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## African Journalists Fight to Tell their Stories



International

BY DENISE ROLARK BARNES - WI STAFF WRITER

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The Black press has often been referred to as "soldiers without swords", tackling corruption and fighting social causes in print. In the case of African journalists reporting in their homelands, the moniker could not be more accurate.

As many African countries adopt democratic ideals, including freedom of the press, reporting on issues of corruption and political misdealings creates a new battleground.

The International Center for Journalists (ICJF) recently sponsored a conversation with African Media in Post-Conflict Situations, to detail the efforts of writers who face death daily in the pursuit of journalistic freedom. Among the panelists, Andrew Kromah, a radio journalist from Sierra Leone in West Africa, and Chouchou Namagabe Nabintu, a 2009 winner of the Knight International Journalist Award from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), said they hope to be benefactors of a wave of democratic change related to reporting.

ICJF program director Jerelyn Eddings, said the program, started by three foreign correspondents, it was essential to work with journalists around the world by providing opportunities, including fellowships to promote "journalism that holds officials accountable."

Eddings, who lived and worked in Africa for many years, said she remembered when the BBC or the Voice of America were the most reliable ways to get news from the area if you were on the continent.

"That has all changed dramatically," she said. "These days we can rely on journalists on the ground in these countries as our first point of contact for the news. Newspapers serve urban populations primarily, and they have opened up and have had an impact on government policies. But it is radio – independent, community and private radio – that has had the most important impact on people in these countries."

Sierra Leone and the DRC are two African countries struggling to recover from brutal wars that killed thousands of people and displaced millions more. Reliance on media, especially radio, is greater now than ever to the country's refugees attempting to resettle in their homelands but doing so with the belief that peace remains illusive and new unrests are imminent.

Their only means of communications is not through newspapers that primarily serve the urban areas, but radio that reaches the rural areas and villages where many people live.

James, the country director of Search for Common Ground in Sierra Leone, a radio program that promotes conflict resolution in Sierra Leone, said radio is the tool that we use to promote conflict resolution work.

"War led to the establishment of a media house, where journalists produce programs that are distributed to nearly 45 community FM radio stations around the country, in addition to religious and government radio stations."

Others, like Nabintu, work "on the ground" going into war-ravaged areas to interview those left behind. Nabintu received international recognition for her focus on gender violence as a weapon of war in her country. After establishing the South Kivu Women's Media Association, she began training female journalists to document stories of sexual violence during and after war.

The eastern region of Congo where war erupted in 1996 has been particularly brutal against women and the media – where both have been considered "special victims" of the war, Nabintu said. The attackers seek to destroy entire communities through rape and sexual violence.

More than a million women have been raped in eastern Congo since the beginning of the war and the "atrocities that follow these rapes are beyond reason," Nabintu said.

"The media has been abused; radio stations were attacked; our director was arrested, but we continued our work. It is hard for journalists in my country to live and work because there is no freedom of the press. In one city, three journalists were killed in the last three years and three women in the association have received death threats for doing everyday work," Nabintu said.

The Kivu Women's Media Association was started with four "brave" women journalists and it has grown to 42 members who are all "self-made reporters" whose aim is to give voice to victims.

"We report on women displaced by war, Nabintu said. "We seek to reach large groups of women through listeners clubs of women in the rural areas in collaboration with 10 radio stations who broadcast their programs. We take testimony from women, which is not easy work, because we have to prepare and train ourselves for how to talk to them, conduct ourselves and make them talk to us," Nabintu said.



Radio journalists Chouchou Namabe Nabintu (right) and Ambrose James discuss the challenges of protecting free and independent media in post-war countries in Africa during a forum at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars on Fri., Nov. 15. **Photo by Roy Lewis**

For the past 25 years ICFJ, a non-profit organization based in the District of Columbia, has worked heartily to fulfill its mission to promote quality journalism worldwide in accordance with the belief that independent, vigorous media are crucial in improving the human condition.

"The question I receive every day is how we can disassociate our work as journalists and activists. We can't because of the war context in our country. We have to find a way to help voiceless women because we have the power of media and we use it to make that fight."

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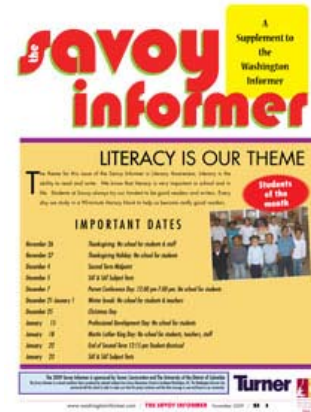
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