

REPRESENTING AFRICA

THE 'SOLDIER AND THE STARVING CHILD', TO BORROW FROM ONE PHOTOGRAPHER, IS THE PAIR OF IMAGES WIDELY CIRCULATED TO REPRESENT THE CONTINENT. AFRICANS ARE REGULARLY REDUCED TO PERPETRATORS AND VICTIMS, A DICHOTOMY WHICH FAILS TO ACKNOWLEDGE THEIR INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE SPIRIT. THE CHALLENGE TO ALL OF US COVERING AFRICA IS TO ADDRESS ITS MANY PROBLEMS, BUT ALSO TO HOLD UP THE VALUES, EVENTS AND ENDEAVOURS THAT DRAW OR KEEP US HERE.



Countering the chronicles of

Inter Press Service's **Patricia Made** considers how to keep African development on the international media's agenda...

The notion of keeping Africa on the international media's agenda might sound odd to those who perceive that the media constantly focuses on African conflicts, coups and famines. A little less coverage, critics say, might help Africa shake its image of the 'lost continent'.

But during the Kosovo crisis in Europe, it became apparent that the media is not so enamoured of Africa's dilemmas anymore. Inter Press Service (IPS) journalists writing from Washington and New York during the Kosovo crisis interviewed media analysts who pointed to stark differences between the American media coverage of conflict in the former Yugoslavia and of other wars in

which the United States has been involved. The same media analysts also noted that during the time of Kosovo, there was a virtual silence in the coverage of wars in Africa.

When the bombing of Kosovo began on March 24 this year, an international media frenzy began. According to media analysts, Kosovo dominated U.S. television news more than any other story since 1991. But while the media was focused on Kosovo, the conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea – in which about 50,000 ethnic Eritreans were expelled from Ethiopia – was largely ignored.

"No one cares about tens of thousands of people in Africa dying," Manning Marable, director of the Institute for Research in African-American Studies at New York's

Refugees are a favourite media subject, belying the widespread lack of genuine concern for the tens of thousands dying in Africa's wars. A contrasting image: people building homes in South Africa's Eastern Cape - "the story of development is still the most important media story to be told from Africa."

