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Access to uncensored news in China

Written question No. 553 to the Committee of Ministers

by Mr Göran LINDBLAD, Sweden, Group of the European People's Party

In the Swedish Parliament, I asked how the Minister for Foreign Affairs was planning to react to the news that broadcasts by New Tang Dynasty Television – via a satellite-owned and operated by the European Telecommunications Satellite Organisation, EUTELSAT – were closed down on 16 June 2008. The satellite provider is the leading video and computer communications operator in Europe and is the third largest satellite communications company in the world.

EUTELSAT¹ was created in 1977 by 17 European countries – members of the European Conference of Postal and Telecommunications Administrations, CEPT – with the purpose of operating a European telecommunications satellite system. Its constitutive text, the EUTELSAT Convention, was opened for signature in July 1982 and entered into force on 1 September 1985. By 2001, 48 European states were parties to the EUTELSAT Convention.

On 2 July 2001, all assets, operational activities and related obligations and liabilities of the organisation were transferred to EUTELSAT S.A., a company established for this purpose and operating under French law. The intergovernmental organisation was maintained to ensure that EUTELSAT S.A. observes the following basic principles:

- public service/universal service obligations;
- pan-European coverage by the satellite system;
- non-discrimination;
- fair competition.

According to the company, the shutdown on 16 June 2008 was due to technical problems with the actual satellite. However, the organisation Reporters Without Borders asserts in an article² that there was no technical error. The decision to close down the broadcasts was based on the wish of EUTELSAT to conduct more profitable business with China.

In my statement in the Swedish Parliament, I requested that Sweden raise this question at the next meeting of the EUTELSAT intergovernmental organisation. The Minister for Foreign Affairs replied that the closing down of broadcasts was indeed a problem, but that it should be solved in the context of bilateral talks on human rights, including freedom of expression, between Sweden and China, and also in the talks that China has with the EU every sixth months, as well as in other forums.

Mr Lindblad asks the Committee of Ministers what can the Committee of Ministers do so that Council of Europe member states – and particularly France – respect their commitments as partners of international conventions, especially regarding the present problems with EUTELSAT.

1. www.eutelsatigo.int.

2. www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=27818.

