

Afghans working for U.S. government broadcasters fear Taliban backlash.

By Ben Smith

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More than a hundred journalists employed by the American government's own radio stations remain in Afghanistan as the Taliban take power, U.S. officials and Afghan journalists said Sunday.

"Journalists are being left behind," said Rateb Noori, the Kabul bureau news manager of Radio Azadi, in a telephone interview from Kabul on Sunday.

The station, a branch of the U.S. government's Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty services, formerly called Radio Free Afghanistan, broadcast through the day Sunday, including airing an interview with a Taliban spokesman. Its sister station, Voice of America, reported on Sunday that one of its reporters "was in the passport office when everyone was told to leave immediately and go home."

The Afghans working for the U.S. government broadcasters in Kabul and around the country have long been targets of the insurgents, who killed a journalist with Radio Free Afghanistan in a targeted bombing in November. They are among the most exposed of hundreds of Afghans who have worked with American news organizations since the arrival of U.S. troops in 2001, and media organizations have been scrambling to help local employees evacuate. The U.S. government made journalists eligible for a visa program that could allow them to leave the country. They have yet to be evacuated and the window to do so is closing quickly.

The acting interim chief executive of the U.S. Agency for Global Media, which oversees the broadcasters, said in an email to staff Sunday that the agency is "doing everything in our power to protect" journalists and "will not back down in our mission to inform, engage, and connect Afghans in support of freedom and democracy."

The president of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Jamie Fly, said in a text message that the service is "doing everything possible to make sure they can safely continue their work."

Mr. Noori, who was awake late on Sunday because he was worried about looters at his home, said there was no protection and little certainty — including whether the stations will continue to broadcast Monday.

"Everybody is locked down in their homes, and no one knows what happens tomorrow," he said.

Afghan journalists have little to do but rely on early Taliban promises that they will not attack members of the news media.

"Having experience last time of their role in Afghanistan, I think they cannot keep their promises — they cannot control their people," he said. "I'm just hoping that we can survive for a while, and then let's see if we have a way out to any neighboring country," Mr. Noori said.

Mujeeb Angaar, who worked for Radio Free Afghanistan from 2010 to 2013 before fleeing the country, said in a telephone interview from his home in Canada that he was told by the Taliban at the time that he "should be killed, because you work for Jews, you work for the CIA."

The American-backed services "will be the first target," he said.

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