

'DISPATCHES FROM DISASTER ZONES'

The Reporting of Humanitarian Emergencies

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For further discussion

NEW CHALLENGES AND PROBLEMS FOR INFORMATION MANAGEMENT IN COMPLEX EMERGENCIES.

**Ominous lessons from
the Great Lakes and Eastern Zaire
in late 1996 and early 1997.**

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Further research material and analysis relevant to the Great Lakes crisis 1996/7 can be obtained by contacting Nik Gowing on 100523.2530@compuserve.com

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1. OPENING

We were damn lucky. I do not know to this day how we avoided people being killed in Eastern Zaire because of the delicacy of handling information. It was a very close-run thing. I dreaded the dilemma”.

Senior UNHCR official

“We used communication and information warfare better than anyone. We have found a new way of doing things”

Rwanda Vice President Paul Kagame¹

“The issue of information was as bad as, if not worse than, all other missions I have been in”.

Senior Military Officer of the
Multi-National Force (MNF)

“Handling information was about the survival of Rwanda. On information, we had the initiative and the upper hand”

Senior Rwandan official

“The media in Goma were the cream of the world’s crop, and I was prepared to be impressed. . . . But if the media there were the cream, some of them had curdled”

Mark Richardson,
Media Coordinator, CARE, in the
Great Lakes at the end of 1996²

“In Central Africa, we have a sense of knowing what is going on: aid agencies and reporters are on the ground and pictures are on the television screen. But it is misleading”.

Lindsey Hilsum
Channel Four News, London³

1.1 Executive Summary

From October 1996, a major humanitarian drama unfolded inside Eastern Zaire and on the borders of Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda. Historians continue to unravel the precise nature of the military conflict that followed. Much detail of the military operation

by the Rwandan and Alliance forces that removed the Hutu threat from Rwanda's western border and ultimately led to the overthrow of President Mobutu in May 1997 remains shrouded in rumour, innuendo and secrecy.

The full picture of Rwandan, Ugandan and – arguably – non-regional involvement has yet to be uncovered. Extensive high-level interviewing for this study has provided evidence of limited political, logistical and advisory support by both regional and non-regional powers. Hearsay and circumstantial evidence is reported. However despite widespread concerns at the time of writing there is scant documentary proof or evidence of either direct backing or complicity. Rwandan officials from Vice President Paul Kagame downwards deny emphatically any such relationship

This research does not try to unravel issues of history. It focuses on one critical issue: the handling of information by the international humanitarian community,⁴ the media and the warring factions during a complex intra- and inter-state conflict where for most of the time the belligerents successfully shut-down the war zone to outside eyes. This distorted international and public understanding of the military operation and the level of human suffering. It can be argued that as a result, a high level of officially-authorized ethnic slaughter (some went so far as to label it genocide) could ultimately be carried out unseen and virtually unreported, even though the Rwandan government denies that mass killing was the intention from the start.

From research to date, the preliminary conclusions of this study are ominous. They are an indictment for those outside the loop of government and military control who believe they are good, or at least competent, at marshalling and handling information in the new real-time environment created by the latest satellite, communication and information technology.

The overall picture of manipulation and deception is not yet complete, and given the nature of the conflict may never be so. Even in a rigorous, impartial analysis it has often been difficult to distinguish rumour, reinforced rumour and what can be called loose 'whisky talk' or speculation from hard facts that are backed by incontrovertible evidence.

However, given the trends identified in this study, neither the Humanitarian Agencies (HAs) nor the Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) emerge with much credit. Too often what they said, reported or claimed was simply wrong. Their reporting was unreliable. So were many of their assumptions and hypotheses. They were caught out by the issue of information and how to handle it well.

This was compounded by the political doctrine of New Africanism that by and large resents the humanitarian intrusion of NGOs, the media and most non-African powers. The political aim was to undermine the effectiveness of all of them.

The prime example was in mid-November when many tens of thousands of adequately fed refugees suddenly appeared at the Zaire-Rwanda border following dire warnings of what one seasoned correspondent even ventured to describe as a "holocaust"⁵. As a result, for the most part, such reporting was deemed irrelevant by both regional and leading international governments whose information sources or intelligence assets were -- by-and-large -- painting a different picture with a higher -- though far from perfect -- level of accuracy.

Thus, the Great Lakes crisis of late 1996 to mid-1997 illustrates how unwittingly both the Humanitarian Community (HC) and media were thwarted and misled by what might arguably be labelled a new, undeclared doctrine of information control drawn up by the new generation of leaders across Central and Eastern Africa.

The poor handling of information by the HC and media was exacerbated by a complacency and arrogance based on assumptions that they knew best and had the technology to outsmart fighters wrongly portrayed as a 'rag-tag force of African rebels' in a 'tin-pot war'. Instead the political and military strategists showed great cunning and ingenuity. They wrong-footed the international community.

This is a new reality in such low intensity conflicts that must be embraced, not ignored.

The implications are enormous. Masterminded by the leaders of Rwanda and Uganda, those undertaking the security operation into Eastern Zaire were able to defy western orthodoxy and assumptions of a certain hegemony on information access.

The conclusion of this paper is that there has been an important paradigm shift in the principles of handling and managing information in conflict. Even modest sub-regional forces from small, supposedly badly-resourced nations and factions have learned and assimilated much of the latest thinking of information warfare, information control and information manipulation.

In his strategy Rwandan Vice President Kagame was not alone. Both the victorious Rwandan / Alliance forces and the defeated Interahamwe had positioned such an information control doctrine at the heart of their strategies. The culture of information control was first developed earlier through the Habyarimana regime before April 1994, and then by those who committed the mass genocide. Evidence amassed in the refugee camps of Eastern Zaire confirms that like Rwandan and Alliance forces, the Interahamwe and Hutu soldiers also had a well developed I-warfare strategy that relied extensively on infiltration of the UNHCR and humanitarian community.

