

RELEASE IN
PART B5

From: McHale, Judith A <McHaleJA@state.gov>
Sent: Wednesday, December 8, 2010 2:00 PM
To: H
Subject: Fw: LA Times/Laura King - Afghan TV police drama delivers message with zest

Interesting approach towards influencing popular attitudes. We are

B5

I'm speaking at the Democracy conference in Bali today and then heading home tomorrow. Had a great trip to Indonesia. Was also in Malaysia and met with Paul Jones on the educational initiative.

See you next week.

Jm

From: Sreebny, Daniel
To: McHale, Judith A; DiMartino, Kitty; Cormack, Maureen E; Schwartz, Larry R/PPR; Whitaker, Elizabeth A; Cedar, Andrew N
Cc: Sreebny, Daniel; Hensman, Chris D; Namba, Nicholas; Kenna, Corley; Guimond, Gabrielle; Moore, James R
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latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-afghan-cop-show-20101208,0,6019051.story

latimes.com

Afghan TV police drama delivers message with zest

Partially funded by the U.S. and aided by Australian TV veterans, the series 'Eagle Four' follows an elite Afghan police squad. It has a political agenda but gets points for being entertaining.

By Laura King, Los Angeles Times

6:20 PM PST, December 7, 2010

Reporting from Kabul, Afghanistan

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A suicide bomber is loose in the city, and the clock is ticking. But an elite squad of Afghan cops is on the case, working street sources and mining databases, equally at ease with witty one-liners and fully loaded assault rifles, looking cool and soulful all the while.

In real life, the Afghan police are better known for illiteracy, drug abuse and shaking down citizens than for daring exploits worthy of the big screen — or the small one. But on the popular new TV series "Eagle Four,"

the squad's resourcefulness, heroism and teamwork never fail to carry the day.

The show, which has slick production values and a noir-ish soundtrack, is midway through its initial run of 13 episodes, and has already garnered a large, loyal following on Tolo TV, the country's most-watched station.

With the show shot entirely in Kabul, the Afghan capital, open-air takes were sometimes ruined by eager onlookers — from ragged street urchins to cellphone-toting businessmen — trying to get close to the cast and crew.

But overly enthusiastic fans were a happy diversion from challenges such as placating an angry mullah who tried to raise a mob to halt the production or dealing with Taliban death threats against several cast members.

"We didn't know at first what the response was going to be," said Faramjan Abraham, who plays the cocky, hotheaded rookie Baktash. "But then actual policemen started to come up and call me 'brother' and congratulate me for doing a good job solving the case."

Most viewers are probably unaware that the series is financed at least in part by the public diplomacy arm of the U.S. Embassy, which acknowledged its monetary support while declining to disclose a dollar amount. A team of Australian TV veterans was brought in to mentor the Afghans working on the show.

Boosting public respect for the Afghan security forces and drawing higher-quality recruits are crucial to U.S. hopes that the police and army will be ready to assume responsibility for the country's security in three years — a goal some consider way too optimistic.

"We see this as an opportunity not only to help support the Afghan media sector, but hopefully also encourage a dialogue among Afghans about the role of police in society, and their growing capabilities," said embassy spokeswoman Caitlin Hayden. Another U.S.-funded effort is planned for next year: a reality show that will seek to impart a frisson of glamour to joining the Afghan army.

If it's entertainment with a political agenda, "Eagle Four" gets points for being, well, entertaining. It's got all the requisite cop-show elements: rapid-fire action; a gritty, cinema verite feel; and engrossing interplay among the four squad members and their hard-edged but beloved leader, Chief Amin (who is tormented by a dark secret; more on that later).

The show's Afghan and Australian creators said "Eagle Four" was inspired by the hit U.S. drama "24." The mood and pacing are similar, but the resemblance doesn't extend to American Jack Bauer's propensity for torturing suspects until they crack.

Baktash occasionally gets carried away and roughs someone up, but he is reprimanded by his older, more-seasoned partner, Kamran, who shows him that finesse works better than brute force.

"My character is basically a good guy, but he's sort of undisciplined, and he has a lot to learn," Abraham said. A recurring theme is that when Baktash disregards Kamran's counsel, he usually gets injured within the next few scenes. "He disobeys, he gets hurt," Abraham said, laughing.

The show's producers take plenty of dramatic license, including the presence of two women on the four-member team, a mingling of the sexes unlikely to be found in any police squad room in this tradition-bound, male-dominated Islamic society. The show's makers see gender equality as an ideal worth reinforcing, even if there's little real-life evidence of it in Afghanistan.

Finding actresses to play the female leads was extremely difficult. Men outnumbered women more than 10 to 1 at auditions. One actress dropped out of the production because of family pressure; writers had to kill off her

character. At one point, executive producer Trudi-Ann Tierney, one of the Australians brought in to bolster Afghan-owned production company Kaboora, stepped in and donned a *burka* to play a suspect's silent wife and a woman's bloodied corpse.

The female characters mainly stay in the office, mirroring the reality that Afghan women are relatively little seen in public. But one of them, Ludmilla, is a computer whiz who relentlessly chases suspects through cyberspace. The script calls for periodic crisp pronouncements from her such as "I've got a fix on the location" or "Looks like the bomber is a decoy."

Somewhat daringly, there's even a love story, albeit a chaste one, between Ludmilla, who manages to make her black head scarf and loose-fitting clothing look Hollywood sultry, and the impetuous Baktash. The two of them bicker their way through much of the season, in classic romantic-comedy tradition.

She eventually softens toward him after he shows sensitivity and understanding about her feelings of guilt over having inadvertently contributed to someone's death. In the final episode of the season — spoiler alert! — they make plans for him to meet her father.

"The whole time, they don't even lock eyes," Tierney said. "But everyone can see they have feelings for each other."

Even if the show's popularity doesn't translate into heightened respect for the Afghan police, the principals believe it does justice to many aspects of Afghan life. One plot line has the seemingly incorruptible Chief Amin submitting to blackmail and deliberately compromising a case after his son is kidnapped.

"It's all part of our social reality: drug-smuggling, suicide bombs, insurgents, graft, abductions," director Ghafar Azad said. "That's all in the show. So in a lot of ways, it's telling the truth."

laura.king@latimes.com

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