

Foreign Correspondents' Club of China Annual Working Conditions Survey

The past year has seen unprecedented examples of investigative journalism by western reporters in China. Unfortunately, the Chinese government has increasingly resorted to threats and intimidation against foreign media, according to the Foreign Correspondents' Club of China's annual "Reporting Conditions" survey* of its members, and its review of incidents reported over the last 12 months.

The FCCC survey, carried out in May 2013, found that 98 percent of respondents do not think reporting conditions in China meet international standards, and 70 percent feel conditions have worsened or stayed the same as the year before. Only three respondents say they think things are getting better; the rest have not been here long enough to have an opinion.

Among the FCCC's greatest concerns are

- government retaliation against foreign media which have incurred official displeasure
- threats to the physical safety of reporters whose reports have offended the authorities
- increased cyber harassment and hacking attacks on foreign journalists
- continuing restrictions on journalists' movements in Tibetan-inhabited areas of China
- official harassment of sources
- official intimidation of reporters' Chinese assistants

The survey found 63 cases in which police officers or unknown persons impeded foreign reporters from doing their work, including nine cases in which reporters were manhandled or subjected to physical force. This represents a welcome drop from last year, but remains unacceptable.

"Attacks on journalists, those working with them and their sources have replaced detention by uniformed police." A US radio correspondent.

"It has now become normal that uniformed police stand with arms folded as plainclothes 'thugs' appear. The thugs are often violent. I have received many bruises during these incidents." A British TV correspondent.

OFFICIAL RETALIATION AND INTIMIDATION

Victims of government retaliation include The New York Times and Bloomberg. The New York Times English and Chinese language websites are blocked in China and the newspaper has been unable to secure journalist visas for either Bureau Chief Philip Pan or correspondent Chris Buckley. Bloomberg has also been unable to secure journalist visas in order to replace its correspondents and the company has reportedly suffered significant commercial harm from a drop in sales of its data terminals.

Three other media companies, France 24, ARD TV (Germany) and the Financial Times have

also come under unusual Chinese government pressure after publishing news reports that angered the Chinese authorities. Chinese embassy officials in Paris, Berlin and London lodged direct complaints with senior editors, in an apparent effort to pressure them into restraining their reporters in Beijing.

Although routine delays in the provision of journalist visas appear to have shortened in recent months, ten percent of survey respondents reported difficulties in obtaining official press accreditation or a journalist visa on account of their reporting or that of their predecessors.

“My paper has been working on my accreditation since August last year. The authorities stated that the difficulties were due to the work of my predecessor.” A European newspaper reporter.

Intimidation can also be more particular and more threatening. One foreign reporter whose articles angered elements of the Chinese government was told by the manager of the building where he lives that security officials had visited and asked the manager questions about the reporter’s family life, the layout of his apartment, where his children went to school and other personal questions.

CYBER ATTACKS

Cyber attacks on FCCC members have become routine. Though we cannot identify the origin of these efforts to install malware and spyware on our computers, the club’s cyber-security consultant has found that many of the attacks are targeted deliberately at foreign correspondents based in China.

GEOGRAPHICAL REPORTING RESTRICTIONS

Restrictions on foreign journalists’ access to “sensitive” areas of the country remain widespread, arbitrary and unexplained. Reporters have been told by officials in Qinghai that all Tibetan-inhabited areas of China are off-limits to the foreign press. Though such a blanket ban is not always applied, local officials have repeatedly interfered with reporting work.

“I was road-blocked, denied access and constantly followed and monitored in Qinghai from the day of my arrival.” A French newspaper correspondent.

HARASSMENT OF SOURCES

Previous FCCC reports on working conditions in China have complained about the official harassment of Chinese citizens who talk to reporters, which they are free to do if they so choose according to the Chinese government regulations governing foreign journalists’ activities. Such harassment continues at the same level as ever: the survey found 23 such cases in 2012-2013.

“After reporting on self-immolations in Qinghai I learned that my local fixer had been harassed

by the police. They showed him all the Skype and phone contacts he had had with foreign journalists. He seemed scared.” A European newspaper reporter.

HARASSMENT OF EMPLOYEES

30 percent of respondents to the FCCC survey said that their Chinese assistants had been called in by the police or other security forces to “drink tea”, a euphemism for an interrogation. The employees are commonly asked to inform the police about reporters’ activities and plans. Two such assistants have reported that their relatives have also come under official pressure on account of their work.

ADDENDUM

The following cases of sometimes violent interference, reported to the FCCC over the past year, illustrate the difficulties that foreign correspondents in China face.