Through the later stages of war in former Yugoslavia and right up to last stage of the Great Lakes crisis, most large media organisations – especially the technology-rich international TV news organisations – believed they had the upper hand on information. They assumed a new level of omnipotence. They believed that increasingly the lightweight satellite technology for telephone, text and video transmission had created a new information transparency in zones of conflict. Experience showed how technology was helping news organisations and the humanitarian community defy the instincts of governments, the military, warring factions and war lords to impose controls on information.⁶

However in the Great Lakes, both the HC and media were deceived comprehensively. By and large they did not perceive accurately the hidden military campaign that was unfolding beyond their reach. As a result they never gained the usual upper hand on information that they had come to assume in recent years. They were outsmarted.

This failure exposed five new realities.

- The political ideology and military realities of The New Africanism and its impact on both NGOs and the international media.
- The significant inexperience of many personnel (though not all) from HAs and HOs when it comes to handling information in the new real-time information age, and their failure to understand its virulent capacity to destroy perceptions and reputations if handled ineptly.
- The urgent obligation to revise the instinctive, inappropriate assumptions of journalists and their editors at head office that every conflict neatly fits a Somalia- or Bosnia-type editorial template of humanitarian disaster with a stereotype of starvation. The Great Lakes crisis was from a new era of both inter- and intra-state conflict where humanitarian suffering was as a result of a ruthless military campaign designed to remove by any means a political grouping of a single ethnic composition as well as their allies.
- The inappropriateness of assigning journalists without (in this case African) experience to a complex ethnic conflict whose basic variables they even have difficulty in grasping, especially when they are not readily visible. This problem is exacerbated by the hiring of local journalists or 'fixers' who inevitably also have a bias one way or another.
- The apparent failure of the media to take note of many criticisms of their performance during the first Rwanda crisis in 1994,⁷ along with lessons to be learned "for more responsible reporting". This goes a long way to explaining why so many were wrong-footed in late 1996 and through to mid-1997.

1.2 Methodology

To achieve the greatest credibility and impact, it would be preferable to source all information and views detailed in this report. This was not possible.

As in previous studies by this author, it was found that the only way to secure access and insight was to assure anonymity to those interviewees who requested it. Almost everyone did. Given the circumstances in which most sources were interviewed, it was decided not even to footnote the dates on which interviews took place. Where used, quotes should therefore be assumed to come from a reliable source with impeccable official credentials, even though they are not identified as such in the text. Where possible, however, interviews have been footnoted.

The author met sources at all levels from many organisations and several national governments involved in the Great Lakes crisis 96/7, both in the region and elsewhere. Some remain working *in situ*. Others have moved to new jobs elsewhere. The range of interviewees included desk officers and field delegates from NGOs, HAs, journalists and editorial staff, diplomats and government officials at many levels, and military officers involved in planning for the mooted international intervention force. Interestingly, given the nature of the issue, even most journalists preferred not to be quoted.

What was especially encouraging was the willingness of sources at all levels to recognise the significance of this issue, and then to make available often generous slabs of time to discuss and reflect with the author. To a few it was already seen as a major issue. But most had not appreciated -- or in many cases even begun to realise -- the central importance until they began discussions for this study.

In the time available for preparing this preliminary report there were significant constraints. As will be clear from the text, several lines of enquiry that could be central to the report have not yet produced a definitive, unambiguous conclusion.

Central to this study was the need to distil facts from rumour, hearsay, eye witness accounts and general 'whisky talk' beliefs that pervaded much of this period. Straightforward allegations would normally have no place in a factual assessment unless confirmed beyond doubt. Without such corroboration there will always be the danger of merely re-cycling rumours and allegations and thereby compounding the blur between facts and hearsay. However, given the preliminary nature of this study and the issues involved it was felt appropriate to re-state for the analysis many of the allegations if they had not been disproved beyond doubt. It is acknowledged, however, that some analytical purists may feel uncomfortable with this.

A considerable number of people involved in the Great Lakes Crisis of 96-97 will realise that they have not been approached and interviewed. They should be. The author apologises to any who might feel ignored or slighted because they believe they have a contribution to make. It is likely that some still hold keys to unresolved details of how information was blocked and manipulated in this conflict. Please would they now come forward to make contact and help fine tune this preliminary report.

1.3 Acknowledgements

The majority of those who have contributed to this research have asked not to be named. However they know who they are, and I acknowledge with much appreciation the time and effort they all devoted to recalling events and helping with support documents or references. I also appreciate their willingness to field back-up check calls long after they may have thought I was off their backs.

However, I can thank David Aronson, senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington DC both for his support and sharing his own research insight into some of the events detailed here. David Shearer, senior fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies helped clarify my understanding of the role -- both real and potential -- of the new breed of private security contractors in such conflicts. Declan Hill, an associate producer with CBC's 'Fifth Estate' TV current affairs programme in Toronto, Canada kindly shared with me research he gleaned over many weeks for his documentary '*Moral Authority*' on Canada's uncomfortable involvement in the Multi-National Force that never materialised.⁸

Some, along with others who asked to remain anonymous, read early drafts and provided invaluable comments and suggestions. I thank them.

I also want to express great appreciation to the organisers of conferences and seminars whose discussions I was privileged to be invited to attend, and in some cases moderate. The many sessions helped to inform many perceptions and clarify others. I thank especially the International Centre for Humanitarian Reporting from Geneva Switzerland, whose Boston conference in April 1997 during the last weeks of the Alliance advance through Zaire first aired concerns about the issue of a new information doctrine. I thank also the ICRC President's forum in Wolfsberg, Switzerland; the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the Howard Gilman Foundation; the Lester Pearson Peacekeeping Centre in Canada; the Institute of Humanitarian Law in Italy; the Center for Refugee Studies at York University, Canada; the Wilton Park Conference Centre in the UK; and the organisers of several conflict simulation and gaming exercises for peace support/peace enforcement emergencies in which I was invited to be a participant.

