Kinshasa, former Zaire, August 1998. The scenes Andrews chose not to shoot: "I feared for my life."

Out of sight

A photographer's story of self-preservation

Many photographers and camerapersons covering violent conflict develop a dangerous bravado and illusion that the camera somehow protects them. Reuters photographer **Peter Andrews** shares his survival instincts...

On the 27th of August last year rebels opposing President Laurent Kabila were advancing on Kinshasa, capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo. The city had been tense for quite a few weeks and our work as journalists was becoming almost impossible. Reporters, cameramen and especially still photographers were constantly harassed by local soldiers, secret police and even the local population, who seemed to have totally accepted government propaganda calling every foreign newsperson an imperialist or spy.

It was especially bad for white journalists, who stuck out like sore thumbs in the midst of the turmoil. Reuters Television news cameraman Sipho Maseko and I were arrested and beaten up a few times and I even had my film confiscated personally by the Minister of Information himself, which seemed a bit ridiculous since the film was of small children carrying water. It seemed to me a clear indication that the situation in Kinshasa was deteriorating by the hour.

On the day of the rebels' advance towards the city, a Belgian journalist managed to arrange a trip with a military escort throughout the capital. There were four of us: the Belgian, a woman from Radio France International, Sipho and I. We had one soldier with us with an AK-47 assault rifle and a man who said he was the deputy military com-

Journalists covering intense conflict not

witnessing trauma

The communication of stress

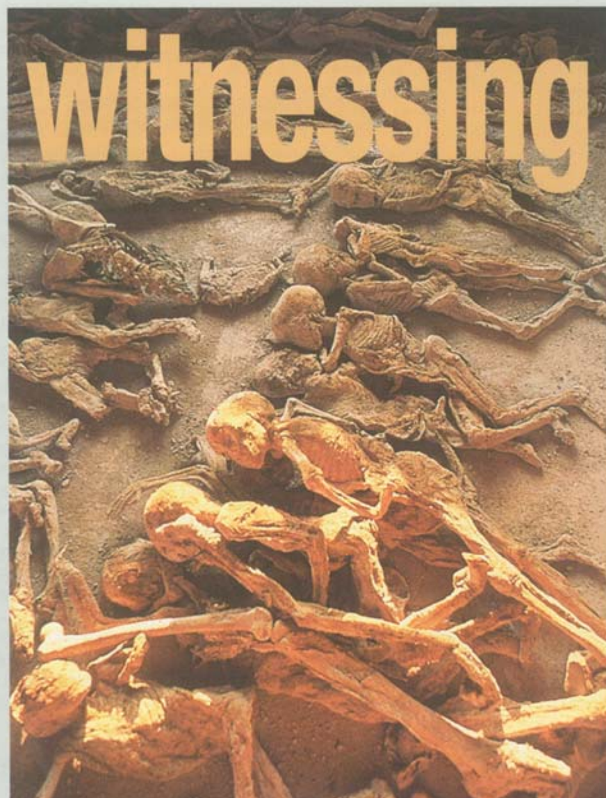


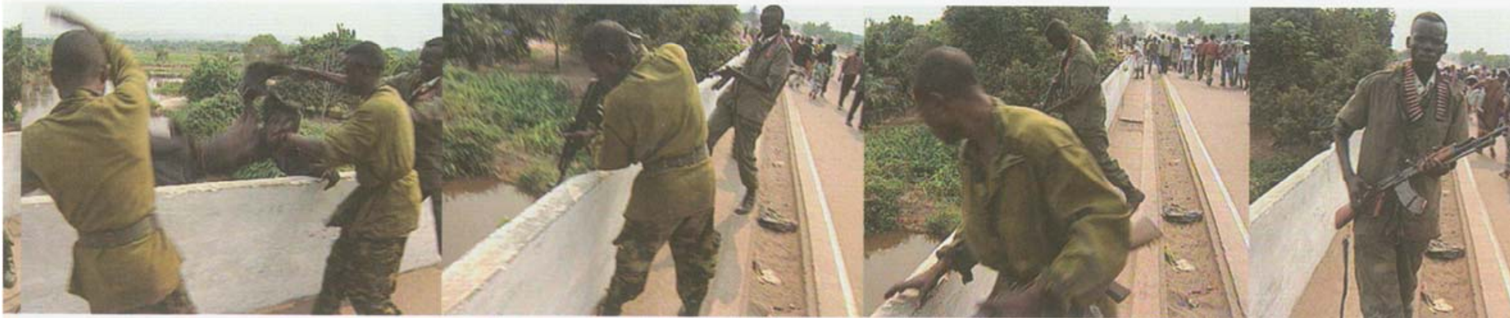
Photo: Jesper Strudsholm/i-Afrika

Journalists not only witness trauma such as this in Rwanda; themselves traumatised, they pass it on to their audiences in their reportage.

During World War II doctors realised that people caught up in terrible violence could suffer from a barrage of images that kept on returning long after the events were over. They saw this not only among soldiers, but among priests, doctors and reporters who had been with those fighting the war. This after-attack of stress, anxiety and reliving the terrible events has come to be known in psychological terminology as 'post-traumatic stress syndrome' (PTSS).