February 2013

German TV crew attacked

A TV crew belonging to ARD television, narrowly avoided serious injury when two men, apparently linked to local authorities in Hebei province, attacked their vehicle with baseball bats, shattering the windscreen, after a high speed chase down a major highway near the city of Sanhe, 50 km east of Beijing.

ARD correspondent Christine Adelhardt, accompanied by two German colleagues and two Chinese staff, had been filming in the village of Da Yan Ge Zhuang for a report on urbanisation, one of the incoming Chinese government's major challenges and a process that has often provoked disputes over land ownership.

"We were filming the village square, where you could see old style farmers' houses next to a newly-built mansion behind a wall and high-rise buildings in the background," said Adelhardt, when a car drew up next to them. The car's driver began filming the TV crew.

When the crew left, two cars, later joined by at least two others, gave chase, trying to force the Germans' minivan off the road and to deliberately cause a collision. They forced the ARD driver to stop at one point, whereupon five or six men surrounded the car, attempted to get in, and hammered on the windows with their fists.

The crew got away, but were pursued, forced off the road and onto the sidewalk, rammed, and made to stop. Two men from the pursuing vehicles attacked the minivan with baseball bats, shattering its windscreen, before the ARD driver was able to get away again by bulldozing his way past a car parked in front of the ARD van.

The crew then came across two motorcycle policemen and asked them for help. Their pursuers caught up with them, and again began smashing and punching holes in the car's windscreen, despite the police officers' attempts to control them.

A local resident who witnessed the scene later told Adelhardt that one of the cars involved in the pursuit belonged to the Da Yan Ge Zhuang village Communist party secretary.

Eventually, police reinforcements arrived, and escorted the ARD crew to a local police station, where Adelhardt and her colleagues were questioned. Adelhardt saw a number of the men who had attacked her car at the police station, but was not sure whether they were detained. When she asked to file a charge of attempted homicide, she was assured by a local official that such charges had already been laid against the men.

But a policeman told her that the investigation had found that villagers had been "offended" by the TV crew's presence and that they should have asked permission to film.

Chinese government regulations governing foreign journalists in China state expressly that such prior permission is not required to film in public spaces.

July 2012

Japanese reporter beaten

Atsushi Okudera, a correspondent for Asahi Shinbun in Shanghai, was injured after police officers pushed him to the ground and kicked him in the head and about the body while he was covering the mass demonstration on July 28 in Nantong's Qidong district. His camera was confiscated.

December 2012

German correspondent's equipment ruined

Der Spiegel correspondent Bernhard Zand and his Chinese assistant were reporting on the case of five boys who died of carbon monoxide poisoning in Bijie, Guizhou. In the course of their work they met the journalist who had first broken this story and who had then disappeared for several weeks, Li Yuanlong.

They were followed throughout their stay in Bijie by unidentified men. On the evening of Dec. 29th they checked into the Kempinski Hotel in Guiyang. When they returned from supper to their rooms they found that Bernhard's tablet computer and an iPhone had been destroyed by submersion in water (they were still wet), all the photos on an SD memory card in his computer had been deleted, and a large number of files had been deleted from his laptop. Most of the files on his assistant's laptop, in the next-door room, had also been deleted.

Bernhard filed a complaint the next morning with the local police, but their investigations did not uncover the culprits. The Kempinski Hotel's security chief said the CCTV cameras with a clear view of the doors to the two rooms in question had not recorded any pictures at the relevant time, and hotel staff said that the hotel does not keep logs of guestrooms' electronic door locks.

March 2013

Hong Kong journalists beaten in Beijing

On March 8, two Hong Kong journalists were beaten outside the home of Liu Xia, the wife of jailed Nobel laureate Liu Xiaobo. A group of unidentified men beat TVB cameraman Tam Wing-man and Now TV cameraman Wong Kim-fai, as they were filming an activist's attempt to visit Liu Xia, who is under house arrest at her apartment building.

The attackers, who did not identify themselves, suddenly appeared from around a corner, shouted at the group of journalists outside the building, and demanded that they stop filming. One of the Hong Kong cameramen was punched in the face and pushed to the ground, while the attackers attempted to confiscate the other's camera and hit him in the head.

About the survey: The FCCC conducts an annual survey on reporting conditions. The survey was sent to 232 FCCC correspondent members in Spring 2013, of whom 98 replied. Figures indicate an absolute number of responses, unless otherwise indicated. When percentages are used, they reflect all respondents to that specific question. Not all respondents answered every question. Data may be used if credit is given to the Foreign Correspondents' Club of China (FCCC).

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FCCC Administration Office

Tel: 8532 3807

E-mail: fccadmin@gmail.com

E-mail: fccchinaadminoffice@gmail.com

General Manager: fccgm@gmail.com

Website: www.fccchina.org