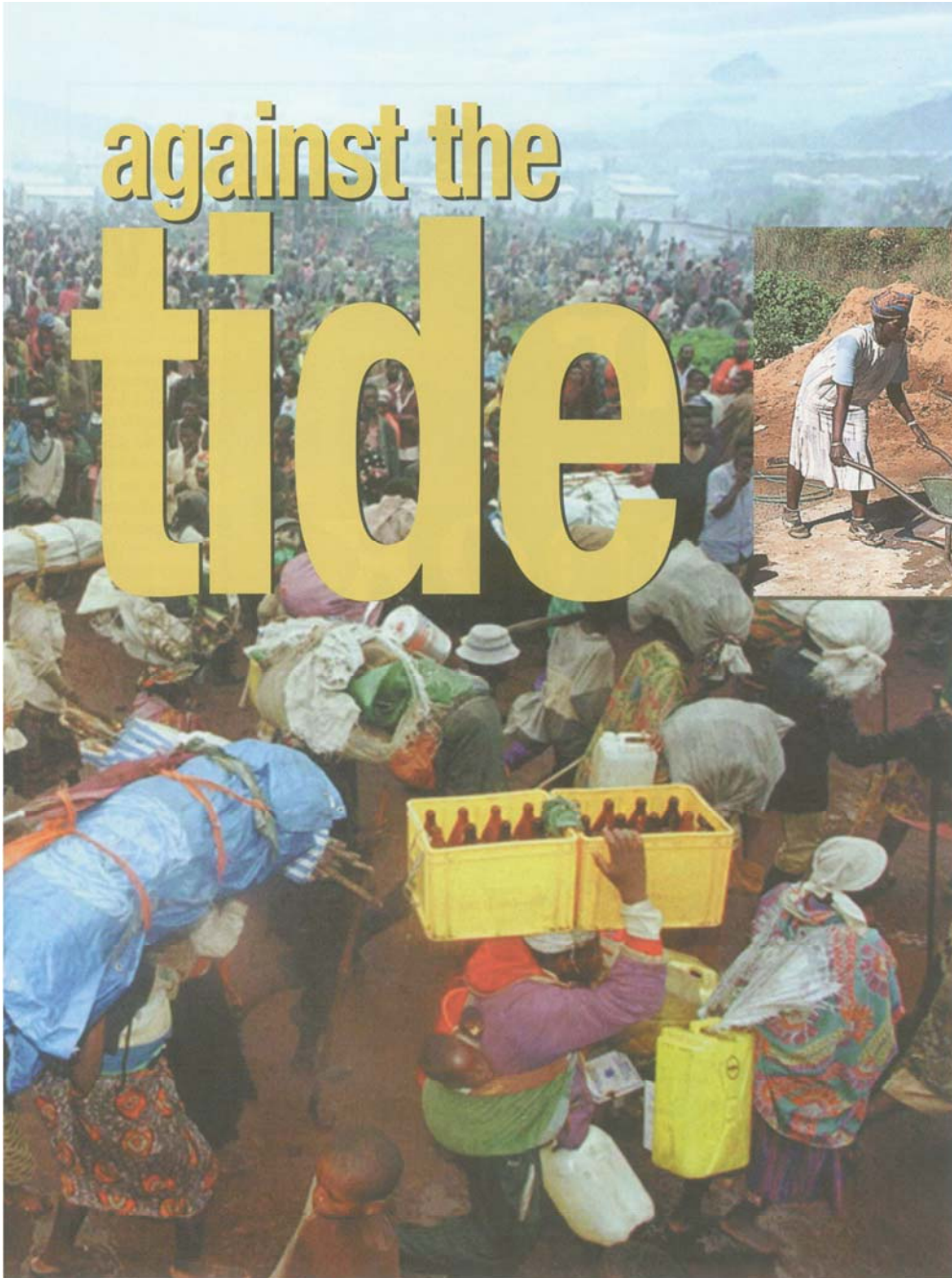


PHOTO: ERIC MILLER/AFRICA

victims and disasters

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Columbia University, told IPS journalists. The conflict in the Horn of Africa has barely been mentioned in the mainstream media. The war in the Democratic Republic of Congo, which has directly involved at least seven African nations, "is still on the back pages" of Western newspapers, Marable added. Angola was also a lost story.

Inter Press Service has been trying to tell these 'lost stories' for more than 30 years now. It regards this mission even more important at a time when the world is being governed by a new political hegemony firmly rooted in the notions of winners and losers.

IPS is the world's leading alternative international information provider. It was established in 1964 by a cooperative of journalists who saw the need for an alternative to the Western-led news agenda that dominated the global media.

Today, the agency is an international not-for-profit association of journalists worldwide, with satellite communication links to 1,200 outlets. The agency holds Consultative Status Category I at the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

IPS specialises in process-oriented reporting on global issues, and it has become a major information service with an innovative system for inter-cultural communication. The agency promotes a global communication strategy that aims to bring together civil society, policy makers at national and international level and the media. In addition to its main services in English and Spanish, news bulletins are produced in other languages, some of which include Bengali, Dutch, Finnish, French (Africa), German, Hindi, Kiswahili, Mandarin, Nepali, Norwegian, Sinhala, Swedish, Tamil, Thai and Urdu.

While 'globalisation' may be a relatively new term, some argue that the process began when the explorer Christopher Columbus set foot on North American territory in 1492. This planted the seeds of a process which today is moving at incredible speed and changing the political, economic and social fabric of countries worldwide.

IPS seeks to provide in the global information market products such as news features, analyses and expert commentaries on the events and global processes affecting the economic, social and political development of peoples and nations in the South. This is a tall order: to tell more urgently than ever the stories of people's development and aspirations when the world is much more attuned to issues of economic growth, prosperity, foreign investment, movement of capital, emerging markets and global trade. Yet with this growing divide between the 'haves' and the 'have nots', the story of 'development' is still the most important media story to be told from Africa.

STAYING CLASSIC AMIDST THE TRENDS

At a time when the media seems to be interested only in global politics and global economics, any information agency that still talks about 'development' appears to be out of fashion and out of step with the times. Bad news is still good news.

But in a set of training manuals on reporting on 'children and women' produced by the United Nations Children Fund with the Thompson Foundation, journalists are reminded that 'development' still provides a window to new angles and untold stories which capture the lives of people. These manuals define development journalism as: seeking "to report a country's progress and setbacks in both urban and rural areas in a factual and accessible way. It should create an information bridge between the authorities and the public, between urban and rural communities. Long-term, it aims to contribute to improvements in people's lifestyles."

