

how do you cover conflict when you don't have money, up-to-date equipment or transport to get you to the scene of the crime or even access to your own government and its thinking? Africa's journalists are a gung-ho crew, but for the most part their ability to report the vital matters of the day is hampered by historical disadvantages, and the overwhelming logistics of news gathering in a continent famous for its lack of infrastructure.

You could take it back as far as Henry Morton Stanley's famous foray, on behalf of the *New York Daily Herald*, to find Dr. Livingstone in 1871. News was being invented from the shores of the industrialised West, while the Africans on whose territory this news was happening were mere bystanders. How could the bemused porters

who carried Stanley across the uncharted continent imagine that this meeting with a tired old white man on the shores of Lake Tanganyika was of any importance? And yet that meeting became a news event that reverberated across the globe, and transformed the image of the Dark Continent forever.

Africa is still being reported in much the same way today. Heavily equipped mini-armies of European and American journalists swarm like flies to centres of conflict, bringing added chaos to already beleaguered regions. A famine in Ethiopia transforms the economy of Addis Ababa for the brief period that the story holds the interest of a Western readership. In the Ugandan capital of Kampala, the Equatorial Hotel experiences an unexpected revival of its faded colonial glory when the cream of the world press takes occupation to observe the rise and fall of Idi Amin from the safety of its colonnaded balcony. When the war leaves,

or the famine becomes another boring African disaster, the scribes and scribettes of the West pull out, taking their computers, their fax machines, their hunting jackets and their 4x4s with them, riding high towards another foreign crisis.

South Africa, a relatively developed part of the continent, is no exception to the faddishness of the Western media. In the 1980s, South Africa's burning townships was the place to be. Today, although the issues are even more complex than they were 15 years ago, South Africa is barely newsworthy in the outside world.

Down here on the ground, meanwhile, Africa's journalists struggle to keep the issues of conflict alive for a homegrown readership. In South Africa, with its computerised newsrooms and rapid access to most parts of the sub-region, conflict reporting is relatively easy. The problem is deciding what constitutes conflict, and how we make

On a recent assignment taking him into the ongoing conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo – the former Zaire –



John Matshikiza brought back the sad reality

of structural constraints facing African journalists.

The question is: what to do about them?

A Reporter's Lament

The crazy logistics of war reporting in Africa



Kinshasa, former Zaire, August 1998. An angry mob drags the burned body of an alleged Tutsi rebel through the streets. When the graphic horror show subsides, is anyone still watching?

PHOTO: PETER ANDREWS/REUTERS



People in **Bukavu** are likely to have **relatives in Kinshasa**, and vice versa, but **neither side** will have **any idea** of how the other is **faring**.

the complicated issues behind the various conflicts in the region comprehensible – including our own. The government and its spokespersons go out of their way to keep us in the dark, sensitive about regional diplomacy and embarrassed about their own blind fumbblings as the new superpower on the block.

In other African countries, the problems are even deeper. African newsrooms remain poorly equipped. Television stations are almost comically inefficient. The bottom line is money. Pointing primitive cameras at their own reality, African journalists can do little more than relay to their audiences the bitter truth that they live in the Third World – evidenced by the poor quality of the images they are seeing on the T.V.

As a result, most African media rely on foreign news services to report their own conflicts. Access to information is difficult. Your own government is probably more likely to grant an interview to Robert Fisk than to journalists from its own back yard, because the local chaps might want to complicate the story with questions about internal human rights abuses, corruption scandals and lack of policy. The end result is a stand-off in which local journalists decide on a policy of self-censorship, in order to get Government House to say anything at all. The African audience remains baffled as to the course and causes of the conflict it is paying for with its hard-earned taxes.

The war in the Congo – the former Zaire – is a case in point.

I entered the Congo by road through the Rwandan border-post that leads directly into Bukavu, on the southeastern shores of Lake Kivu. Bukavu is the capital of the province of South Kivu. It is an important area, due to its proximity to the eastern borders where the Interahamwe rebel eruptions take place, and where pursuit and counter-pursuit by the Rwandan and Burundian armies occur as a result. There is a huge population of refugees and internally displaced communities, all depending on the protection of the Rwandan and Congolese military

garrison, and the civilian governor and his team, who report to the Rally for Congolese Democracy (RCD) leadership in Goma – the political grouping trying to unseat their former ally, Laurent Kabila.