Finally, I must mention the office of Antonio de Menezes, counsellor for Information at the European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO) in Brussels. ECHO's Press and Information Officer Eva Kaluzynska was especially helpful with guidance, advice and support.

1.4 LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACRI	African Crisis Response Initiative
AFDL	Laurent Kabila's Alliance Forces
CA	Civil Affairs
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
DART	Disaster Assistance Response Team
UNA	United Nations Agency
HA	Humanitarian Agency (mainly at the UN)
HO	Humanitarian Organisation (the NGOs)
HC	Humanitarian Community (HAs and HOs together)
IMET	US International Military Education and Training
LIC	Low-Intensity Conflict
MNF	Multi-National Force (October-December 1996)
MTT	Mobile Training Team
PI	Public Information
RPA	Rwanda Patriotic Army
RPF	Rwanda Patriotic Front.

2. THE NEW NATURE OF INFORMATION IN CONFLICT

“This is a new and unique development, but one that has troubled me for some time as inevitable”

Senior Humanitarian Official

“Forces on the ground are becoming more sophisticated in handling information and the media”

Senior Canadian Diplomat

Central to the new challenge is to understand that the nature of information in conflict is fast changing. There is a new information edge where the struggle for the factual high ground is to be first, fast and as accurate as possible within the new technological challenges of real time. In addition, the conventional assumption of a pillared information structure of HAs, HOs, the military, the diplomats and the media – each with their own discrete information stream -- is now out of date. On the new information edge the old distinctions have become blurred. Often they have disappeared altogether.

If the HC and media fail yet again first to identify, then understand their errors and failings, and if they refuse to re-examine and re-draft their template assumptions of how to react, then the already diminished credibility of their work and the information they convey in future crises like the Great Lakes 96/97 will be eroded still further in the eyes of those who make policy.

This analysis is designed to help re-orientate both professions in a direction that is more focused, more responsive and more appropriate for the new realities of real-time information in conflict. As one leading practitioner in the information field put it: “Where is the knowledge that we have lost in information? Information without analysis is like oranges without sunshine”⁹

Although the focus of this study is the Humanitarian Agencies (HA), the Humanitarian Organisations (HO) and the media, none of those who handle information relating to a conflict or crisis -- whether diplomats, ministers, government officials or anyone else – is spared the new challenges. None of them can – or should – afford the luxury of complacency. A process of rapid change and evolution is under way on what can be called The Information Edge. The evidence is that coping with one crisis does not mean there is automatic readiness for the next. Often even basic lessons are not learned. Indeed, experience shows all too sadly how often ‘lessons learned’ have become ‘lessons forgotten’.

The Great Lakes Crisis of 96/97 proves the point. All of the different players had to scramble in real time to marshal whatever information came their way, and from whatever source. “There was always a conflict of data and conclusions right down through the government chain,” remarked one senior Canadian official at the heart of the Multi-National Force preparations. “There was a conflict of factoids. We had to discover who

said what to whom. We were often in a situation of explaining to a minister why something in the news was not as important as what we just told him ”.

The experience is not new in the management of information in conflict. However the Great Lakes 96/97 highlighted the factoid nature of real-time information more starkly than ever. .

2.1 Information Handling In Conflict: Illusion or Self-Delusion” ?

‘The Zairean rebels have clung determinedly to the Party line – that they are Zaireans who are fighting alone to end three decades of Mobutuism, and no foreigners are helping them. As they’ve moved relentlessly west, the illusion has been stretched thinner. . . .

And what about the heavily-armed Portugese-speaking troops from Angola who are enjoying the sun next door on the hotel terrace, sipping warm soda pop?

“I have seen this condition before, when I was practising as a doctor” one of Laurent Kabila’s most senior aides tells me. “Clinically, it’s called delusions and it means that you continue to believe in what you think you’ve seen, rather than what I tell you you’ve seen. There are no Angolans here’

Jane Standley, BBC News, 3 May 1997¹⁰

Filed close to the end of six months of Kabila’s military advance and persistent reports of mass slaughter targeted at Hutu *genocidaires* and refugees.

“Sinister”.

Almost without fail this is the adjective most widely used by those from the humanitarian community and media who were interviewed for this report when asked the question: how would you describe the new developments on information handling and control as experienced in the Great Lakes region of Africa ?

Because of both intimidation against outsiders and the inevitable confusion of this conflict, the day-to-day pressures of personal survival and the relentless numbers of refugees dominated the daily agenda. With good reason, few on the ground – if any – ever had the time to step back, reflect and consider whether a paradigm shift on the issue of information management in conflict was under way. But there has been such a shift. The nature of conflicts is different. They do not readily fit the old templates and proceed down the old predictable tram lines of past conflicts.¹¹ This study believes this shift has ominous implications for how conflicts are viewed by governments, the humanitarian community and the media alike.

One senior military officer involved in the Canadian-led Multi-National Force (MNF) highlighted a central reason for the distortion and misrepresentation that took place. “The heart of the problem was the emotions and political convictions of those involved, which -- whatever side the person was on -- skewed impressions or interpretations one way or the other. Certain facts were believed to be true, regardless of checking with reality”.

