

Journalists' reports cannot prevent conflict

by

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Declining interest in historical background and conflict analysis

During the genocide in Rwanda, in April 1994, a German radio presenter asked me, the new foreign correspondent who had just arrived and suddenly and unexpectedly found himself caught up in a war, how things really stood with the Hutus and the Tutsis down in Rwanda. The presenter obviously had not prepared well for this live broadcast or perhaps it wasn't his best day. I managed to cover up for the embarrassing mistake: what he'd meant, of course, was Hutus and Tutsis. This slip raised the question of how difficult it must be for the reader, listener or viewer if the editor himself can't get even the most important facts right about the greatest genocide in Africa in modern times. At that time, from April to June 1994, victims of the massacres could be seen each day on television screens in Europe and the United States. Yet very few people had a clear idea of who was bashing whose brains out in Rwanda. Not to mention the more probing question of why it was happening or whether it could have been prevented.

And what seems far away to the media consumer is generally also remote for politicians. In the editorial offices, reports on skirmishes, forthcoming acts of war and impending massacres might catch

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the special editor's eye but are otherwise of little interest to anyone. It would be nice — but naïve — to think that journalists, reporters and correspondents in Africa would be able to prevent man-made disasters by writing critical reports. For foreign correspondents are reporting for their clients in Europe or the United States. And even if they are writing for an English-language or French-language medium, the warlords on the African continent couldn't care less what is being said about them in *Newsweek* or *Le Monde*.

It is not until war breaks out or famine is rife or there is a massacre that people begin to wonder what caused it. The period prior to the disaster then becomes a news item or a background story. Reports in the media can indeed influence conflicts, but they can hardly ever prevent them. Television pictures create the atmosphere. An empathetic report on a famine or, better still, pictures of emaciated mothers and wailing children may prompt the competent minister or committed parliamentarians in Europe or the US to take action — after all, they want to be re-elected. But politicians don't win votes for the cautious prevention of conflict. And advance warning and prevention of conflicts are incompatible with the way politics and the media seem to work today.

Of course there are dozens of exceptions — the serious daily which disregards current fashions in publishing and does not feel it must hype up every topic simply because others do, or the politician who acts without the ulterior motive of winning elections. But these exceptions are becoming increasingly rare. In politics and journalism the pace is constantly being stepped up by competition, the plethora of information and the speed of its transmission. Time to reflect is becoming a rarity. A good deed done by a politician today is already forgotten tomorrow. How many readers of a French or Belgian daily can remember what their governments did early this year to help the inhabitants of Mozambique who were trapped by floods?

Yet many observers still believe that journalism can change the world. The role played by correspondents during the Viet Nam war is cited as an encouraging example. It was not until graphic reports and pictures from the forests of Indochina outraged public opinion in the United States of America that the government found itself compelled,

after much protest, to make peace with the Vietcong. No war since then with massive US involvement has ever been reported on so freely, for military strategists resolved that journalists should never again be allowed to bring so much influence to bear on the outcome of hostilities. Since Viet Nam, the press has never, to my knowledge, managed to end or prevent a war.

As a journalist in Rwanda

Let us return to Rwanda and the question of whether journalism can achieve anything at all in situations of crisis. In March and April 1994, BBC correspondents reported from the capital Kigali that trouble was brewing. The Rwandan government, led by President Habyarimana, and the rebels of the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) had agreed in the Arusha peace treaty to end the civil war. The Tutsi minority was henceforth to be allowed to participate more fully in public life and in the government. Tension rose in the capital shortly before a joint government was formed, since rumour had it that those close to the President would never agree to share power with the rebels. The Canadian commander of the UN troops, General Romeo Dallaire, cabled New York to warn of a genocide, reporting that warnings he had received from the Rwandan army and the ruling party led him to expect a disaster of unprecedented dimensions and that the militias were being heavily armed. But Dallaire's warnings went unheard, as did those of the journalists. Kofi Annan was responsible for the deployment of UN troops at that time and was thus General Dallaire's chief. He ignored the alert from Kigali. Admittedly, few could have imagined the extent of the killings and atrocities that began on 6 April. The genocide which claimed up to one million victims within the next three months, many of whom were hacked to pieces with knives, defied the imagination of journalists and the staff of relief organizations.