Kinshasa, the Congolese capital, is far away, on the other side of the country. Although in most countries the daily news of the capital tends to dominate the national agenda, here it is not so. The only news out of Kinshasa is rumour and speculation. From Bukavu, Kinshasa could be as far away as Kosovo – with the difference that, thanks to the radio, Kosovo is more real than Kinshasa, with blow-by-blow accounts of its turmoil broadcast every hour on the hour from London, Paris and Johannesburg.

Bukavu and Kinshasa are effectively in two separate countries, with each half cen-

soring out information about the other as part of the war strategy. People in Bukavu are likely to have relatives in Kinshasa, and vice versa, but neither side will have any idea of how the other is faring.

Arriving in a new town, the journalist's instinct is to look out for likely sources of information. It struck me on my second day in Bukavu that a newspaper office or a news bureau would be a great place to hang out and discover what the trends might be in this confusing scenario of civil war.

My host, a representative of one of the dozens of international aid agencies that operate in the area, was surprised that I was even asking. No one had ever thought of the idea of a local news agency, and Bukavu is too unstable for an international agency to want to have a permanent presence. When an interesting flare-up occurs, Reuters, AFP, the BBC and a number of others will send in someone from Kigali or Nairobi, perhaps, to hang around on the terrace of the Orchid Hotel and see what they can glean from the odd expatriate who might still take their sundowners there.

This had, in fact, been the scenario just a week before I had arrived, following an incident in which an RCD official had been howled down and stoned by the people in the market area when he had ventured into Bukavu from Goma to hold a political rally. By the time the foreign journalists had arrived, the RCD leader had long retreated back to Goma, and there was nothing but a sullen silence reigning over Bukavu. Sullen silence, for all its eloquence about the level of popular feeling against the war, is not news. The foreign correspondents blew a few hundred dollars on the Orchid's inflated menu and left town.

A week later I arrived in Goma, at the northern end of Lake Kivu. Goma lies in the area of a number of active volcanoes. The last eruption took place in 1969. The town is built out of black volcanic rock, and there is a permanent whiff of sulphur in the air, as if the devil has just passed through, and might well be back at any moment.

At Goma, as at Bukavu, the ordinary people hang on every scrap of news that a traveller might bring regarding the course of the war and the possibility of the signing of a peace accord. Although I feel like a local, identifying with the plight of my fellow Africans, I have already attained the status of a foreign celebrity. I am known as 'le journaliste sud-africain'. In the absence of the BBC and the AFP, a South African journalist will do. I am not only expected to take down detailed information from every source who can get to me – politicians, taxi drivers, soldiers and fruit sellers – but am looked to as a source of hope. What is happening in Kinshasa? What is Kabila's next move? When will the South African army come and save us from all this nonsense?

People emerge out of nowhere to seek me out at the obscure hotel I have checked into. To be sure, I am one of only three guests in occupation in the 30-room establishment whose construction has been halted by the onset of the second war of liberation to hit the unsuspecting Congolese in the last few years. But how did all these people know that I was a journalist? And what difference can a journalist make, anyway?

The foreign journalist, of whatever colour, is the 'gringo'. The gringo comes with dollars, information, a tape recorder and Camel cigarettes – all precious commodities in the war zone. As the only foreign journalist in the area at the time, I was the only thing that was keeping the hotel alive. My usefulness as a bearer and taker of news was almost eclipsed by my new role as the sole support for a whole infrastructure of Congolese families, from the manager to the apprentice waiter. The manager was slightly more reticent about making me personally responsible for his woes than were the apprentice waiter and his immediate superior in the restaurant, but everybody found it hard to keep the whine of desperation out of their voices. Any tip was welcome.

It seemed that all this information I was being plied with, none of it very substantial, was a prelude to the real business at hand: a way of getting hold of some hard cash. I don't know how other journalists live with this oppressive responsibility for years at a time, from one theatre of desperation to another.

Whereas in Bukavu there appeared to be no journalists (apart from members of tiny NGOs working alongside aid agencies to provide some sort of information to their communities, along with medical and other support), in Goma I did catch a glimpse of the Congolese press. My key contact, a senior man in the RCD, phoned late in the afternoon to tell me that President Ilunga, the leader of the movement, would be giving a press conference on his arrival from a visit to the President of Gabon. I was to make my way to the Presidency, along the shores of the lake a few kilometres to the north, and be there promptly at 4:30.