In this post-conflict aftermath it has been hard to find a voice at any level that does not confirm the inadequacy of the humanitarian community and international media on the issue. Many go so far as to label the failure as lamentable. As one senior NGO representative asked: “How is it possible with all the real-time capability, that we knew so little, and got so little right, and fell victim to misinformation?” He added: “October 1996 on the Rwanda-Zaire border was ‘infront-of-your-nose TV. It was also one of journalism’s lowest hours”. The HC was accused of similar failings. Many agencies succumbed too readily to a “temptation to bend the truth”.¹² Even those with the best reputations “lost their credibility because they lost their neutrality”.¹³

It is an inadequacy that undermined significantly the international image, integrity and political effectiveness of the media, the HC and some political figures who entered the fray to pass judgement. What is viewed widely in retrospect as a brilliantly conceived Alliance strategy of information control and access denial left the NGOs and media flailing. They could see little of what was happening at first hand, mis-read the signals and could not necessarily draw the correct conclusions. With her years of experience both covering the region and living in it, Lindsey Hilsum described the “denial machine”. There were Alliance and Rwandan structures “whose job is to promote a version of events that will simultaneously convey the invincibility of AFDL advance and conceal from the gaze of the world the ruthless disregard for human rights with which it has been accomplished”.¹⁴

This is the new conflict between real-time technological capability and reporting accurately, impartially and objectively by both the HC and media alike. Instant real-time reporting generates an inevitable subjectivity and lack of ability to check. In turn, this undermines the credibility and integrity in reporting that is naturally assumed by TV audiences or newspaper readers to be there.

As well as exaggeration by the HC and media, many in the Great Lakes expressed concern about the reporting of over-emotive descriptions from high-profile political figures who alleged that “I have just come back from hell”¹⁵, or that there were “carpets of dead bodies” or that a “million will be dead if we do not get to them straightaway”. The sharp focusing of international attention using remarks described by one humanitarian official as “totally, totally irrational and over the top” was often undermined swiftly when the claims were not matched in their totality by evidence. “It was unnecessary and dramatic overstatement”, complained one HC official who was himself just as concerned by the large numbers of Hutus and refugees under threat. But as the humanitarian community had already discovered, exaggeration discredited the overall political case. “We all lost credibility. It is right to say: save these refugees! But you have to show responsibility, or it will come back to haunt you”, said one HO official.

More important is that these same interviewees confirm how this inadequacy and inexperience played into the hands of the Alliance forces symbolised by Laurent Kabila. During a period of conflict when all sides were committing gross violations of international humanitarian law¹⁶, it provided a significant tactical advantage. More generally, what has since emerged is that Kabila was a new public creation of the political doctrine of ‘New Africanism’ for Eastern Africa¹⁷ being promoted jointly at the time by

President Museveni of Uganda and Vice President Kagame of Rwanda, and latterly embraced by other regional leaders too. At the time few outsiders perceived the fundamentally new political reality, let alone understood it. There was “a particular ruthlessness about the new leaders which runs counter to the idealism (and very possibly the naivety) of western governments, civil societies and especially NGOs”.¹⁸ By giving the humanitarian community presence at the periphery but not access at the central focus of the crisis, Rwanda and the Alliance created the illusion of compliance with humanitarian principles without actually complying. In this new political scenario the existing political borders of Central and Eastern Africa were being deemed “irrelevant” and the new generation of regional leaders were “masters of the game”.¹⁹

This is central to the long term implications for the handling and management of information in a zone of conflict.

2.2 Information Control: a central pillar of Rwandan and Alliance strategy

Part of the un-stated Alliance doctrine required a virtual shutting-off of the theatre of conflict, along with a block on access and all vital information. This created an atmosphere of high danger for outsiders, and reluctantly only token co-operation with humanitarian organisations. “Kagame realised the central nature of information control to the success of the operation,” said one senior humanitarian official. “The shut-down of Eastern Zaire allowed Kabila to proceed, and by the time the situation became clearer in late December, it was too late : the operation was well advanced and picking up momentum”. The supportive role of what later will be shown to be a ‘fan-club’ of sympathetic nations helped.

Vice President Kagame confirms that his doctrine of ensuring information shut down was central to his strategy. “We used communication and information warfare better than anyone. We have found a new way of doing things. [However] We did not write it [the new doctrine] down. Maybe we should!”²⁰ The Kagame I-warfare principles may not be written down, but many believe they are precisely thought out and honed.

Kagame also exploited a pivotal weakness of all humanitarian operations: the need for governments or warring factions to grant operational consent to the HAs and NGOs. Denial of access and control of information was a central aim designed to further compromise them. He targeted the humanitarian community and the international media because they each handled information that could thwart Rwanda’s military intentions. In line with the principles of New Africanism he trusted neither.²¹ “We built on their weakness. They had weaknesses and our strength was to keep information from them. We saw that from very early on in 1994. The aim was to let them continue their work, but deny them what would be dangerous to us”.

The Alliance was readily inculcated with the same principles of efficient information transmission and ruthless information control. Humanitarian workers and journalists entering eastern Zaire in late 1996 were forced to surrender their short-wave radios and

satellite telephone systems. Kabila often made rapid real-time contact with his political allies by e-mail, wherever he was in the Great Lakes region.

Many believe that this highly effective strategy of information control and access shut down was the result of Kagame refining the knowledge of information warfare he acquired during a US Command and Staff course in 1990. Rwandan officials laugh off these suggestions. They say Kagame only spent three months out of a planned twelve months as a Ugandan officer on a training course at Fort Leavenworth in Kansas. He cut short his studies to return to lead and plan the RPF advance into northern Rwanda after the commander, Fred Rwigyema, was killed in action.

However Kagame himself acknowledges the importance of the Fort Leavenworth contribution to his thinking, especially in information warfare and communications. "That is very right," he told this author. "The US experience added something". He confirms that "central to my studies in Leavenworth" were "organisation, tactics, strategy, building human resources, Psy-Ops [psychological operations], information, psychology and communications among the troops".²² He was supported by other officers who were trained in universities and colleges of Central Africa and were inculcated with the Kagame way of doing things.

All this contributed to a new information doctrine that was robust, home bred and modified as events unfolded. It may have been somewhat *ad hoc*, but the basic principles were executed ruthlessly and shown to be highly effective. And Kagame was not alone. The culture of information control had begun to be developed earlier through the Habyarimana regime before April 1994, and then by those who committed the mass genocide. Evidence amassed in the refugee camps of Eastern Zaire confirms that like Kagame, the Interahamwe and Hutu soldiers also had a well developed I-warfare strategy that relied extensively on infiltration of the UNHCR and humanitarian community.