For IPS staying true to the ideals and tenets of reporting development also has meant explaining what goes on in the world to its readers by increasing its editors' and journalists' capacities to analyse and contextualise the changes

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tions, parties take steps toward resolving a conflict, they risk being attacked by more intransigent members of their own constituencies. The media can greatly facilitate the process of compromise by making it possible for negotiators to address their own publics through the media in order to explain their negotiating positions and build support for them.

- **Solution building:** Conflicts get prevented or managed when the parties table and consider possible solutions to grievances. Journalists can play a role in this process by pressing the parties for their proffered solutions. Although this seems self-evident, many third-party negotiators have noted that parties are often so invested in their grievances that they do not develop or consider options for potential agreement with adversaries. The simple act of eliciting ideas and reporting them could assist the dynamic of the more formal mediation process itself. It should also be noted that the process of formal mediation can fail if there is not a parallel process of what might be called 'social mediation', by which the constituents and publics of the formal negotiating parties are brought into the process and prepared to accept its outcome.

This is but a partial account of potential media roles. A fuller account would describe a complex set of activities undertaken by a great variety of actors operating from institutional bases in independent, multi-lateral and governmental institutions

in conflict situations of great diversity. Elaborating such a full account will require, over time, the combined efforts of media professionals, diplomats, conflict resolvers and diverse protagonists, among others.

The process by which this could be done would be one of 'social invention' in which the spontaneous, largely uncoordinated but not random activities of diverse actors could create new institutions and behaviours. Journalism itself, in fact, is a product of precisely this process over time, as is the sitcom, soap opera, rap song, portable radio and the sports page. It would be folly to believe that the history of the media has ended here, and that we do not possess the social imagination to meet the challenge now being posed by the threat of mass social violence to human societies everywhere.

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1 James W. Carey, "The Dark Continent of American Journalism," in Robert Karl Manoff and Michael Schudson, eds., *Reading the News*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1987.

Tide

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taking place globally. But it has also meant, at times, redefining the commonly held definitions of news to include new perspectives, other and more voices and a different position to the dominant view.

Translating this vision into practice within the IPS Africa network means that reporting on the issues of health, education, poverty, women's human rights, labour, transport, the environment and other issues of development is still the essence of the IPS reporting from Africa. Getting journalists to accept these issues as part of their daily news agendas has been the result of training programmes, seminars on new themes and constant on-line, daily guidance by the IPS editors. To IPS journalists in Africa, a story about the Congolese rebels suspending hostilities in their territories to allow children to be immunised is as important as the story about seven heads of state involved in the Democratic Republic of Congo conflict signing a cease-fire accord.

We live in an era where international bodies like the World Trade Organisation (WTO) determine the winners and losers in the movement of goods and services, and most often the 'winner's' story gets told. But the other side of the story must be told, too: like the recent IPS story filed from Kenya on the fight to stop a Parliamentary bill which would strip farmers and local innovators of their right to technologies and indigenous knowledge. Or the underside of the story, reported in the mainstream press, that Mozambique's multi-billion dollar debt relief package could be a big boost to the nation –

IPS went deeper to reveal that the deal would prevent the country from rescuing its cashew nut-processing industry. This would mean that 10,000 Mozambicans, half of them women, would remain without work.

Along with stories on African politics and economics, IPS' Africa coverage has included, among many others, stories on girl soldiers in Sierra Leone laying down their guns for books; the housing crisis in the oil-rich country of Gabon, where the disabled are particularly vulnerable to homelessness; prison conditions in Kenya; children's rights and new laws in Nigeria; a rice production scheme that has been successful in providing a livelihood to the unemployed in Congo; increasing poverty in oil-rich Equatorial Guinea. These stories focus on human development, and people's right to development.

During the last two years, IPS Africa also has worked on re-training its network of journalists to advance reporting on women's rights as a human rights issue. Through the development of an editorial policy and through subsequent training programmes, IPS journalists have actively begun to seek out women as valuable sources of news and information.

IPS is constantly refining its role within the world's information order. Remaining a 'classic' among the 'trend-setters' means that the agency must meet the challenge of filling the gaps in reporting events and processes with a different focus, yet one that engages media managers and audiences. It must also continue to meet the challenge of keeping Africa, with all of its complexities and changes, on the international media's agenda.

