

Financial Dispute Forces Mongolian Christian TV Station to Shut Down

Eagle Television broadcast Christian evangelistic programs, news and The Flintstones before it went off the air in April. When U.S. and British troops invaded Iraq last spring, the warren of offices and studios that make up Mongolia's Eagle Television were electric with the energy of a staff fully aware that it was making journalistic history in the isolated, former communist state. They were the only channel in this landlocked country of 2.7 million offering western-style, seat-of-the-pants coverage of breaking news.

"There wasn't a bar or restaurant or shop that didn't have Eagle TV on. You had people standing around the televisions in the state department store," recalls the independent station's affable general manager, Tom Terry.

Terry, an American who took over the unusual Christian station last year, was determined to provide a lively, objective alternative to government-controlled television's staid war coverage. A retired Mongolian general provided commentary. Viewers called in with opinions.

But in late April financial disputes led Eagle Television's American partners to shut down the station.

In addition to international news, Eagle Television broadcast American evangelistic programs such as the charismatic Hillsong Television from Australia and Christian music videos, as well as The Flintstones and NBA basketball. Eagle

Television's management estimated that it has generated "10,000 contacts for Christ" over its eight years of operation in a country where Tibetan Buddhists and pagans predominate.

"Eagle TV was founded for two purposes," Terry told the Associated Press (AP). " ... To advance the gospel of Jesus Christ and ... for the advancement of freedom and democracy."

These days, Terry sits alone in his barren office, his laptop plugged into the wall and cans of Coke on the windowsill. With flow charts and a good deal of patience, he explained how an eight-year arrangement fell apart when the Mongolian side threatened to go to court to dissolve the partnership.

AMONG, a nonprofit Christian organization in Sioux Falls, S.D., that helps fund Eagle Television, reacted swiftly to preempt what they thought could be a costly and dangerous legal battle, said Terry, who was hired by the group. To safeguard the station's expensive equipment, Terry removed it from the studios and locked it up in storage. The Mongolian partners learned what happened after the fact.

"I kind of look at it like coming from the Lord that most of these guys were out of the country at the time," Terry said.

Today, the two sides are at an impasse, waiting for the government to decide who will get Eagle Television's broadcast license and return to the air. Government officials are promising to be objective.

"I don't think there is any kind of hidden political motive between the participants," said Jagvaral Hanibal, the foreign ministry's spokesman. "I would really like to see it come

back. For the public, for society, it is important.”

The Flintstones was especially popular, the AP reported. The 1960s cartoon was dubbed into Mongolian and renamed The Flint Stone People. “The Flint Stone People showed how normal people celebrate life,” retired civil servant Balganjav Oyunchimeg told the AP. “We learned many lessons from that family.”

On the face of it, AMONG would seem to have an advantage in the dispute because it has no political agenda in Mongolia, whereas the Mongolian partners are in the Democratic Party, which forms a tiny minority in the nation’s Communist-controlled parliament.

“AMONG is the only disinterested party here. All we are here for is the propagation of the gospel. The propagation of the basic [press] freedom of a democracy,” Terry said.

Surprisingly, the station’s religious programming has been barely an issue in the public debate. One exception was a May interview given by one of the Mongolian partners, Batbayar, to the weekly Seruuleg newspaper in which he said he looked forward to running Eagle Television without the Americans.

“We won’t be poked any longer for ‘spreading alien religion’ etc.,” stated Batbayar, who, like many Mongolians, uses only one name.

Bayartsetseg, a legal expert at the nonpartisan Mongolian Foundation for Open Society, said she, as a Buddhist, found the station’s religious content personally repugnant but praised the station’s contribution to making Mongolia into a functioning democracy.

“There is a gap of independent news. We have a country ruled by the Communist Party,” Bayartsetseg said. “There is so much censorship here. Mongolia’s main [TV] channel is owned by the government, which means the Communist Party controls it.”

Frank Brown in Ulan Bator, Mongolia