In their relations with both sides of the conflict the error made by the HC and the media was to make what might be called the conceited assumption of the developed world that their new, instantaneous mobile satellite technology would guarantee transparency and overcome any control. In the quest for accuracy and comprehensive information this was a major failing. They failed even to consider, let alone appreciate, the level of sophistication in doctrine and information management that can be achieved by a tiny war-torn country like Rwanda that was still recovering from a horrific period of mass genocide thirty months earlier. As Vice President Kagame himself put it: "People think that Rwanda – a small African country – cannot succeed in the way it did". He added: "I learned from the field that the media and NGOs would be a problem. For a specific amount of time these people have to be kept out. We managed to keep them out. They leaked information. They were very damaging". And he added: "They are not neutral, as many claim to be. To allow a free hand will not bring [us the Rwandans] the best results."²³

Lindsey Hilsum has detailed what many have described to this author: namely how well even the Office of Information in Kabila's Alliance understood the new dynamics of real-time journalism. Journalists have "rapid deadlines, limited budgets and a short attention span. If they spin things out for long enough with security scares, with bureaucratic hurdles and impassible road blocks, [and large demands for ready cash] the

journalists will go away. They know that television teams are particularly vulnerable to such constraints, to the need to produce quickly the string of images and narrative that we call ‘the story’”.²⁴

This is a fundamentally incisive assessment by the OOI of the media’s weaknesses and carries important lessons for the future of all apparently low-intensity conflicts (LICs).

There also continues to be a widespread belief by some working in the Great Lakes that part of Rwanda’s trick had been quietly to earmark hard currency for a modest, but precisely targeted inventory of specialist communication and equipment that would support the overall, covert I-warfare strategy. One ready source of hard currency is known to be the very high fees charged to the humanitarian community in particular just for access and the right to operate in or out of Rwanda. International organisations also say that for their own communications equipment Rwanda abused the import and export procedures as an easy way to acquire technology.

No one can point with absolute certainty to who might have supported a sophisticated communications capability with either equipment, manpower, expertise, logistics or money. There remain many ‘whisky talk’ suspicions about outside, non-regional involvement. Private security contractors with specialist communications skills are considered a distinct possibility.

Yet there is a well-founded contrary view that Kagame did not need such outside help. According to one senior NGO official, “They [the Rwandan leadership] are damn clever. They prepared themselves for this kind of warfare. They have excellent people in communications, including the chairman of Rwanda Telecom”. Much of Rwanda’s military thinking came initially from Ethiopia which relied heavily on East Germany’s determined, manpower-intensive Cold War principles of signals intercepts. A senior Canadian recalled that in 1994 “Kagame had outstanding SIGINT [signals intelligence] and HUMINT [human intelligence]. It was good then and they must be much better now. It would be rather naïve to think that Kagame did not have the capability to use it, with help from allies”.

That same question remains throughout this study. There is also uncertainty as to whether even with access to the communications technology the Rwandan forces had the numbers and quality of human resources to both process and analyse the routinely vast volumes of data likely to have been generated by such a SIGINT regime.

Rwandan government sources at the heart of the policy structure reject all these high-flying assumptions. The Vice President himself laughed off the conjecture of a sophisticated Rwandan capability to intercept the satellite communications of both the humanitarian community and media. “Communications are very important,” he said. “We have the experts, but not the resources. We rely on human beings, not equipment.” On the issue of communications and intercept resources he added: “we are trying to acquire them”.²⁵

Once again, then, the picture is opaque and blurred. Yet despite firm Rwandan denials, it must be assumed that such a procurement strategy for communications intercept equipment along with a new information doctrine could readily and attractively be adopted

by other warring factions in future regional conflicts. The prospect is not wild or theoretical. It is real.

2.3 An Information Void: Who Might Have Helped To Fill It ?

Despite a prolonged period of denial from Kigali, the involvement of regular troops of the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA) in the Alliance force is now confirmed and well-established.²⁶ There is also growing and considerable evidence that Alliance forces massacred Hutu refugees in a “deliberate and arbitrary” manner.²⁷ They “perpetrated deliberate killings of civilians” and the “systematic and indiscriminate killings of refugees”²⁸, especially women and children²⁹, although much more has yet to be chronicled satisfactorily. Vice President Kagame rejects without reservation all such accusations from Human Rights organisations and the United Nations.³⁰

For many weeks in the early autumn of 1996 there had been a working assumption that events were part of a ‘tin-pot war’ being waged by a ‘rag-tag’ force of ‘Tutsi rebels’.³¹ The reality was significantly different. In retrospect, we know that it was a carefully conceived military campaign backed by Rwanda, Uganda³² and eventually Angola. It had been planned over many months to remove the lingering Hutu threat from inside the refugee camps of Eastern Zaire, and it was signalled explicitly to the United States by Rwanda as early as June 1996.³³ Non-regional government had, however, already made the same internal assessments at least a year earlier of the likely solution to the problem of the massive refugee camps in Eastern Zaire. They concluded that “thousands of innocent victims would be killed” and “that was planned”.³⁴

The campaign was an extension of the feared, disciplined reputation that Paul Kagame had established as the 29-year-old Head of Military Intelligence in the Ugandan National Resistance Army of Yoweri Museveni after it fought its way to power in Kampala in 1986. Kagame was central to plotting strategy for the 1990 invasion of northern Rwanda by the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF).³⁵ For that operation he is known to have used at least eight senior intelligence officers who had served with him in Ugandan intelligence. After the Tutsi commander Fred Rwigyema was killed, Kagame flew back from his military training at Fort Leavenworth in the United States to take command, and the Ugandans worked under him.

