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United States Department of State
and the Broadcasting Board of Governors
Office of Inspector General

Report of Inspection

Broadcasting Board of Governors Operations in Afghanistan

Report Number ISP-IB-10-48, March 2010

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and the Broadcasting Board of Governors**

Office of Inspector General

PREFACE

This report was prepared by the Office of Inspector General (OIG) pursuant to the Inspector General Act of 1978, as amended, and Section 209 of the Foreign Service Act of 1980, as amended. It is one of a series of audit, inspection, investigative, and special reports prepared by OIG periodically as part of its responsibility to promote effective management, accountability and positive change in the Department of State and the Broadcasting Board of Governors.

This report is the result of an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the office, post, or function under review. It is based on interviews with employees and officials of relevant agencies and institutions, direct observation, and a review of applicable documents.

The recommendations therein have been developed on the basis of the best knowledge available to the OIG and, as appropriate, have been discussed in draft with those responsible for implementation. It is my hope that these recommendations will result in more effective, efficient, and/or economical operations.

I express my appreciation to all of those who contributed to the preparation of this report.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "H. W. Geisel".

Harold W. Geisel
Deputy Inspector General

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

SCOPE 1
CONTEXT 3
RADIO AZADI (RADIO FREE AFGHANISTAN)..... 5
VOICE OF AMERICA 7
SECURITY 9
OPERATIONAL ISSUES 11
RELATIONSHIP WITH THE EMBASSY..... 13
FORMAL RECOMMENDATIONS 15
INFORMAL RECOMMENDATIONS 17
ABBREVIATIONS 19

SCOPE

The Office of Inspector General (OIG) conducted a limited inspection of the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) operations in (b) (7) Afghanistan. The inspection took place on October 29, 2009, in conjunction with an inspection of Embassy Kabul. Because of security concerns, this was a limited-scope inspection. The OIG team visited the news bureaus (b) (7)(F) to look at local issues and operations. The inspection did not include a detailed look at BBG's Pashto border region broadcasting effort, which was covered in a previous report, *Review of Voice of America's Deewa Radio Journalistic Controls*; (ISP-IB-09-67, July 2009).

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CONTEXT

U.S. international broadcasting entities (b) (7)(F) play an important role in reporting the news in a country where the local media are still in the development stage. They serve as facilitators of discussions among the Afghans themselves on important issues affecting the future of their nation, thus helping to build civil society.

BBG has two colocated offices (b) (7)(F). The largest is the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) bureau for Radio Azadi, the local name for Radio Free Afghanistan. The service broadcasts 12 hours a day, from 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m., Kabul time, in Dari and Pashto. The second office is the Voice of America (VOA), called Radio Ashna, which broadcasts on the same frequencies during the other 12 hours of the day, from 7:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m., forming a continuous block. VOA also broadcasts a daily, one-hour television program. (b) (7)(F)

(b) (7)(F)

BBG is the number one broadcaster in the country, foreign or domestic, measured by total audience, and the most important source of news, according to survey data. Preliminary results from the latest survey, conducted in late 2009 by Inter-Media, indicate that BBG's combined weekly reach in any language is 65 percent of Afghan adults over 15 (the number who listen at least once a week). The survey found that Radio Azadi, VOA, and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) are statistically tied as the three most popular radio stations in Afghanistan, with weekly audiences of 50 percent, 50 percent, and 52 percent respectively. (VOA reaches 41 percent via radio and 18 percent weekly via television, for a combined reach of 50 percent.) All of these figures represent increases from 2008, but are lower than or equal to the results found in 2007. BBG noted that it expects some long-term decline in audience, because the local media market has grown more competitive in recent years, with the revival of television and the launch of local radio stations focusing on lighter entertainment programming.

RADIO AZADI (RADIO FREE AFGHANISTAN)

For Radio Azadi, 60 percent of the broadcast material is prepared in Afghanistan, and 40 percent originates in Prague. At the top of the hour, (b) (7)(F) broadcasts 3.5 minutes of live news. Radio Azadi broadcasts three call-in shows per week – the first in Afghanistan to be broadcast without censorship. The shows cover topics like health and politics. The guests are (b) (7)(F), while the panelists and moderator are in Prague. The callers are from all over Afghanistan, as well as the border areas of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the Middle East, and the United States. In August, Radio Azadi hosted the Afghan presidential debate. Not all Afghans know that Radio Azadi is U.S.-funded, and the radio station does not advertise its funding sources.

The news bureau has four radio studios: a modern, attractive one for live broadcasting and three smaller studios for recording. The news bureau does not broadcast on television, because BBG has given VOA the mandate to do television broadcasting. Television is becoming increasingly popular in Afghanistan, although it still reaches only a small percentage of the population.

