

# BAD NEWS

## Reporting Africa

Veteran Africa correspondent **MOHAMMED AMIN** gets beneath the story.

**C**OVERING Africa is dangerous. There is no other way to put it. But this danger is not only physical but one born out of ignorance, bias, lack of interest and false priorities by the powers that be in the media.

When American and other Western troops left Somalia in March, almost all newspapers and international television news organisations pulled out. The explanation was that readers and viewers back home would have no need to know what was happening in this war-racked country. The impression created was that people in different countries only want to know of events where their own people are involved.

That impression was evident in the reporting when Western troops were there. American reporters concentrated on activities of American troops and officials; Germans on Germans; Italians on Italians. Hardly anybody mentioned that the Zimbabweans were doing a fine job. Botswana troops, tackling some of the toughest assignments effectively, are still there.

Now there are hardly any journalists in Somalia and whatever reporting is done is by Somali stringers, who take their respective sides.

Yet there are many events worth reporting in that war-torn nation. The United Nations is there, spending millions of dollars of taxpayers' money. What is being accomplished? Surely people around the world want to know.

Somali factions, who usually prefer throwing high-calibre shells at their real and imagined enemies, are in fact doing quite a lot of talking — seeking solutions to their political problems. Surely the people who were accustomed to seeing pictures of emaciated children, and dead bodies piled on trucks bound for the cemetery each morning, would like to know about the change of heart?

Moreover, thousands of Somalis have returned to their homes, are tilling their land, and are rebuilding schools. This is a

positive story which never has been fully told.

I mention Somalia to illustrate two points.

One is that events in Africa and, indeed many Third World countries, are covered internationally only when they cannot be ignored. By then they are no longer events, but more often tragedies.

The second point is that good news — or what you might refer to as human interest — is ignored. As a result, there is little understanding of the causes and effects. Let me illustrate this.

When the Rwandan Patriotic Front rebels and the government reached a ceasefire agreement last August, it appeared all would soon be well. The Hutus, who dominated the government, and the Tutsis who led the rebel movement, were finally settling their differences.

Almost the whole world, except perhaps listeners to the BBC Africa Service and a few other notable exceptions in the media, were made to understand that tribal differences were the sole cause of the problem and if the two sides were willing to talk, it would be just a matter of time before the conflict was resolved.

The fact is that it wasn't that straightforward.

There were Hutus who opposed the settlement right from the beginning. There were Hutus who supported the agreement, not necessarily because they sympathised with the rebels but because they wanted a more democratic form of government.

On the other hand, there were Hutus in the political opposition parties because they supported, rightly or wrongly, the rebel explanation that the war was to establish democracy and allow the right of return for refugees, mostly Tutsis.

This was hardly explained. In other words, the slow developments that were raising tension, the less spectacular happenings shaping Rwandan society and turning the country into killing fields, were not explained.

When disaster struck, the world was caught unaware.

The Rwandan massacres took a dramatic turn into a big story, largely because there were many heavyweight journalists in South Africa covering the elections. Most of the organisations, particularly big television stations, had geared up for a civil war in South Africa.

When South Africa became, in news terms, a non-story, the organisations who had invested huge sums of money looked elsewhere for their headlines. Rwanda came at a perfect time and a number of top correspondents and their crews headed north.

This is largely the reason why Rwanda became such a big story and was given such a high profile. Fortunately, in this case, having started the story the journalists stayed with it.

Many got the story wrong. Even to this day there are reports of ethnic and tribal massacres. It is far from that. The truth behind the Rwanda story is it is a well-planned, well-executed genocide by extremely well-trained troops, trained by the French who are, ironically, today back in Rwanda.

I can give other examples where disaster struck: Burundi, Liberia, Angola. Zaire is another example of a looming disaster. Yet it draws very little reporting.

Your own country, for example, was always portrayed as having two forces at each others' throats. But this was not the case. This media coverage came about because the extremists got a better hearing.

We have to admit that Africa is not an easy continent to report.

Communications are a disaster to say the least. Officials are inaccessible. When they are reachable, getting information from them is like trying to get blood out of a stone. Data is unreliable, where it exists. A simple rule of reporting — that if you wait long enough someone is going to talk — does not work in Africa.