Looking back, one NGO representative who was caught up in the events of 1990, now describes them as “an amazing deception” as part of a policy of “managing ethnicity” in support of the RPF advance. Former commander – now Vice President – Paul Kagame was central to that.

Analysts believe that with his brilliant, analytical skills in intelligence and strategy honed over almost a decade, Kagame applied similar principles in the fall of 1996 and through early 1997. He himself confirms the impression. His US training, and continuing contact over the years with the US military, further sharpened his skills in Psy-Ops, manipulation, deception and information management. “I became a commander at the top,

learning from the US. It allowed me to enrich my strategy, and the way to make things [happen] on the ground”.³⁶

As will be seen later in this analysis, the precise level of any direct non-regional involvement with Kagame remains disputed and unconfirmed.

For much of the period between September 1996 and May 1997, the humanitarian community, diplomats, military and government ministers from ‘concerned’ outside nations say they were all at a loss to know precisely what was unfolding. Senior figures from the main supportive non-regional nations have denied to this author that they had explicit inside knowledge of the operation from the start, despite the close working relationship of their Kigali-based diplomats to the Rwandan leadership.

Vice President Kagame has since confirmed that he personally warned US officials in June 1996 that the Hutu refugee camps inside Eastern Zaire “had to be dismantled, and that if the United Nations would not remove them, somebody else would have to do it”.³⁷ He said the US response “was really no response”. However diplomats claim that a stream of explicit Rwandan warnings at different levels during the summer of 1996 that they would “dismantle” the camps could never realistically be construed as a signal that mass slaughter of Hutus was planned or would eventually take place. Kagame’s decision to “tell the truth” a year later that Rwanda “bore the main burden” of Kabila’s Alliance operation³⁸ confirmed a widely held fear in the fall of 1996 that Rwandan of a hands-off involvement were disingenuous and misinformation.

Rwandan officials later denied reports that in his Washington Post interview the Vice President had confirmed Rwandan military involvement in Eastern Zaire.³⁹ But the claims were not taken seriously given the evidence and Major-General Kagame’s claims elsewhere. Neither were Kagame’s emphatic rejections of evidence that Rwandan forces actively participated in revenge killing of refugees.⁴⁰ He told the Weekly Mail and Guardian: “The insinuation that Rwanda or the Alliance got involved to go and kill refugees is not true”.⁴¹ He accepted that “in such a situation the innocent and guilty [Hutus] are mixed up. But he said that any atrocities were carried out by “individuals and not organisations”.

With the passage of time and the emergence of independent evidence⁴² neither denial can be considered credible. In September 1997 Laurent Kabila thanked Rwanda publicly for supporting his military advance through Zaire and the eventual seizure of the capital Kinshasa.⁴³ Also, too much evidence has now emerged of the deception and disinformation techniques used to mask the presence and leading role of Rwandan officers in particular.⁴⁴

Yet while it is known that Kagame both backed and helped plan Kabila’s military advance, some analysts warn that such framework involvement does not necessarily mean an intimate approval for, and involvement in, a process of mass killing. Indeed they point out that Kagame has been known to execute in person any soldiers who violate discipline. Also, in public the Vice President always preached the need for a multi-ethnic Rwandese identity, not just a Tutsi identity.

What about certain officials of non-regional government during the period from September to November 1996: were they sufficiently inside the Rwandan and Alliance

planning loop to know what was planned? If so, did they know only a bare outline or the more intimate details?

In a critical letter to President Clinton in August 1997, US Congressman Christopher H. Smith, chairman of the Subcommittee on International Operations and Human Rights, complained that he had received “consistent and credible reports that a few US diplomats in Rwanda have been . . . strong and obvious enthusiasts of the Rwandan government and their Congolese allies” and they operated as if they were “friends of the RPA”⁴⁵.

But did such regular diplomatic contact constitute direct influence on Rwandan and Alliance policy or strategy? The suspicions are not proven, despite close contacts by a small “fan club” of nations.

The ambiguous but supportive nature of this ‘fan club’ relationship is not disputed by the Rwandan government. Yet regular contacts between foreign diplomats and Rwandan officials several times a week both in Kigali and in the field did not necessarily mean that non-regional governments were briefed either automatically or fully on Kagame’s strategy for Rwanda and the Alliance inside Eastern Zaire. Indeed, Kagame says he withheld information.⁴⁶ Similarly, it can be argued that the coolness of the US in particular to the deployment of a Multi-National Force in November 1996 must not be seen necessarily as an expression of open support for Kagame and Kabila, and the campaign of ethnic revenge.

Rwanda confirms this more qualified view. “People expected US involvement, but the reality was different,” said Vice President Kagame.⁴⁷ “The fact that we did things so well is seen as a sign of very close co-operation”. But he says that such an impression was wrong.

3. HANDLING INFORMATION AND NGOs: THE NEW REALITIES

3.1 NGO's and information : Not Good Operators

“The NGOs got it so wrong”

Senior Canadian Government official.

“The NGOs are now part of information warfare”

Senior MNF military officer

“Probably never before has the fine art of communicating had such power of life and death over so many people We [in the ICRC] are increasingly aware of the phenomenal weight a word, a sentence, an expressed belief can have. . . . We shall have to learn to navigate between the rock and the hard place of modern institutional communications”.

Urs Boegli,

Head of Communications, ICRC ⁴⁸

Would that others in the Humanitarian Community could make the fundamental leap in perception and sensitivity reflected in those remarks from the Head of Communications at the ICRC. Since the early nineties, humanitarian organisations have come to value and live with their new role as central to the public perception of most conflicts. They have assumed that “we are the story”, and that without their presence “the story would not happen”.⁴⁹

However, few among those who work in humanitarian community have yet to take on board the inevitable new expectations and responsibilities that come with this pivotal position. They have not come to terms with the new potency of the information and communication dynamics in the new real-time environment, let alone begun to change their traditional mindset. In the words of one seasoned public information officer, there remain “a lot of very unprofessional people” in the humanitarian community.