Within hours after the bloodbath began it was clear that disaster was imminent in that small country, yet only the occasional correspondent travelled to Rwanda in the first few days and weeks. Was it fear of the dangers or lack of travel facilities that prevented so many colleagues from going to Rwanda, or were they speechless at the horrors taking place? What is more, only a few relief organizations stayed

on there; one was the ICRC, which was running a hospital in the centre of Kigali. Meanwhile the killing continued. Corpses with bloated bellies floated down the rivers, and massacre victims were dumped in latrines. The organizers went about their task meticulously, Broadcasting on mobile radio transmitters their calls to murder and reading out lists... And still nobody heard the appeals by General Dallaire, relief organizations and journalists, calling on their governments and the Security Council to send more UN troops to Rwanda to stop the slaughter. The reaction by the governments in Bonn, London and Paris, and by the Security Council in New York, left most of the admonishers at a loss for words, for instead of being increased, the number of UN troops in Rwanda was drastically reduced. Then after the assassination of ten Belgian soldiers by militiamen most of the remaining troops from Belgium, Senegal, Ghana, India and Zimbabwe were withdrawn in order to avoid exposing them to further risk. And that was precisely what the organizers of the genocide had counted on.

Those who stayed were a handful of journalists and representatives of relief organizations, some of whom remained in the war zone contrary to instructions from their headquarters. The Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski, who is accused at times of neglecting the facts and creating a literary truth, voiced the criticism that modern war reporting devoted little attention to the political context and none whatsoever to the historical causes of events. But since SOME reporters themselves do not have the answers to their own questions they cannot answer the media consumers' questions or make pertinent assessments.

Two types of reporting

In reporting from and about Africa there are two groups of journalists which differ from each other through their familiarity or unfamiliarity with the subject. The first group comprises foreign correspondents who are posted in Abidjan, Johannesburg or Nairobi and who have generally made a close study of the region on which they are reporting. Although it no longer seems to be a matter of course, the majority of these correspondents are very widely read in the history of the continent, the causes of its conflicts, its literature and the various customs practised from Abuja to Zanzibar. The editors who are in

charge of the Africa desk in the editorial offices back home and are in regular contact with the correspondents also belong to this group, although they do not live in Africa. The second group consists of all those who fly in only when there is a disaster. Many of the reporters who converge from all over the world are sometimes not sure where they are. In many cases they don't even speak the colonial language of the country in question, nor have they any idea of either when or why the country became independent or from whom it won its independence. This group of generally very young, very avid "semi-professionals", as the German relief worker Rupert Neudeck once called them, are under tremendous pressure from the editorial offices back home to deliver as highly sensational stories as they can. After all, the travel expenses have to be justified.

When the genocide in Rwanda was over, in July 1994, a great number of such reporters flew into the town of Goma in eastern Congo, just over the border from Rwanda. Hundreds of thousands of Rwandan refugees had gathered there, fleeing for fear of reprisals to the neighbouring country at the end of the civil war and genocide.

The reports of the overwhelming number of reporters gave rise to a wave of offers of help. In Germany the sympathy for the fate of the refugees went so far that the German Chancellor arranged for a series of short-term missions by volunteer doctors and nurses — which ended in a fiasco, however, since the volunteers had not been properly prepared. The question of why the refugees had come to Goma, and the realization that amongst the Rwandans, who were plagued with cholera and malnutrition, there were also numerous killers, interested very few of the journalists and government representatives who had arrived from Europe. Criticisms to the effect that the repressive structures which had made the genocide possible in Rwanda were being maintained through the refugee camps were dismissed.

The hordes of reporters and the flood of aid which descended upon the Rwandan refugees, may have seemed a mockery to many a survivor of the genocide. But this lack of historical understanding and political interest was like a continuation of the international community's silence during the genocide. The inertia of governments and relief organizations during the genocide itself was

compensated with generous assistance for the refugees, amongst whom there were many murderers.

It is not always easy either for correspondents posted in Africa to issue warnings and admonitions. A looming conflict in Kosovo has more immediacy for editors than an impending massacre in Burundi or Liberia. It is part of human nature for people to be more preoccupied with wars at their front door than with those further afield. The Viet Nam war was no exception, for since 30,000 Americans were killed it was a war that took place in every American living room.

The power of the visual image

Moreover, warning of disasters is not thought to be the concern of the electronic media; it supposedly takes place in the newspapers. Television exists by transforming news into pictures, and you can't get any footage of massacres about to happen in Burundi or the flaring of renewed hostilities in Sierra Leone. But for many newspapers events become newsworthy only when people have already seen them on television. The massacres in Burundi and the mutilations in Sierra Leone did not become news, and sensational news at that, until the victims had been shown on TV.