Radio Azadi also has a newly upgraded website in Dari and Pashto, www.azadiradio.com, with a live link to the radio broadcast. The website received 100,000 hits in September, 60 percent of which were from Afghanistan and 40 percent from overseas.

Radio Azadi has about (b) (7)(F) in Afghanistan, including a core staff of (b) (7)(F) that includes the news bureau chief, senior editors, full-time reporters, technicians, and support and administrative staff. Other employees include part-time producers and writers and freelance reporters located around the country. All members of the staff, both full-time and part-time, (b) (7)(F), are working via freelance agreements. Due to the security situation, the (b) (7)(F) has not been audited.

One of the problems facing Radio Azadi is the employment status of its staff and news bureau. RFE/RL has formally registered the (b) (7)(F) with the Afghan Government. However, BBG says that, because of contradictory and outdated legacy employment laws in Afghanistan, RFE/RL has not yet executed with its (b) (7)(F) staff the types of employment contracts it offers in its other, more

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developed locations, nor has it yet fully regularized the news bureau. As a result, the entire staff is employed via freelance contracts, including the head of the news bureau. As freelance employees, they do not receive benefits such as health insurance or pensions; their only benefit is life insurance. BBG says the net salaries for full-time news bureau staff members cover the cost of health care and retirement savings, and RFE/RL submits income tax withholding to the Afghan Government for the staff.

The lack of benefits, coupled with salaries that are low compared to other international broadcasters, has caused a problem with staff retention. The news bureau noted that Radio Azadi has been able to recruit new, young journalists, but after they are trained, they go to rival international broadcasters, where they can receive better salaries and benefits. In addition, according to Radio Azadi management, private local TV channels such as “Tolo” and “1” offer bureau staff higher salaries than those currently provided by Radio Azadi, which has led to growing problems recruiting qualified reporters with strong English-language skills. In the past 18 months, Radio Azadi lost five star reporters, who were lured away for double the pay. Other important news bureau positions are similarly vulnerable: Radio Azadi also nearly lost a technician and a key administrative officer.

Recommendation 1: The Broadcasting Board of Governors, in coordination with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, should resolve the issues of the employment status of Radio Azadi bureau’s staff, and should seek ways to provide competitive salaries and benefits to the staff members (b) (7)(F). (Action: Broadcasting Board of Governors)

VOICE OF AMERICA

(b) (7)(F) [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] The work space is cramped, especially the small room from which television broadcasts originate. Nonetheless, the current VOA facilities are better than the previous facilities, which are described in a 2006 OIG report (ISP-IB-06-02, February 2006).

The VOA (b) (7)(F) [REDACTED] does not have the status of a news bureau within VOA, because there is no central news correspondent based there; the Islamabad bureau covers Afghanistan. This means that the entire ten-person staff, including the head of the office, have the status of contractors, and the office does not have authority to make its own decisions on a number of matters. They have developed adequate workarounds, but the situation poses challenges. For example, since the (b) (7)(F) [REDACTED] staff members are not government employees, they do not have the authority to write a letter of introduction to the Afghan Government to introduce a new colleague; that has to be done by the Islamabad bureau.

In addition to radio broadcasts, VOA has a one-hour television show (30 minutes in Dari, and 30 minutes in Pashto) six days a week, through Radio-Television Afghanistan. Participants include ministers, politicians, students, and other local luminaries. The show itself comes from Washington, with five or six minutes broadcast (b) (7)(F) [REDACTED] – out of a small room into which the staff has managed to squeeze the equipment, the backdrop, and the guests' chairs. New research data indicate that this program is reaching a weekly audience of 18 percent, up from 12 percent in 2008. The same survey indicated that, of the total VOA audience, 64 percent listened to VOA radio only, 19 percent watched VOA TV (called TV Ashna) exclusively, and the remainder did both.

SECURITY

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OPERATIONAL ISSUES

(b) (7)(F)

These transmission systems belong to the IBB, but they are located on Afghan Government land and are maintained by Afghan Government staff. Despite occasional maintenance problems due to lack of spare parts, the AM transmitter is strong (400 kw) and reaches the whole country. However, FM is increasingly popular in Afghanistan because it is clearer. FM transmitters have a very limited range in the mountainous country. Five FM transmitters are not nearly enough to reach the entire country; by comparison, Britain's BBC has more than 20 FM transmitters. BBG also has received requests from various elements within the Embassy that the number of FM transmitters be increased. IBB has developed a list of 18 possible locations, but BBG reported that implementation of an expanded FM network depends on the availability of funding. Each new FM transmitter costs approximately \$300,000 because they require generators, due to the unreliable power supply.

