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Calling Article ‘Divisive,’ Afghanistan Orders Expulsion of Times Correspondent

By ROD NORDLAND

AUG. 20, 2014



The attorney general of Afghanistan on Wednesday ordered the expulsion of an American correspondent for The New York Times, Matthew Rosenberg, and barred him from re-entering the country.

The action, the first public expulsion of a Western journalist since the Taliban regime, came less than a day after the office of the attorney general, Mohammad Ishaq Aloko, issued an order prohibiting Mr. Rosenberg from leaving the country while he was under investigation.

Both orders related to an article written by Mr. Rosenberg that was published Tuesday by The Times. It said that high-ranking government officials were discussing forming an interim government as a possible resolution to the country's current electoral crisis — an action that would effectively amount to a coup.

The Afghan presidential election has been mired in recriminations, with the top two candidates claiming victory and accusing each other of fraud.

Mr. Aloko's office on Wednesday released a statement to news organizations — not including The Times — that accused Mr. Rosenberg of writing an “article that is considered divisive and contrary to the national interest, security and stability of Afghanistan.” The statement said the “attorney general decided that Matthew Rosenberg should leave the country within the next 24 hours, and he will not be allowed to re-enter the country.”

The statement suggested that Mr. Rosenberg, 40, had presented his opinion in the article while “falsely attributing it to high-level government officials.” The article was based on high-ranking Afghan government sources, some of whom spoke on the condition of anonymity because of fears of prosecution for sedition if their names were used, as Mr. Rosenberg noted in the article.

A statement issued by the office of President Hamid Karzai, while not mentioning the expulsion, quoted the president as telling the head of the United Nations here, Jan Kubis, that a recent article in The New York Times “showed foreign interference and conspiracy in order to destabilize Afghanistan.”

“This kind of article should not be allowed,” the statement read.

Mr. Aloko’s own statement did not specify what, if any, laws had been broken, or what legal grounds there might be for such an expulsion, which is unprecedented in the 13 years of the government of Mr. Karzai.

The attorney general’s statement said the decision had been made because Mr. Rosenberg “didn’t cooperate well during the interrogations” carried out by the attorney general’s office on Tuesday.

Dean Baquet, the executive editor of The Times, criticized the Afghan government’s action.

“Matt is a terrific reporter who reported an accurate story,” Mr. Baquet said. “He was perfectly willing to talk to the Afghan government but obviously wasn’t going to reveal his sources.”

He said that Mr. Rosenberg would continue to report on Afghanistan and that “we’re appalled that a government would kick a reporter out for doing his job.”

Aimal Faizi, a spokesman for President Karzai, said the decision to expel Mr. Rosenberg was made “at the very highest level,” which he said included not only the president, but also both

vice presidents and several central ministers, who had a series of meetings since the publication of the article on Tuesday.

“What is understood is that you are following a deep state agenda,” he said, emphasizing that he was referring to The Times generally and not just to Mr. Rosenberg. “I don’t want to go into it, but that is what is understood and that is what is seen.”

Mr. Faizi’s “deep state” euphemism has often been used by some anti-American Afghans to refer to efforts by the American government to interfere in Afghan affairs.

After Mr. Rosenberg was summoned by the attorney general’s office for what officials said would be an “informal chat” on Tuesday, officials there insisted that he sign a formal statement. At that point, he asked for the right to have a lawyer present during any further discussions, agreeing to come back when he had such representation.

His interrogator, Gen. Sayed Noorullah Sadat, the head of the directorate of internal and external security in the attorney general’s office, insisted that Mr. Rosenberg did not need to have a lawyer present, as there was no crime under investigation. He unsuccessfully pressed him to sign the statement. “Right now there’s no case, no legal charges, there’s nothing,” he said.

Later Tuesday, a spokesman for the attorney general, Baseer Azizi, said that Mr. Rosenberg was barred from leaving the country “until this issue over this article is resolved,” and an order was lodged at the Kabul International Airport to prevent him from departing, according to officials there.

The attorney general’s new position was apparently prompted by Mr. Rosenberg’s failure to appear for questioning on Wednesday morning, instead sending a letter from a Times lawyer requesting an extension because the lawyer was not immediately available to attend.

Mr. Rosenberg objected to the attorney general’s suggestion that his article was concocted to cause dissension in the country. “The story is based on numerous sources both on and off the record and as yet no government official has challenged the accuracy of it,” Mr. Rosenberg said. “I have no stake in this election, I’m just reporting on it. In a country that I’ve covered for a long time, it’s really dismaying.”

General Sadat asked Mr. Rosenberg to divulge the confidential sources cited in his article, and asked what proof there was that he had not invented them. Mr. Rosenberg declined to name them and noted that editors at The Times have internal checks on the use of anonymous sources and have to be satisfied that they are legitimate before publication.

In Washington on Wednesday, Caitlin Hayden, a spokeswoman for the National Security Council, called the expulsion of Mr. Rosenberg a “significant step backward for the freedom of the press in Afghanistan and should be reversed immediately.”