

Was mistrust behind the hush over Sooden's weapons link?

The New Zealand Government's 'terror protocols' helped keep the nation's media quiet on hostage Harmeet Sooden's links to weapons company Osmar for fear such news would endanger his life. But, as KAREN TAY reports, surely journalists are responsible enough to make their own decisions on what to print, without undue pressure from above.



IMAGE OF PARADOX: Harmeet Sooden, the peacekeeper with former weapons links, is now an anti-terrorism poster child.

Harmeet Sooden has become the reluctant face of anti-terrorism. One could not ask for a more appealing poster child. He was raised in Zambia, lived in Canada and before his capture, was a student actively involved in peace movements in New Zealand. His family is of Kashmiri extraction, and he had done volunteer work in Palestine.

His capture by the Swords of Righteousness brigade, an extremist Muslim group in Iraq while involved in peacekeeping activities cemented his image as a fairytale good guy in the hands of the baddies. Before long, stories were being circulated of his involvement with organisations such as the International Solidarity Movement and Christian Peacemaker Teams.

It was only after his rescue from the clutches of his captors that the major newspapers in New Zealand revealed the disturbing news: Harmeet Sooden, media saint and darling, had once worked for a company called Osmar.

Osmar International is New Zealand owned and based, and according to its website, "is a world leader in the field of Realistic Combat Simulation". Its primary products are "multiple integrated laser effects simulation systems (MILES) or infantry weapons effects simulation systems (IWESS)".

The company supplies equipment to the USA Miles 2000 programme and according to a *Sunday Star Times* article, had "sought to do business with the Israeli army". Osmar had been refused a license to export "military-style laser harnesses" to Israel because of its potential contribution to regional conflict, said the *Sunday Star Times*.

This was damning information, of the kind which could very realistically have endangered the lives of not only Sooden should it have become public knowledge earlier, but also the lives of the other three captives.

Never mind that Sooden had changed his beliefs and views, even going so far as to switch courses from electrical engi-

neering to English and campaigning against his former employer. The terrorists would have seen the one year of work he did for Osmar as proof that he was indeed a spy.

The Osmar story was also the "scoop" that could have potentially made the career of any journalist, but none of New Zealand's media organisations followed through on the story while Sooden was still a hostage. Some days after the Harmeet Sooden story broke near the end of 2005, the Government requested a blackout on publishing information of his employment at Osmar under a little-known ethical agreement known as "Terrorist Event Media Protocols".

The protocols were a set of principles set out by the Government "to assist both parties in dealing with each other in the hopefully unlikely event of a terrorist emergency within New Zealand, or a significant terrorist event overseas involving New Zealanders".

The writing of them can be seen to reflect a mistrust on the part of the government towards media organisations. After all, not publishing details of Harmeet Sooden and Osmar could be regarded as ethical common sense. He was in the hands of Islamic insurgents who would almost certainly either severely harm or kill him if the information had been divulged.

Newsrooms across the country who knew of Sooden's involvement with Osmar in the first place had decided to show ethical restraint and refrain from publishing even before the government request.

New Zealand Herald deputy editor David Hastings said they had information of Harmeet's employment "from day one", before the Government had even approached them about the agreement.

"You don't necessarily publish something just because you can. With the Harmeet Sooden story, to publish that information when he was in the hands of terrorists in Iraq would conceivably have put his life at risk and it was pretty obvi-

ous right from the start as soon as we realised he had worked for this company," he said.

Dr Paul Buchanan, a senior lecturer in politics at the University of Auckland, and the director of the Working Group On Alternative Security Perspectives, praised the media in New Zealand, saying not publishing was a sign of "a responsible press" but at the same time questioned whether all the media organisations had declined to publish because of ethical journalism.

Buchanan said his personal opinion was that "reporters on the beat didn't dig this up", and instead, had only found out when they were informed by the Government.

"If the *New Zealand Herald* was able to self-censor in the interests of this man's safety, that's good," he said.

He cautioned however, that if the Government had any faith in editors and reporters, they would not have felt the need to request a media blackout.

Co-ordinator of Peace Movement Aotearoa Edwina Hughes echoed Dr Buchanan's sentiments.

"Journalists and media publishers should have sufficiently high ethical standards so they would not consider publishing information which will put lives in danger. There should be no need for a government request," she said.

Perhaps the real question then was one of trust between a democratic government and its supposed "watchdog", the press. The terrorism protocols were worded very carefully, with the emphasis being on cooperation between government and media, but it did not change the fact that the Government felt the need for the document to exist in the first place.

A friend of Sooden's, student activist Omar Hamed, said he felt that "on the

whole, human beings are ethical, but they commercialised, corporatised network that journalists interact with is essentially an unethical structure".

This climate of cynicism and mistrust towards the press is worrying, especially as many mistakenly view the terrorism protocols as a "gagging writ", and applaud it in this instance.

Finding the balance between ethical reporting and exposing the truth "they" do not want to be told has always been the responsibility of journalists on the job. It appears though, that the ability of the press to perform this duty is now being called into question by a dissatisfied public and government.

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In Australia, former federal court judge Marcus Einfeld told the *Sydney Morning Herald* that new sweeping anti-terrorism legislation could lead to a "police state".

The judge criticised the shutting down of a website belonging to "a social commentator" by the Australian government, saying to the *Sydney Morning Herald* "how this constitutes a threat to our national security or falls within sedition laws or even might 'incite others to terrorism' is not only beyond me, but a serious question for us all to consider".

Although the New Zealand protocols ultimately leave the decision of whether to publish up to the editors in charge, and is not law, Buchanan warned that we cannot get complacent.

"This government, in particular, has been prone to attack the press when it doesn't do its bidding," he said.

The fine line between a democracy and an autocracy is not necessarily whether legislation exists to suppress freedom of the press, but whether there are consequences from the government for publishing unwanted details.