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West

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Meanwhile, Kinshasa's own demands to Kabila were depicted as stubbornness and indecisiveness. Indeed, the reports on Kabila's demands conveniently omitted the U.N.'s demand for a ceasefire as a preamble to negotiations. However, the reports did point to frustrations by U.N. emissaries in their negotiations with Mobutu and other government leaders.

As military engagements intensified, the imbalance in coverage of the two sides widened. The agencies' reports chronicled the rapid advance by rebel alliance forces – 1,500 kilometres in barely three months – and openly suggested that government forces were no match. For example, in mid-February 1997, the AP depicted use of aerial bombardment by government forces as ineffective against the rebels' ground plans to take several key cities, including Kisangani, the country's third largest. The air strikes were reported as "last options in Mobutu's fight against rebels" that couldn't "change the tide in war". The articles also depicted aerial bombings as a threat to peaceful resolution because they could prompt Kabila to "withdraw his offer to negotiate". Indeed, the AP once claimed (without substantiation) that journalists and relief workers saw "Mi-24 combat gunships and warplanes apparently piloted by mercenaries from Eastern Europe".

But the reports went beyond allusions. AP regularly reported the rebel take-over of towns and settlements as "orderly and peaceful". Government forces were described as a "struggling army counter-offensive against the rebels". Government forces were portrayed as "troops on looting sprees in nearly every town they have abandoned to the rebels". Where they didn't altogether abandon a town, the government forces offered "little resistance". The agency wrote on March 8th: "In each town, demoralised and unpaid Zairean troops learn of the rebel approach, loot everything in sight and then retreat, leaving the town to the rebels without a fight." And a day later: "[Kabila] presides over a sophisticated military and political organisation. And his rebels have three advantages over Mobutu's unpaid and demoralised government troops: strategy, discipline and motivation."

AP later wrote: "[The rebel alliance] favours pincer movements on the battlefield, always leaving the enemy an escape route to herd it west. Government forces have pillaged towns they were supposed to be defending and fled without much of a fight. Unlike the army, the rebels are disciplined. On a continent where many armies are fuelled by beer, rebels are not drunk in public. Their U.S.-style uniforms are crisp in sweltering jungles. They follow command."

The manner in which the agencies consumed war propaganda from both the rebel and government forces is disconcerting. For example, the rebel forces were reported

being within 14 miles of Kisangani on March 4, 1997, but within 50 to 60 miles of the city a week later. Had there been a retreat or a misrepresentation of fact? And when Kisangani eventually fell on March 14, both wire agencies reported heavy fighting and mortar-fire, yet the AP talked of "little resistance from the government forces" a few days later.

The characterisations of Mobutu and Kabila were pointed. During October and November 1996 – the period when G-7 countries were contemplating an 'intervention force' – Mobutu was portrayed as a stubborn African leader who was nonetheless open to dialogue. Yet in the months leading to his ousting, the wire agencies simply switched adjectives. They described him as a "dictator", "systematic plunderer", "looter" and "thief". Describing his re-emergence after a month-long "seclusion", AP reported that "even his cap seemed to be getting tattered." Kabila, on the other hand, was depicted as a pragmatic leader and his past – allegedly as a gold and diamond smuggler – was left largely unquestioned. News reports described him as a modern leader with a corporate look, a sharp contrast to the old-fashioned and impervious Mobutu. Some wire reports even alluded to Kabila's energy and sense of humour.

But probably the most insidious bias in this reportage was the negligence towards the human costs of war. Reports filed throughout the entire period were silent about civilian casualties, dilapidation of

public amenities, threat of epidemics, destruction of economic activity and the general mayhem that are war's direct results. Indeed, the coverage was so overtly reductionist that it at times appeared to mobilise support for war or at least make the civil war acceptable. On numerous occasions, the agencies used language and imagery that portrayed war as inevitable and morally justifiable.

Little wonder that the wire agencies, despite their close proximity to the civil war's frontline, could not corroborate relief agencies' claims that hundreds of thousands of refugees had been slaughtered in the rebel onslaught. Considering that a large number of stories carried 'battlefront' datelines, it is difficult to understand how the now widely feared – but all so real – genocide of fleeing Rwandan Hutus could have gone unnoticed. Even more confounding was the glaring failure by agency correspondents to take the rebels to task on the refugees' fate as the civil war raged.

The truth about these serious omissions lies in the storyline that the correspondents subscribed to in their reportage. Clearly, the line followed during the rebels' march on Kinshasa conformed to the foreign policy of Western governments. Whether other storylines will ever emerge is anyone's guess.

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