He had not left me much time. The head waiter hailed a motorcycle taxi at the top of the road and I jumped on the back, notebook in hand, camera slung round my neck.

When we got to the Presidency, the slit-eyed soldiers knew nothing of any press con-



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Refugees leaving the former Zaire, November 1996. Often those at the heart of the conflict, those suffering most, are least considered - "onlookers in the charade of war".

ference. They made it clear that I was not welcome. Fortunately, I had not sent the motorcyclist away. As I walked back to where he had posted himself at a safe distance from the military men, a voice hailed from inside the grounds of the Presidency. A young man in white trousers, a gaudy red shirt with an equally gaudy tie that didn't match, and cheap, gold-framed spectacles with plain glass rather than prescription lenses on his nose was rushing up to the guard house. This was the head of protocol, and he had just been advised that the Presidential press conference was on its way. The soldiers reluctantly let me through into the grounds of the Presidency.

I waited, along with the peculiar protocol officer, in the desperately kitsch reception room of what had once been General and Mrs. Mobutu's North Kivu palace. The building had been looted during the war of 1994, and only a couple of fake Chinese vases and porcelain statuettes survived. The protocol man and I sat staring past each other in the empty mausoleum.

After half an hour, my senior RCD man showed up, smiling broadly and clutching two cellphones - one for each of the net-

works that sporadically make communication possible in the eastern Congo. There had been a misunderstanding, he said. President Ilunga would not be coming to the Presidency, but would be giving the press conference at his private house. Would I please accompany him in his 4x4? So off we went, back across the volcanic town in search of an elusive press conference.

On the back porch of the President's residence, I finally came face to face with members of the Congolese press corps. There were four of them - one carrying a VHS video camera, one carrying a Nagra and two holding pieces of paper filled with handwritten questions. After another delay, with the sun almost gone, the President finally emerged. He had in his hand an identical list of questions, seemingly hand-written by the same blue ballpoint pen. This whole thing had obviously been very carefully set up.

I watched and listened as the President made a lengthy statement about his trip to brief President Bongo on the current situation. Then he invited the members of the press to ask questions. The two journalists with the pages in their hands took it in turn to read out questions to his excellency,

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speaking loudly in ornate French. The President replied with equally theatrical eloquence, referring to the pages in his hand to make sure that neither he nor his questioners were deviating from the carefully arranged scenario.

The President's bland statements, putting no new flesh on the bones of the story of the war, would go out on local television within a few hours. The only items from Kinshasa that would go out on the same channel that night would be bootlegged music videos. The sexy gyrations of the dancing girls of Kinshasa would be the only moment of excitement and insight into what was happening in the rest of the country for the citizens of eastern Congo.

When I arrived in Kisangani the next day, two pale young foreign journalists were already on the scene, smoking cigarettes on the balcony of the governor's offices as the Zambian and South African ministers negotiated with some of the warring factions inside. One was a Frenchman working for Agence France-Presse (AFP), the other a Croatian, reporting for Associated Press (AP).

"Croatia?" I said to the AP man. "Isn't that a case of 'out of the frying pan and into the fire'?" "It's a change," he replied, grinning in that war-crazy way that war correspondents have.

They had been sitting in Kisangani for five days. They would probably sit there for another five days, maybe a week or two weeks, on the off-chance that something might happen. This last weekend, although they hadn't seen much, there had been a confrontation between the Rwandan and Ugandan armies. Soldiers and civilians had been killed. Maybe there'd be more shooting in days to come. That was news. So they hung out, in this dead town where nothing much happens.

That night, as I sat in the company of some of the RCD people in a commandeered house on the outskirts of Kisangani, I watched them listen intently on portable short-wave radios to the AFP man's report on the day's events in the city. He was speaking for the benefit of his French audience, trying to make the banality of the day's happenings sound like exciting news. The RCD men were satisfied that he was giving the right kind of spin to their endeavours.

The AFP man was performing his heart out, via satellite phone, convincing his executives in Paris that his job continued to be worthwhile.

The RCD men, sitting in the same town, glued to his voice being beamed back to them by satellite from Paris, were satisfied that he was continuing to make their own jobs seem equally important to the outside world. "L'AFP," one said, "c'est la verité" ("AFP is the truth").

Meanwhile, the people of the Congo, the heart of the conflict, sat it out, onlookers in the charade of war.

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