U.S. military and Department of State strategic communications plans call for building secure cell phone and radio towers that could also house FM transmitters on forward bases, but these plans do not appear to have been coordinated with IBB's efforts to expand its FM reach. However, BBG says it has been exploring "nonconventional" methods to increase broadcast coverage, including discussions with the Department of Defense.

Recommendation 2: The International Broadcasting Bureau should continue to push forward with efforts to expand FM coverage in Afghanistan, and it should determine whether the U.S. military's planned cell phone towers could be used by Broadcasting Board of Governors broadcasters. (Action: IBB)

A thorny issue that has hindered broadcast expansion was the status of the (b) (7) (F) order to transmit radio programs in Pashto to the border regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan. At the time of the inspection, BBG had

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not been able to turn the transmitter on yet, because elements within the Afghan Government were holding up official approval, due to issues of broadcast content control. Since that time, following Afghan Governmental changes, Radio-Television Afghanistan has signed a modification to the operation and maintenance contract with BBG, and it will operate and maintain the new site for BBG.

BBG also broadcasts into Afghanistan via shortwave radio from transmitters located elsewhere in the world. People in the mountainous areas still listen to shortwave broadcasts, and small, Chinese-made radios capable of receiving AM, FM, and shortwave are affordable and available in the markets. As a promotion, from 2007 to 2008, Radio Azadi bought and distributed 5,000 inexpensive radios with the station's logo and frequency imprinted on them. In 2009, RFE/RL bought 700 hand-crank radios instead, which are more expensive but also more useful. In view of strategic communications plans being developed by Embassy Kabul and the Office of the Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan that call for measures to increase the Afghan people's access to objective news from various sources, the OIG team has made informal recommendations to increase the number of giveaway promotional radios, which would serve a larger purpose.

RELATIONSHIP WITH THE EMBASSY

Relations between the BBG entities and the U.S. Embassy in Kabul are generally cordial. Radio Azadi is satisfied with the services received from the Embassy, which represents the news bureau on issues involving the Afghan Government. The Embassy press office treats Radio Azadi and VOA as it does other news organizations, arranging interviews and providing information. The news bureaus are mindful of the need to maintain their journalistic independence from the Embassy, in order to preserve their credibility.

The BBG entities also rely on Embassy support for some shipments. However, the proper procedures for the notification, handling, and conveyance of such shipments have not been communicated to all staff members involved, as is evidenced by an incident that occurred while the OIG team was in Kabul. IBB shipped some spare parts for transmitters in Afghanistan to the Embassy in Kabul via the diplomatic pouch, addressed to PAO/IBB. The IBB contractor was supposed to pick up the crates and take the parts to the transmitter sites. However, the public affairs section was not expecting this shipment and was unsure what to do with it when it arrived. Since the public affairs section experiences a complete or virtually complete turnover in its American staff every summer, the officers involved had not handled an IBB shipment before.

Recommendation 3: Embassy Kabul, in coordination with the International Broadcasting Bureau, should develop written standard operating procedures for processing International Broadcasting Bureau shipments, including clear instructions about notification and handling. (Action: Embassy Kabul, in coordination with IBB)

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FORMAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: The Broadcasting Board of Governors, in coordination with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, should resolve the issues of the employment status of Radio Azadi bureau's staff, and should seek ways to provide competitive salaries and benefits to the staff members (b) (7)(F). (Action: Broadcasting Board of Governors)

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INFORMAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Informal recommendations cover operational matters not requiring action by organizations outside the inspected unit and/or the parent regional bureau. Informal recommendations will not be subject to the OIG compliance process. However, any subsequent OIG inspection or on-site compliance review will assess the mission's progress in implementing the informal recommendations.

A draft strategic communications plan for Afghanistan, written by representatives of the Office of the Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs' public diplomacy office, and Embassy Kabul, calls for distributing 50,000 radio sets in areas that are key to the counterinsurgency strategy. Meanwhile, given limitations in its marketing budget, RFE/RL has reduced the number of promotional radios distributed by Radio Azadi because of a switch to the more useful but expensive hand-crank radios.

Informal Recommendation 1: The Broadcasting Board of Governors should make further efforts to increase the number of free radios distributed as a way of promoting Radio Azadi.

Informal Recommendation 2: The Broadcasting Board of Governors should consult with the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs and the Office of the Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan about the feasibility of printing Radio Azadi's logo and frequency on these radios, as part of the strategic communications plan.

ABBREVIATIONS

BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BBG	Broadcasting Board of Governors
IBB	International Broadcasting Bureau
OIG	Office of Inspector General
Radio Azadi	Radio Free Afghanistan
RFE/RL	Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty
VAO	Voice of America

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