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Ministry accused of seeking to censor media

by *Javed Hamim Kakar*

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KABUL (*PAN*): An independent media group on Friday accused the information ministry of seeking to censor its news report about a recent clash between the supporters of two lawmakers in Kabul.

One person was injured and a health clinic damaged during the gunbattle in the Pul-i-Charkhi locality of the capital between the gunmen of lawmakers Mullah Tarakhel Mohammadi and Haji Allah Gul Mujahid on July 23.

The clash occurred after a Mohammadi supporter, who visited the clinic for a medical examination, refused to wait for his turn and insisted on an out-of-turn check-up. The gunman fired his weapon after clinic staff asked him to respect rules.

Meanwhile, Mujahid's gunmen reached the scene in support of clinic staffers. A clash erupted at around 5:30 pm and raged all night long, with dozens of gunmen trading Kalashnikov and machine gun fire, a clinic employee.

A senior official of the Killid Media Group said they had been airing the story about the gunbattle in their hourly news bulletins. "Initially, we ran the Pajhwok Afghan News report on the incident."

Speaking exclusively to Pajhwok, Najiba Ayubi said: "Later on, we updated the report with quotes from security officials. We also did our bit to take comments from the MPs, but they could not be reached."

After Radio Killid broadcast the news item, an official from information ministry secretariat phoned her to kill the story. The caller allegedly asked her not to air reports critical of Mullah Tarakhel.

“I asked the caller if they are censoring our news reports,” Najiba said, quoting the official as responding: “Yes, in a way, you can say this.”

She denounced the call as brazen censorship of news organisations by the ministry, which should try to strengthen media outlets instead of choking their voices and supporting a particular strongman.

A secretariat official, introducing himself as Farid, acknowledged calling the Killed Group, but denied asking for killing any report. “We just wanted to know whether or not the story was aired by Killid.”

Meanwhile, the South Asia Free Media Association (SAFMA) chief for Afghanistan accused the information ministry of trying to impede the development of news organisations.

Zia Bumya blasted the ministry for attempting to prevent the freedom of expression and following double standards in dealing with media outlets.

To illustrate the point, Bumya referred to a report about alleged payments by Iran to certain Afghan legislators for rejecting the Afghanistan-US Strategic Partnership Agreement.

He said the story had been released by several print and electronic media organisations, but Information Minister Makhdoom Amin Rahin referred only three of them, including Pajhwok, to the Attorney General Office for investigations.