The relief organizations have realized that television is their most important medium. It is for similar reasons that rebels first occupy the television station and then the seat of government. Whoever controls television broadcasting controls the people, their views and their feelings. Televised pictures make the work of the organization known and donations pour in. Rupert Neudeck, the head of the Kap Anamur relief organization, appeared on German television several times during the war in Kosovo, and after these appearances his small organization received so many donations that he had no choice but to pass on several of the millions to other relief organizations.

To maintain interest in emergencies and disasters, there must be constant reminders of them. The rivalry between relief organizations is the equivalent of media competition over an interesting story. Many of the relief organizations born of social commitment in the course of the last three decades vie for sponsors' donations and contri-

butions from national budgets or that of the European Union. At stake are jobs in the relief organizations and amongst their suppliers.

Efforts to attract the attention of journalists by means of information leaflets, statistics and dire warnings of imminent famine, floods or droughts have taken on inflationary dimensions. Correspondents have developed a flair for knowing which relief organizations only issue warnings when the emergency really is imminent and which groups make a mountain out of a mole hill.

One example was the warnings of the impending famine in Ethiopia in the spring of 2000. The World Food Programme of the United Nations had been sounding the alarm for months about bottlenecks in food supplies and had been calling for a forward-looking supplies policy. It was more by chance that the media became aware of the drought in Ethiopia: the Ethiopian Foreign Minister delivered a speech in which he attacked the West and urged that the authorities must not wait again until skeletons were to be seen on television. There was no world-shattering news apart from that. So journalists streamed into Ethiopia, where they were received by the relief organizations, busied themselves around the few hungry people, and wrote heart-rending reports. But the appeals for aid were out of all proportion to the real extent of the disaster. Some relief organizations actually conjure up disasters. Several of them said that things might get as bad as they were back in the 1980s, without having any surveys to back them up. The European Union and the United States immediately pledged hundreds of thousands of tons of food aid. It was only then that the head of the World Food Programme, Ms Bertini, brought more objectivity into the debate, stating that this was not a famine but a drought. Those relief organizations which had tried — with impunity — to collect funds by exaggerating the situation in fact did the cause of the needy a disservice, and the hotfoot journalists damaged the credibility of their profession.

Under the growing pressure of competition most media reporting has replaced analysis with cheap propaganda. What is more, since the end of the Cold War Africa has lost much of its strategic importance and is going through a period of economic marginalization which is steadily reducing interest in the continent. To give an account of the conflicts there, for instance in the Democratic Republic of

Congo, or an explanation of the various influences exerted by the neighbouring States of Rwanda and Uganda requires interest in the editorial office and space in the media. These requirements are met by only a handful of media, such as certain critical daily newspapers in Switzerland and Germany.

These newspapers are also read by decision-makers. The officials in the Swiss Ministry of Foreign Affairs are presumably more inclined to seek information in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* or the *Financial Times* than in the widely available tabloids with their scant and piecemeal news coverage.

Media and prevention?

But the media are unlikely to have a preventive effect. Critical reporting on Liberian President Charles Taylor presumably forced him to introduce a relatively civilized form of rule and deterred him from behaving like a bush fighter once he was the elected President. But in the 1990s that reporting did not stop him from waging a brutal war on his own people. Taking preventive action is the task of relief organizations such as the ICRC: talking to officers, prison guards and warlords in order to prevent the situation from deteriorating even further.

The former UN special envoy to Somalia, Mohamed Sahnoun, did a lot of thinking on the possibility of preventing conflicts from breaking out. He concluded that an article in the *New York Times* has much more effect than ten of his reports to the United Nations in New York. But even Sahnoun overestimates the powers of the press. Experience has shown that conflict prevention is much cheaper than subsequent reconstruction. Yet neither the relief organizations nor the press seem able to break this vicious cycle of destruction, reconstruction and renewed destruction. The task of the foreign correspondents should be to report on the reasons for this vicious cycle.

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Résumé

Les articles de journalistes ne peuvent empêcher les guerres — Moins d'intérêt pour le contexte historique et l'analyse des conflits

par CHRISTOPH PLATE

Est-il vrai, comme le pensent beaucoup d'observateurs, que les médias peuvent changer le monde? — Mettant à profit ses expériences, vécues notamment en Afrique, l'auteur examine les difficultés du métier de journaliste dans des situations de crise, et les limites qui lui sont imposées. Après avoir examiné la couverture par les médias des récents drames humanitaires survenus en Afrique, il conclut que leur pouvoir afin de prévenir un conflit ou une catastrophe est en réalité très faible, voire nul.