As has begun to happen for the military in conflict, information handling is a new discipline that all those working in the field should at least be taught, and preferably forced to acquire, whatever their status. The integrity of any field operation is a function of how well information is handled by all the humanitarian community representatives at all levels. There should be no exceptions.

However, this has yet to happen. Some institutions are reluctant even to perceive these new realities, let alone accept and embrace them. The near catastrophic handling of information by the humanitarian community in Central Africa shows the high price of refusing to come to terms with the fast changing nature of information in a theatre of

conflict. And this failure further compounded what is viewed as the much wider humanitarian community failure to understand the resentment of the new breed of Central African leaders towards humanitarian organisations that undermine the “African sense of ownership”.⁵⁰

A senior officer in the putative Multi-National Force highlighted the problem of this humanitarian community mindset. “They are very naïve at understanding the implications of exaggeration, and they are not sophisticated enough. They will have to be: do they realise that?” The officer believes that by their naiveté the HC made a rod for their own backs. In his view Rwandan Vice President Kagame “does not like NGO’s, so he paralysed them completely and terrorised them. If he did not like what they did with information, he kicked them out”. Kagame himself did not dispute this impression.⁵¹

In the first weeks of the Great Lakes Crisis during October 1996, the collective name of NGOs was discredited savagely by the lack of overall competence of different humanitarian organisations in handling information. But just as it would be wrong to lump all journalists together under the homogeneous rubric of “media”,⁵² so it must be considered a gross misrepresentation to see all in the humanitarian community as identical. They are neither “homogeneous, united, coherent nor cohesive”.⁵³ There is a wide spectrum of organisations with different policies and different approaches to media handling. It could be said that at one end there is *Medicins Sans Frontieres (MSF)* which tends to be open and visibly pro-active in its advocacy. At the other end is *Save The Children* which takes a more controlled and restrained approach, certainly in public.

Yet for all parts of the spectrum, the Great Lakes 1996/7 presented new challenges that overall were not tackled adequately. For example, one insider described a “massive traumatising of Oxfam” because of the failure to use the information and projections available to galvanise an international consensus for military intervention. It is widely recognised – not least by some of the NGO’s themselves – that failures on this issue undermined considerably their future integrity as reliable sources in unfolding conflicts. “There is no doubt: we did not do well. I felt dreadful about it. We have not performed well”, said one senior NGO official.

Central to this collapse of image was the public rivalry in October/November 1996 between different HAs and HOs in what was a fact-starved concentration of frustrated humanitarian and media workers. Rwandan and Alliance forces had shut down access across the border to the vast refugee camps in Eastern Zaire. With clear evidence of a military operation and in the absence of any information, it was understandable that many assumed and planned for the worst. Yet no one knew whether the camps had been forcibly closed, how many refugees – if any -- were on the move, what the *genocidaires* might be doing, what had happened to their weapons, and whether the *genocidaires* would allow a possible massed return of refugees to Rwanda.

As speculation proliferated, confidence in what the HAs and HOs were claiming slumped rapidly. The fact that they argued openly and bitterly worsened their image, thereby destroying credibility with the media, foreign governments and the military. At one point different UN agencies disagreed openly about their assessments of what was happening and the number of likely victims. “It was a nasty, bitter experience”. In turn this

served the purposes of those involved in the MNF task force who wanted to ensure that no full MNF deployment went ahead for what they viewed as a 'mission impossible', whatever end state might be defined.

Rival humanitarian organisations became bitten by the same bug: they had to raise their profile and grab public attention.⁵⁴ It was a “dog-fight between agencies”, including different UN agencies, and most “deliberately trespassed on other peoples’ territories”. For example, the World Food Programme’s job is food. But “the WFP started talking about refugees to get the human factor. They knew that journalists were not interested in bags of flour!”. With some HC workers marooned inside Eastern Zaire at Goma, one organisation enraged others when it revealed the secret evacuation plans. It was “cut-throat” public information and “deliberate efforts to get on TV!”

When UNICEF released a projection that some one thousand Hutus in Eastern Zaire were probably dying each day, one official from another UN agency commented cynically “I knew where that was coming from: it was designed as the day’s headline. It was [an attempt at] the Sylvana Foa factor”. Agencies seeking profile played themselves off against each other. “Everyone realised the importance of PR: if you have effective PR, then you have heroes”.

Exaggeration was seen as a legitimate tool in the PR arsenal, but at what price? “You grab headlines but there is a good chance that it will be counter productive” conceded one senior official.

In this rivalry between and across both UN Agencies and NGOs, it could be said that information became bastardised, and that the victim was accuracy.

“We were used by the NGOs,” concluded Massimo Alberizzi, Africa Correspondent of *Corriere Della Sera*.⁵⁵ Many reporters wrote that 50,000 were dead. There was cholera and malaria. “But when we [finally] went over the border [from Rwanda into Eastern Zaire] we discovered refugees in good condition; no malaria; no cholera; just normal sickness”.

Such was the resentment of journalists at being fed inaccurate information by the HC that some convened an impromptu meeting. “We discussed how NGOs would give us false information. Were they joking with us?” Alberizzi was one of many who were embarrassed and furious. “I was used by people who wanted to give false information, especially by the NGOs who had a lot of ‘business’ (sic), and the US who had other intentions”. He wrote an article for his newspaper apologising. “I said: ‘I am sorry that the information of the last ten days was wrong’”

Many recall in particular a UNHCR press conference where a representative from Medecins Sans Frontieres positioned herself among the journalists, then openly took issue with the UNHCR. The issue was whether refugee transit camps were open. UNHCR spokesman Ray Wilkinson said they were open and running smoothly. MSF spokesperson Samantha Bolton said the RPA had closed them down. In a heated exchange both challenged not just the other’s versions but also their personal integrity. Ray Wilkinson said he would not argue with MSF over figures. What journalists remember is less the argument about transit camps, and more the way the argument developed into a furious

personal dispute about the numbers of people claimed to be dying across the border in Eastern Zaire.

