

YET ANOTHER AFRICAN DISASTER

It was early August '94 and I was having tea on the verandah of the Residence Hotel in Bukavu, Zaire, just across the border from Cyangugu, southwestern Rwanda. The festering wound that had become Rwanda was oozing, and its refugees were starting the second major crossing into Zaire.

It was pretty much par for the course as far as Africa goes... metre-deep potholes, ragged street-urchins and cars that had ceased running in another decade lining the roadside. Camouflaged soldiers with red berets slowed down their jeep and chatted to curio-sellers in the language of De Gaulle, but sped off when the big lenses of expensive cameras appeared on the balcony of the hotel opposite. And then, as if on a film-set, a long drawn-out queue of ragged folk, young and old, walked into picture, most with bundles on their heads... people that came to be known by many of the journalists as "the bundle people".

A callous statement. But I suppose the necessity to make sick, heartless jokes — in such a situation — is a defence mechanism, a way of coping with the stress that accompanies stories of human catastrophes. A reaction to constant exposure to mutilated bodies, not just dead ones, but human beings hacked into little pieces — grannies, babies, sisters, brothers, you name it — the whole family. The discovery of another mass grave next to a church or more bloated bodies in the lake. Such is the stress of joining the latest and ever-developing round of international journalism, supplying London, New York and Tokyo with news and pictures of yet another African disaster.

It's a strange thing, this game of playing foreign correspondents. Men and women with the latest "journ gear", from flak-vest to laptop, carrying the latest edition of the Herald Tribune or Newsweek, emerge from the C-130. They'd be here for the big day. The last of the French legionnaires were due to leave their self-proclaimed protection-zone in a few days, and word had it the Tutsi-dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front couldn't wait to take revenge on the remnants of the country's Hutu population. And sitting on the edge of the runway in a remote corner of Rwanda, green-topped hills and banana trees all around, the method behind the chaos of an international news room suddenly became that much clearer.

Whether for Der Spiegel, Time or ITN, the pictures coming out of the projected refugee-crush at the Bukavu border post on the Zairean frontier were bound to be good, which would be gospel for the editors back home as great visuals go down well with the advertisers. Gore, suspense and drama around news time draws the audience, which brings the commercials, which brings happiness all 'round for the corporation chiefs. But the question that needs to be asked is where were the big networks and journals when the story was in its infancy, when all the signs of an impending genocide were there to see? Could coverage then not perhaps have prevented the disaster, raised world awareness and even led to pre-emptive international action? I suppose the brutal truth is that the points on the horror scale weren't big enough yet... the dismembered bodies were still to come. I once put this ques-



Illustration: Alex Groen

Radio Today journalist Angus Begg spent some time in Zaire looking into Rwanda. He found the journalists nearly as interesting as the story.

tion to the senior editor of a major network in the United States, placing it in a South African context. He donned the hat of the average man, and summed up the news value of a story thus: wherever you're sitting in the world, if you see news of an event elsewhere on the globe, you have to ask yourself, "who cares?" I suppose the bottom line is that news these days tends to be big business, a commercial concern, and has to pay for itself.

As it happens with such stories, most of the journalists adopt a certain hotel or bar as their local watering hole, meeting for a drink and a meal at the end of a grimy day's work, and after a while it struck me that most of the accents I heard were from out of Africa — either Europe or the States. Okay, these people may have been temporarily based in Nairobi or Jo'burg, but nonetheless they weren't from Africa, which raised further questions; surely the way in which a story is viewed and portrayed by journalists depends on their background, upbringing and environment? Do they understand Africa? Do they understand the ways of its people? Why do we never hear positive news coming out of this continent? It may be hard to believe for Joe Soap, given the civil wars, coups d'etat, famine and corruption associated with Africa, but if journalists are allowed to look, they will find.

At the end of the eighties the World Bank issued a report in which it warned of the dangers of the Western media's portrayal of Africa as a disaster zone. Quite simply, the message was that if this attitude continued, Africa would become a self-fulfilling prophecy. And let's face it... a rundown of all the conflicts on this continent doesn't make for good bedtime reading. Interesting reading, however, would be a look at the competition between the various relief agencies. The last thing you'd think of really — considering the remarkable tasks they perform — is a tussle for publicity between, for example, the International Committee of the Red Cross and Medecins Sans Frontier. But the head office of an aid agency in Paris or Geneva wants exposure... wants coverage on CNN and Sky, and articles and pictures in Time magazine. As a result, the PRO's stick close to the big guns, the correspondents attached to the major international operations, and an inevitable result of this contact is the occasional tale of the orphan refugee rehabilitated with her parents. You see the journalists don't look for these stories — the aid agencies deliver them. Which is fair enough really, because if your agency is not featured somewhere around the headlines then people will forget its name, and possibly even send potential donations elsewhere.

The issue of money was something I had much opportunity to think about, as I had limited resources available to me, especially working for what is essentially — on the international scene — an unknown station. Use of the satellite phone — common practice in areas without an efficient telecommunications network — was a major headache for me, especially when the bill was running at \$45 per minute. But that got me thinking. If TV can spend about R200 000 over about four weeks on one documentary for Agenda, why was I sweating blood about spending R6000 for a two-week story?

But the matter of big money is not restricted to the length of your lens or the power of your laptop. It links in to who you work for, who you know, and where you worked your last job. Being part of an international crew like ITN or the BBC is a good start because you acquire instant credibility.

Obviously experience counts for a great deal, and no-one can begrudge the extensive experience many of those journalists have acquired in similar conflict situations. But is the arrogance that accompanies this experience necessary? Certainly there were few fraternal feelings toward me. But as time goes on, and we in the SABC hopefully become more part of Africa I imagine, indeed expect, this will change. This is the crux of the matter. The last time a Radio Today staffer got to cover a major conflict story in Africa was Somalia '92. I sometimes wonder whether the SABC, and specifically Radio Today, which is meant to be the flagship of SABC radio news programmes, will ever be able to give true coverage to Africa. And whether the American was right. If we don't, will anyone care?