

PublicationDate: 09-06-2001
PAGE: 01
Expression Exchange

PUBLICATION: BANGKOK POST
KEYWORD: press freedom, International Freedom of

HEADLINE: The weight of words

SUBHEADLINE: As promises of greater democracy echo worldwide, the press should be the first to reflect it, but even today, gross violations occur and journalists continue to be persecuted _ and in some cases killed _ for their opinions. Is freedom of expression still a hypothesis?

BYLINE: WANPHEN SRESHTHAPUTRA

"I have no right to commit any mistake. If I do so, I'll die." His throat tight with emotion, his face marked with sadness and bitterness, Amnat Jongyotying, editor and publisher of Phaknua Raiwan (Northern Daily) in Chiang Mai has had to bend the rules strictly enforced upon him.

He has left his home in Chiang Mai, where he has been a virtual prisoner for the past year, never going out unless for very exceptional reasons, and then wearing a bulletproof vest and surrounded by bodyguards. He alternates between his home's first and second floor, between working, eating and sleeping, watching TV, trying to escape his reality for the length of a James Bond movie or a Suai (under-table) episode on ITV.

Since Amnat published a series of articles exposing corruption and shady deals by powerful politicians in his fiercely independent and investigative newspaper early 2000, he has been in the line of fire of local political kingpins who wish him dead.

He narrowly escaped death when on a quiet suburban street in broad daylight on the afternoon of April 2000, he was shot at by two men. Twisting away from the shot at the last moment, the bullet pierced his stomach and he survived. After assaulting him with kicks in the head, the gunmen left him for dead.

"I don't have any choice," he said. "If I win I die, and if I lose I die. In Thailand, we have a saying, Amnat was quoted as saying in The New York Times newspaper: 'If you break the back of a snake, make sure you kill it or it will come back and bite you.' I'm like the snake. Their big mistake was that they didn't kill me."

His newspaper sorely afflicted _ deeply in debt, shrinking in pages, dropping in circulation, coming out only every three days because no advertisers dare to buy space, his life and family in the doldrums _ Amnat is more determined than ever to continue his fight.

Despite bribery attempts and continuous threats to him and his family, he has gone after his attackers in court as well as in print.

Now he is in Bangkok to share his experiences with a panel of international journalists and members of press advocacy groups attending the 9th annual meeting of the International Freedom of Expression Exchange (Ifex) held at the Pathumwan Princess Hotel which concluded yesterday.

"I am not sure how this story is going to end. The case has been in court for the past year. There have been attempts to twist the case, witnesses have received death threats and most refused to testify. They want both my life and the closure of my newspaper, but I will fight ... until I die," Amnat said.

``Chiang Mai is one of the most beautiful provinces in Thailand, the city is lovely, its inhabitants too. Yet many politicians have grown very influential, and therefore corrupted. Each line of the budget involves corruption, in some way or another. As journalists, it is our duty to look into the way they work, to check and try and monitor the system. As a result the way we report, really disturbs many of them," he added.

However terrifying Amnat's case may be _ he who jumps with fright each time a stranger approaches him too closely and who says gunmen are still waiting for the first opportunity to kill him _ it almost fits into the audience's criteria of normality. An audience whose daily duty is precisely to struggle to defend the freedom of expression in general and the media freedom in particular, to rise up against violations of the right to information and against attacks, incarceration and killings of journalists.

And unfortunately, there are many Amnats on the world media scene. Tipu Sultan from Bangladesh who came to testify on his hospital bed in front of this same panel would not say to the contrary.

An award-winning correspondent for the independent wire service, United News of Bangladesh, Tipu was a victim last January 25 in the rural province of Feni in Bangladesh, of a brutal assault intended to leave him crippled for life. The assailants were armed cadres of a local strongman who is also a member of parliament representing the ruling Awami League.

At the MP's order, Tipu was beaten with baseball bats, hockey sticks and iron rods for over an hour. His bones in his hands, arms, and legs were reduced to fragments so that if he survived, he would never again be able to work as a journalist.

Tipu had a history of reporting on local corruption and abuses of power, and this attack seemed to have been triggered by an article he had written just days before, implicating the MP in an arson attack on a school.

Tipu survived the attack, but doctors in his native country said that he would be permanently disabled unless he received specialised treatment abroad. Thus, in an unprecedented display of solidarity, two national dailies, the Bengali-language Prothom Alo and the English language Daily Star, launched a fund drive to raise the money needed for the treatment.

The campaign, actively supported by local journalists as well as overseas Bangladeshis, netted thousands of dollars. That is how the slight 27 year-old journalist landed in Bangkok early last month on May 7, to receive treatment from a team of surgeons at Bumrungrad Hospital. Though he has several more operations and months of rehabilitation to go, doctors are optimistic that he will be able to work again.

``My family has also suffered from pressure and they have had to run for their lives and move to the capital city. Bangladeshi journalists are working under great pressure and are risking their lives," said Tipu, his bruised arms resting on a pillow. ``But I am fine," he said with a smile. ``I am very honoured to be here today. I want to go back to my profession."

