

A price was put on Agil's head in Baku after he stumbled on something that was particularly embarrassing for the intelligence services and government. When he joined the staff of Azadliq in 2007 everything was fine at first. He liked his work and did lots of reporting in the field, covering corruption in the judicial apparatus, criminal gang activity and cases of embezzlement by local officials. All that changed in January 2008 when he went to cover an apparently anodyne story about a state forest a few kilometres from the capital. It turned out the government had secretly donated the forest to an intelligence agency for services rendered. "When I went there, I found that trees were being felled and the intelligence agency was trafficking in timber. I was attacked by two men who were not pleased to see me. It turned nasty. They hit me, breaking a finger. They threw me to the ground and kept kicking me."

Agil filed a complaint. The police dragged their feet, sensing they were up against something too big for them to handle. "One day, a man offered me money to drop the proceedings. I refused outright. Then I received death threats. I was asked: why don't you take money in exchange for withdrawing the complaint?" But Agil refused to give up. He wanted to see justice done in a country where too many cases are resolved by means of payments. He would pay dearly for his obstinacy. One evening in March 2008, he left the office rather late. Night had fallen and he began walking to the metro station

Athula and Manjula

It was not easy in Sri Lanka to extricate oneself from the Tamil-Sinhalese conflict, to rise above the ethnic and even racist considerations. Either you were Sinhalese and you therefore had to subscribe to the bellicose discourse of the government in Colombo, or you were Tamil and the LTTE wanted you to be a Tamil Tiger and be ready to take up arms and die for an independent northern Sri Lanka.

There was no room for those who wanted to reject the leaders of both opposing factions and try to bring the two communities together. Athula and Manjula, two Sinhalese journalists who tried to promote a Tamil-Sinhalese rapprochement for years, learned this to their cost and have been refugees in France since July 2009. Working with Tamil journalists, they dared to conduct training workshops in Jaffna, the Tamil people's historic capital, on the problems of investigative journalism, human rights and trafficking in humans, and they did this in a completely independent manner.

"Working for a free press became our main activity in 2008," Manjula said. "As members of the Free Media Movement, we organised cultural events and press freedom demonstrations and we defended journalists who had been physically attacked. That might have been all right in peace time, even if risky, but when the war really resumed in 2006, our position became untenable. The time for restraint and dialogue between the two communities was over. There was too much prejudice and nationalism in both camps."

Athula, Manjula and other journalists entered a sort of safe house



Athula and Manjula during protests

in January 2008 because of the danger of reprisals. By day it was the premises of the Free Media Movement, the Sri Lanka Journalists Association and other NGOs. And by night, with the furniture pushed to one side, it became a dormitory. Athula, Manjula and their colleagues never went out at night and only in a group by day.

They were tireless in their defence of balanced, non-partisan news reporting. When a minister sent his thugs to attack Rupavahini TV, because it was not broadcasting his interviews, Athula and Manjula served as intermediaries in negotiations. When the Sunday Leader's editor was murdered, they were the first ones to organise demonstrations to press for a proper investigation. One day, nonetheless, a price was put on their own heads and it was time to flee, first to India, then Nepal, and finally to France, where they have lived for the past year. Athula is currently working for a Tamil radio station based in Paris. Manjula has gone back to being a writer. "As soon as things calm down in Sri Lanka, we will go back. But for the time being, it is still too soon."

Interview with Delbar Tavakoli

It was Delbar Tavakoli, one of the first journalists to flee Iran in July 2009, who prompted Reporters Without Borders' decision to launch a campaign for visas for Iranian journalists in exile. After trying to arrange for her to join her uncle in Sweden, Reporters Without Borders asked the French authorities to give her visa in October 2009. During the weeks she spent in Turkey, the country to which she initially fled, we sent her money several times to help her find a safe place to stay.

When did you begin your career as a journalist?
 I began working in journalism in 1995, after getting a degree in physics. I had not studied journalism but I seized the chance when I was offered a job at the newspaper Zaman. I went on to work for several newspapers covering such subjects as business, politics and society. I particularly like writing about Iran's social problems such as the situation of women, street children or prison conditions. Covering business and tourism enabled me to travel abroad, something that is usually impossible for women in Iran.

You were threatened by the Iranian authorities because of your journalistic activities. When did the threats begin? Before or after President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's reelection on 12 June 2009?

The authorities were already harassing critical journalists before President Ahmadinejad's reelection but things got worse afterwards. It was difficult to work at the newspaper Sarmayeh [which, as the main source of criticism of the government's economic policies, was subsequently closed in October 2009]. I was forced to flee because of my links with Neda Aghasoltan, the young woman who was murdered by the Revolutionary Guards in June 2009, and because of the information I had provided to the BBC.



You managed to get to Turkey in July 2009. Could you tell us about your day-to-day existence there and about UNHCR?
 When I went to Turkey, I thought I would just spend a few weeks there and then go back to Iran. After a month, I saw that the situation was getting worse and then I would not be able to return. I spent nine months in Turkey before travelling to France. The last three months were terrible. We were not allowed to leave Ankara. Although UNHCR had granted me its protection, I had to present myself twice a week to the Turkish police. UNHCR officials know that refugees are being mistreated by the police but they turn a blind eye. I think the UN emblem at the entrance

to UNCHR's offices should be withdrawn. UNHCR collaborates with the Turkish police. The information I gave to UNHCR should have been confidential but one day a police chief threatened me, saying he was well aware who I was and which media I had worked for. Fellow journalists told me that the Turkish police had asked them to provide information about me. UNHCR knows all this is going on.

After several abortive attempts to leave the country, which failed because the Turkish police repeatedly refused to authorise your departure, you were finally allowed to fly to France. Tell us what your first few days in France were like?

For the first few days I felt I was being followed. I was afraid of the police. Now it is June 2010, I am an Iranian and I am in France. I remember when we organised a green human chain almost a year ago. I was among those who wanted change. I have been cheated. The government betrayed us.

I am not the first person to go into exile and I won't be the last. Nowadays I am staying at the Maison des Journalistes. There are people of many different nationalities there and I see that other countries have the same problems as Iran. Reporters Without Borders is doing an important and difficult job. We are talking about the entire world. Reporters Without Borders is

providing support. Knowing there was someone I could count on meant a lot to me.

Although you are now safe in France, do you have a feeling of powerlessness? How do you follow the situation in your country?

I get a lot of information via Facebook, from the Internet. I get news of my friends and my fellow journalists. Facebook allows me to keep up with developments. I am in France and I had no choice about that. I am a refugee. I am here for being the voice of those without a voice in Iran and Turkey, because there are still a lot of Iranians in Turkey.

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REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS is an international press freedom organisation. It monitors and reports violations of media freedom throughout the world. Consisting of a team of 12 journalists and a network of 140 correspondents worldwide, Reporters Without Borders analyses the information it obtains and uses press releases, letters, investigative reports and recommendations to alert public opinion to abuses against journalists and violations of free expression, and to put pressure on politicians and government officials.

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