

Ayatollah expels US news agency

From Liz Thurgood
in Tehran

Iran expelled a foreign news bureau yesterday. Associated Press was closed down yesterday morning and its four correspondents ordered to leave the country within 48 hours.

The American bureau was accused of "biased and distorted reporting which provoked world opinion." One AP staffman, Philip Dopoulos, said the Ministry of National Guidance complained "in general about the tone" of AP reporting and "was particularly upset by the agency's recent coverage of the troubles in Kurdistan."

This latest group expulsion brings to 13 the number of foreign correspondents ordered to leave Iran since the Ayatollah Khomeini came to power last February. Mr Ali Behzadnia, who oversees the foreign press in Iran, was quoted by the Government news agency as saying the bureau would remain closed until the introduction and acceptance of new correspondents.

Pressure on the foreign press began in late June, with the expulsion of the Los Angeles Times Correspondent. It has gathered momentum in recent weeks. Mr Sadegh Tabatabai said on television on Sunday evening that the five major news agencies in Tehran were dominated by Zionists — an expression which rates among the highest in the Government's book of insults.

In remarks printed yesterday, Dr Nasser Minachi, the Minister for National Guidance, accused the dwindling foreign press corps of portraying Iran as a dictatorship. He also accused unnamed foreign publications of refusing to print official retractions.

The foreign press, immensely popular during the months that led to the Shah's overthrow, fell from official grace in the chaos after the February uprising. Rules governing the correspondents were drawn up last month, making them responsible for all copy about Iran appearing in their publications.

In theory, correspondents entering Iran are now expected to take an oath pledging to "maintain honesty." All interviews with Government officials should be held in the presence of a translator, either named or officially vetted, by the Ministry.

Although neither rule is strictly enforced, such restrictions have greatly affected the flow of news. "Not everyone's stopped talking yet," said a Government official who preferred to remain anonymous, "but they soon will." Meetings with the regime's political opponents have become largely clandestine affairs.

Among those news organisations with correspondents recently expelled from Iran are the BBC and the Financial Times. Earlier this week, the Daily Telegraph's stringer, who had yet to seek official accreditation, was given ten days to leave Iran.

Meanwhile, the Iranian military was yesterday reported to be cleaning up the last pockets of opposition in the rebel Kurdish stronghold of Mahabad which was captured by the Government after a massive air and armed offensive on Monday. Reports from the province in western Iran were contradicting and it was still far from clear whether or not the Government had taken complete control of the Kurdish town of Baneh, close to the Iraqi border.

A Government radio reporter in a dispatch from Baneh yesterday said that no clashes occurred when troops entered the small town on Monday night, but there has been no independent confirmation. Meanwhile, helicopters were yesterday reported to be distributing leaflets over Kurdish towns and villages in what was seen as the start of an intensive propaganda campaign to win over the Kurds. The statement, issued by the Army, called on the Kurds to "separate yourselves from the conspirators and the lackeys of foreigners."

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