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UNITED NATIONS, Jan 8 (IPS) - In 2003, two journalists from Radio-Télévision Libre des Milles Collines were convicted of war crimes in the Rwanda genocide - illustrating the dangerous role media can play by relaying hate speech or rumours during times of violent conflict.

RTLM, which broadcast from July 1993 to July 1994, was found to have "fanned the flames of hate and genocide in Rwanda". It was the first such conviction since that of Julius Streicher at Nuremberg for his anti-Semitic publication Der Stürmer.

While RTLM was an unusually extreme example, U.N. experts and observers of post-conflict countries say it is critical for peace-building bodies to forge a coordinated approach toward local media with key actors in international agencies, such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World Bank and the U.N. Peace Building Commission.

"The key element in any zone of conflict is to ensure that communication is flowing as a form of dialogue. What is happening at a political level must get communicated to the population and that the population's needs, desires, fears, attitudes requests must get communicated up," said Sandra Melone, executive vice president of Search for Common Ground, an NGO dealing with conflict issues.

"In most places, it is an afterthought - it is not enough funded, and not enough resourced. Their [the media's] role in the peace-building framework and agenda needs to be developed," she told IPS.

Susan Manuel, chief of the Peace and Security Section in the U.N. Department of Public Information, told IPS that it was urgent "to bring the attention of the donor community and the United Nations system to the fact that communications is also extremely important to prevent a relapse of conflict and for governance."

U.N. peacekeeping operations receive about half of the world body's budget, while strategies to create a public communications sphere in mission countries remain severely under-funded, experts say.

"The international community should support local media in a way conducive to survival as an independent voice in the political system," Bill Orme, media development adviser at UNDP's Democratic Governance Group, told IPS.

"Communications is obviously the key for demobilisation, for reconciliation, for elections," he noted.

He deplored that "things are done, but in an improvised way and in emergency. The Peace Building Commission responses did not think about media, did not take media into consideration at all - the word media did not appear."

Sheldon Himelfarb, associate vice president of the Centres of Innovation



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at the U.S. Institute of Peace, says the biggest challenge has been the absence of coordination among different organisations.

"There are lacks of a common vocabulary and strategic framework for sharing lessons across these different programmes because the money has been short," he said. "Now we have 20 years of history and plenty of evidence to suggest this is a very important factor in stabilising fragile societies."

Media play an influential role in establishing the authority of newly elected governments and acting as a conduit for feedback from the public.

For example, Himelfarb noted that following the war in Bosnia, a public information campaign on radio and on television - which reached more than 90 percent of the population - called "Respect" paved the way for the peaceful return of many internally displaced people.

In 1998, a similar campaign in Northern Ireland helped foster acceptance of the Good Friday agreement by a vast majority of the population in a referendum.

However, running such campaigns in remote areas of post-war countries is very difficult when infrastructure has been destroyed - or never even existed in the first place.

"The international community should support the existing forces and bring them together or create an infrastructure for nationwide communication," Melone said.

The primary U.N. success in this area was the launch of "Radio UNAMSIL" in Sierra Leone, implemented by the peacekeeping mission there in 2000. The United Nations reached an agreement with the new Sierra Leonean government to keep the station functioning after the mission left in 2005, while the government develops a new independent public broadcaster.

The Peace Building fund is on the brink of making a proposal to finance this new entity, revealed Orme.

Since most post-war countries cannot afford such programmes, the United Nations has a crucial role to play to make media development a top priority in its rebuilding strategies and to encourage donors for that aim.

"Without international assistance, it is impossible," Orme said.

Concerning Sierra Leone, the government must pass a media law ensuring that the station "is an independent and public radio broadcaster", she added.

Above all, a focus needs to be placed on the journalistic quality and integrity, making training a key component.

"The best way to get good programming is in partnership. We can provide technical assistance and help support new journalists, broadening the circle from where the voices are coming," explained Melone.

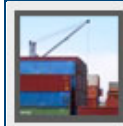
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