There have been many serious-minded foreign correspondents determined to ex-

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plain Africa to their audiences along the lines I have suggested. But in talking to them, I have found that a major problem is the editors back home. "Who cares about that?", seems to be the main response to their suggestions on less spectacular issues — but nonetheless issues of consequence in the long term.

We all know there is never a bad story, only a badly written one. But reporting and the money needed to pay for it is mostly controlled by people who know very little about this continent. Their image of Africa has, by and large, been influenced by the type of reporting I have mentioned. Africa is a continent of disaster after disaster.

I am not saying that beyond every hill or wadi in Africa is a Valley of Shangri-La. Far from that. The continent has numerous problems. But there are many, many Africans seeking solutions. Their voices are rarely heard.

The coverage that has gone out of Africa has, in general, been negative. While I understand this is the nature of news, this tendency has led to suspicious governments and officials being very reluctant to cooperate with journalists in most African countries.

African governments do believe — and I fear most often rightly — that the Western world fails to report their nations seriously, and rather looks to them only for the sensational. This bias and negative attitude has left many governments with a distrust of journalists, particularly foreign journalists,

thus making covering Africa even more complex.

The secret of covering many of the situations in Africa — as elsewhere — is the contacts, knowing the logistics — where the story is, how to get there and, most importantly, how to get out with the story and pictures before anybody else — and I have to say that this needs many, many years of experience and a lot of hard work and planning.

The contacts are absolutely crucial. If the trust is not there, then on many of the major stories it would be extremely frustrating for journalists even to get into the country.

The job of a frontline journalist, particularly cameramen, photographers, soundmen has always been dangerous. Last year was the bloodiest year on record in terms of the numbers of journalists killed. There were at least 75 confirmed cases of violent death, some of them in horrifying circumstances.

Journalists working in Africa must be better equipped and better informed before going into potential danger areas. There are too many untrained and reckless journalistic activities. The competition to get the news first is leading to dangerous risk-taking, particularly involving freelancers.

The time has now come to recognise that the problems of journalists' safety are getting more serious. I would urge organisations like the South African Union of Journalists to take a much stronger stand

against military authorities and officials who harass and persecute journalists.

It is appalling that governments, and the United Nations, are turning a blind eye to the harassment and victimisation of journalists. I would also urge that the editors who assign journalists to war areas be more responsible.

I have heard senior editors say: "We will not send a staff cameraman or photographer to cover the war because it is too dangerous and he has a family... but we will send a young freelancer because he is keen to go."

This sort of attitude is appalling. It is safer, I believe, to send more experienced journalists into war zones, than to pick up a hired journalist because the editor feels less responsible for him or her. And the freelancer usually comes cheap.

I believe a campaign should be launched to help journalists. Unions and associations should organise special training sessions on the dangers of reporting conflicts. Media organisations should provide better insurance for staff and for freelancers, and to agree on a code of practice to ensure that freelancers get equal treatment if they are victims of violence.

■ *Mohammed Amin is Managing Director of Camerapix. This article is an edited version of a speech delivered recently to the South African Union of Journalists.*

## INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE: FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

### CALL FOR PAPERS

DAWN has broken over a democratic South Africa — but it's still unclear how much the sun will shine through.

The country has a modern constitution and bill of rights — but no Freedom of Information Act. The onus is on individuals to show why they should get state information, rather than on the state to prove a case for secrecy. Tax records and state archives remain closed; laws still authorise elected public bodies like town councils to hold closed meetings almost at whim.

So, will the new South Africa be more transparent than the old? What has been the experience of journalists since the elections? Will controversial decisions about development and reconstruction take place behind closed doors? Is there international experience to

draw upon? What new ideas and technologies are there to promote freedom of information? Where do press freedom, state security and the right to privacy fit in?

These are the issues on the agenda of an international conference being hosted by the Rhodes University Department of Journalism and Media Studies in February next year. To be held in Grahamstown, South Africa, the conference will hear from local and foreign international media professionals, academics, lawyers, politicians and other interested parties.

✪ **For further information, contact: The Organiser, Freedom of Information Conference, Department of Journalism and Media Studies, Rhodes University, Grahamstown 6140. Tel. 0461 - 318336/7; Fax 0461 - 28447. e-mail address: jotm@hippo.ru.ac.za**