Dr. Gordon Isaacs, of Cape Town's Trauma Centre for Survivors of Violence and Torture, witnessed substantial evidence of this syndrome in his work with those testifying before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Isaacs says he has also seen journalists in this country suffering from PTSS.

People suffer trauma when they go through a life-threatening event. But often – and particularly in the case of journalists – an 'event' has a double nature: not only is one's own life in danger; one is often witnessing others in danger. Journalists, too, play a double role: not only do they witness danger; they convey it to millions when then them-



Photos: Sipho Maseko/Reuters

mander of Kinshasa, though he had a red cross on his uniform and no other military insignia.

First we went to the army barracks, where we picked up a further truckload of soldiers to bolster our escort. We had to hide our cameras all the time because the soldiers seemed to be in a volatile mood, apparently paranoid, drunk or possibly drugged. All of them walked with open uniforms, carrying their automatic weapons with up to five magazines taped to each other and all with a finger permanently on the trigger, something I have not seen in any other military conflict situation.

> While he was shooting, the camera seemed to have shielded him from the reality of what he was seeing. He could have been easily shot and no one would have done anything to stop it.

From the barracks, we went for a drive through the city streets. As we tried to film for the first time, we were confronted by other soldiers, who appeared not to believe that our commander was indeed a commander, or that we journalists were indeed journalists. They seemed keen to shoot us on the spot. After a heated discussion in which our commander apparently legitimised our identities, we were allowed to leave the scene, but without filming.

Five minutes later we came upon a mob of people running through the streets, dragging the body of a burned man who they said was a Tutsi rebel caught by the local population. At first the crowd seemed not to notice us, so we quickly took our pictures and film, but after a few minutes we could hear questions about who we were and why we were there and whether we should be allowed to record the scene. We left as quickly as we could and headed towards the airport, where most of the fighting appeared to be concentrated. On our way we saw at least ten bodies burning by the roadside. We were told they were Tutsis, but they could have been anybody. As we neared the airport, filming another 'happy crowd' with another burned body, a member of the crowd came up to me and said: "I know where you live – Memling 106."

I was terrified. I was 45 minutes from the hotel and yet he knew my hotel and even my room number. We quickly stopped filming and left to return to the military base. That was when I noticed two soldiers trying to throw a struggling man over a bridge.

I shouted to Sipho, but it seemed dangerous to try to film the scene. Sipho seemed to be able to work more easily with the black crowd. We stopped the car and Sipho stepped out and started filming. The two soldiers ignored us and carried on with their brutality. After they had thrown the man over the bridge, they leaned over the side and shot him in the water below as he tried to scramble ashore.

The three of us who were white were horrified. The commander with the red cross kept telling us: "Every Tutsi should die." As Sipho got back into the car he was shaking with fear and shock. But while he was shooting, the camera seemed to have shielded him from the reality of what he was seeing. He could have been easily shot and no one would have done anything to stop it.

I did not shoot the scene because I feared for my life. I have worked in Africa for three years, Sarajevo for two years and Russia for five, covering small and bigger wars, including Chechnya. I think I have developed an instinctive sense of danger and I trust that instinct to keep me out of trouble. I also had in my mind the image of Somalia and a crowd turning on four of my colleagues; three died. I simply stayed out of sight.

Hopefully my story will help you.

Peter Andrews works for Reuters out of Nairobi.

only experience post-traumatic stress syndrome – they often help spread it.

Anthea Garman spoke to

Dr. Gordon Isaacs

on how to cope...

selves become traumatised witnesses.

This might be why many South Africans turn away from crime as a media story and want to shut it out: they are too traumatised by its pervasiveness in society to cope with the reports as well. Even if they haven't been directly affected by a crime event they could be experiencing 'vicarious traumatisation'.

Isaacs points out – and again this experience relates to working with survivors of apartheid atrocities – that the act of giving testimony or reliving an experience may be as powerful psychologically as having gone through it in the first place. "Trauma resurrects the feelings and they are very powerful," he says.

It is vital that journalists working in high-intensity environments not only watch their own exposure to trauma but become aware of how they convey this to their audiences.

Isaacs recommends that journalists ask questions like:

- Why are we reporting this?
- What do we own around this?
- What kind of outcome is this going to produce?

He offers the following guidelines for dealing with PTSS:

Guidelines for dealing with PTSS:

Signs of post-traumatic stress:

- You feel guilty because you survived
- You block your emotions
- You feel helpless
- Your work is affected
- Your relationships are affected
- You suffer sleep disturbances
- You have nightmares
- You drink more alcohol than usual or start to rely on drugs
- You become aggressive and angry
- You take on more work
- You lose your idealism and start to despair about the violence and cruelty in society
- You lower your belief in the value of your work

How to cope:

- Know your own limits
- Talk to your colleagues
- Exercise
- Avoid abusing alcohol and drugs
- Draw boundaries around your work and put in place rituals of decompression
- Explore reasons to believe in your work
- Reaffirm your belief in life and find areas in which you can affirm this belief
- Revisit your past successes and rethink your goals
- Do relaxing and positive activities

Employers can help by offering:

- Logistical support
- Organised group debriefings
- Time off
- Acknowledgement of their work
- Rotation of assignments (so that you are not the only competent war specialist!)

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