Amnat and Tipu are just two examples of the hundreds of journalists attacked and threatened each year around the world. According to the latest report of Reporters Without Borders published on May 3, 2001 there were 36 journalists killed worldwide in 1999 _ nearly twice as many as in 1998.

On January 1, 2000, 85 were in prison because of their beliefs or in connection with their work _ slightly fewer than a year earlier, 446 had been arrested, while 653 had suffered attacks and threats. About 400 media professionals were victims of bans, suspensions, seizures or censorship.

``This year's report shows that while real progress can be observed here and there, in many countries where the situation seemed to be improving, it has actually gone into reverse because of changes in the political scene. The promise of democracy that blossomed 10 years ago at the end of the Cold War has not borne fruit everywhere.

``Governments that were starting to open up in response to the wishes of the people and pressure from the international community have fallen back into their old ways of authoritarianism and intolerance.

``Others have been weakened by internal conflict and have let rebels and criminal gangs get away scot-free with violence against the media," reads the Reporters Without Borders 2001 report, concluding with; ``In more than 20 nations that are home to two billion men and women, press freedom simply does not exist. It can only truly be said to exist in about 30 countries with less than a billion inhabitants. Elsewhere, press freedom is random and unreliable."

Yet there are signs of hope, which take different forms, from easing tensions in Cambodia, to willingness to accept political change in Croatia and Slovakia, and Pakistani General Musharraf's more liberal policy towards the press.

Even Amnat who is experiencing hell in his home-turned-bunker in Chiang Mai is of the opinion that a new era for the freedom of expression could be reached ``within some eight years, or maybe 12", if what he calls the ``local mafia are as difficult to unarm as Al Capone."

``People's increasing demand for transparency will make the change, as well as improving standards of education. People have to know the dark side of reality and be willing to elect only honest people," he said.

Another positive sign comes from journalists themselves, showing that they know how best to utilise new freedoms to win greater independence.

The growing number of journalists' organisations throughout the world, and the increasing number of so called ``press freedom observatories" in Africa for example are indeed reasons for hope.

So is the ever increasing network established by Toronto-based Ifex, established in 1992 and now the largest free expression monitoring body in the world with membership of over 50 different groups, located from the Pacific Islands to Europe and West Africa.

``I find myself wanting to quote my predecessor, Nina Ratulele who aptly captured the growth and breadth of Ifex when she noted that there had been `growth in the number and range of alerts, growth in the number and range of countries they come from and growth in the activities to support the work of our growing members.' A year after she made this statement, it still rings true," stated Hisham Kassem, the present Ifex Convenor, also President of the Egyptian Organisation for Human Rights.

One of the central components of the organisation and the essential raison d'etre of its network is the Action Alert Network, by which member organisations report free expression abuses in their geographic region or area of expertise to the Ifex Clearing House which in turn, circulates this information to other members and interested organisations all over the world.

As stated during the Ifex Annual General Meeting by Sharmini Peries, the organisation's executive director, in the year 2000 Ifex issued 2,123 such alerts, that is 290 more than in 1999."

``This type of networking is so important for us, especially in Africa where we are so isolated, on top of being confronted with so many difficulties _ wars, underdevelopment, lack of infrastructure, lack of media freedom ... " commented Mwamba wa ba Mulamba, journalist in the Democratic Republic of Congo and representative of the Journalist in Danger association.

``We greatly benefit from the Ifex network in the form of solidarity. If a journalist in Kinshasa is being arrested, thanks to the Ifex network the Thai Journalist Association may send a letter of protest to our President, and it surely weighs in favour of the journalist," Mwamba continued, a father of four, who says he is struggling to make ends meet on a monthly salary of \$200 (9,100 baht) a month.

``I went through great troubles to come and attend this meeting in Bangkok. The airport authorities in the DR Congo didn't want me to leave, requesting a letter from the Ministry of Information giving me permission to attend the meeting.

``I finally got my passport back only five minutes before departure. Each day spent exercising my profession is a day of fear and sorrow," he said, admitting that he would have to send the material collected in the meeting by mail in order to prevent any possible seizure.

``I wish the Club of Cambodian Journalists could learn from this panel and become more active in the region as greater defenders of freedom of expression, although I am aware that many journalists in my country still lack professionalism and ethics. Political influence should be avoided," commented Khieu Kola, a member of the board of directors of the Club of Cambodian journalists.

``But since the establishment of the club in 2000, the situation seems to be improving. We receive better support from common people for example," he said.

As satisfied and happy as participants of the seven-day seminar may be, all seemed to cast side-long glances especially at one thing; Ifex's funding for its members.

``We try to respect a principle of equity in our funding. Some associations in Paris would obviously not get the same attention as some in the Congo for example," said Peries.

One thing is sure, one of the greatest triumphs of the gathering surely belongs to the host country, Thailand, ``a country upheld as a model in the region for a better access to information," stated Peries.

``It is the first time in the modern history of the Thai press that such a huge gathering of journalists is being held here. It is an acknowledgement and a sign of recognition for the Thai press' role in the region as a promoter and advocate of press freedom," commented Kavi Chongkittavorn, managing editor of The Nation and president of the Thai Journalists Association and chairman of the Seapa, the meeting co-hosts.