More important, however, is that this open anger, along with the vicious exchange of accusations and epithets, further worsened the HC image. It was “a pivotal moment for a difference of opinion to be presented”. MSF and Oxfam had a common position and believed it was right to make a stand. In the words of one HO, the UN needed “to be torn apart” for what it was claiming. However it was done “in a way that discredited us all” and “our presentation bugged it”. Worse still, the open and embarrassing dispute between leading members of the humanitarian community undermined the little leverage they still enjoyed with the media. “We were not playing on a level playing field. Most journalists had committed themselves to the idea that the camps were full of genocidal Hutu maniacs, and that they had to be repatriated”. Many in the humanitarian community had also made the same commitment.

All this happened at a time when the HAs and HOs were already operating from a position of low esteem. A good number of named journalists had lost respect for most in the humanitarian community after what took place during the 1994 Rwanda crisis. So much so that when many of the people from both sides came together again in the Great Lakes in late 1996 a few reporters would not even talk to the HAs and HOs. It was even said that “some hacks [journalists] believe that the NGOs created the 1994 genocide [and Zaire camp crisis in July] by their humanitarian response”. The reporters had never forgiven them. Humanitarian workers thought that journalists considered the unfolding ghastliness as “genocide sponsored by Oxfam, because we piped the [refugee] camps and talked of the rights of the camp people to be protected”. The reporters continued to resent the response of HAs and HOs whom fundamentally they had begun to despise: “Had we not done it then a lot of nasty people would have died. I would prefer people to live to face a proper trial”, was the typical humanitarian community defence against the journalists.

The resentments lingering from 1994 helped to create a new suspicion and doubt about the role and aims of HAs and HOs when it comes to information handling and image projection. The post MNF ‘lessons learned’ study conducted in 1997 by the Canadian government concluded that “government and the media must recognise that some Humanitarian Agencies have political interests and agendas that influence their actions on the ground, the intelligence they provide and their media relations”.⁵⁶ It added: “Governments and the Media must make every effort during a crisis to understand this, and to differentiate between the various Humanitarian Agencies and NGOs”

Both at an institutional and personal level, many NGOs and UN agencies, along with their staff, were shown to be naïve and ill-equipped. They were prepared to exploit an information vacuum for their own political purposes. This was nothing new. But on this occasion they pushed their advocacy beyond the point of credibility and impartiality. As a result, they were found out and in many cases humiliated. A senior officer in the MNF reflected the complaint of many when he told this study: “The NGOs were no longer humanitarian workers”. Instead, by their actions they threatened the operational security (OPSEC) of the Alliance forces. Referring to the dilemma for both the HC and the MNF

the senior western officer added: “I was guilty of talking to the NGOs on ‘clear’ [open communications lines]. It was not a good thing to do from what we know now. We shared our views on what to do, and where to go and what was happening”. This officer regretted this in retrospect. “If we reported a massacre then we are taking sides. Then we became fair game for the rebels [sic] to take action”. Some in the HC regard such an observation as indicative of a military naiveté that is the direct reverse of the military complaints about the humanitarian community’s naiveté on information handling.

Indifference to, or ignorance of, such new information realities became a seriously-flawed miscalculation in the field of information management. The consequences are likely to be felt for a considerable time yet. The fact that so few personnel in the HAs and NGOs are trained to even a basic level for the responsibilities of handling information compounds the problem. “We had the best press officers we could muster in the time available. We wanted to do our best, but it did not work”.

3.2 NGOs : The Dangers When Speculation Becomes Fact

“For NGOs the humanitarian imperative has gone”

Senior NGO official

In the Great Lakes matters went considerably further than the documented failures of the humanitarian community in Rwanda in 1994,⁵⁷ including its predisposition to exaggerate and on occasions to make ‘factual’ pronouncements without checking. For probably the first time in such conflicts, journalists decided that HAs and HOs were using them to peddle information that was portrayed as fact when in reality it was extrapolation. Whatever trust and confidence the media had in HAs or HOs as ‘good offices’ was virtually destroyed. As several journalists put it : “the NGO’s were found out”. In addition, “the usual, pleasant NGO-media conspiracy where we needed each other, broke down” in the Great Lakes bloodletting of 1996/7. It has not recovered.⁵⁸

The typical and reasonable defence of the HC was that their often inexperienced staff on Rwanda’s western border were put under enormous pressure by the media because there were no other sources of information. Too much reliance was placed on the HC as sources when they knew little or no more than the journalists. Furthermore, they complained that journalists desperate for information and under pressure from their head offices, knowingly omitted qualifications to the HC assessments and extrapolations. This meant that reasonable projections were often reported as fact, not the speculative assessments that invariably they were.

On this the media are guilty of mis-representing qualified extrapolations by the HAs and HOs. However given the nature of real-time media pressures these days, the humanitarian community must expect that this will be the case, and not wish idealistically for things to be dramatically better.

There is one additional factor. Some in the HC found emotions outpacing their ability to cope. As they manned positions along the Rwanda border they feared for

colleagues in Eastern Zaire who had not been seen or contacted. “Emotions took over. There was also irritation with questions [like] ‘what are you doing ?’ when you can’t do anything”. The handling of information suffered.

This is a reasonable explanation, but not an adequate excuse. There can be no doubt that to the disgust of some HAs and HOs, others in the humanitarian community decided to exploit the vacuum for the purposes of image and potential cash-flow purposes. That is a turn of events that will have enormous implications when the HC and media next come together in a crisis, especially if it is in Africa.

It is this study’s contention, however, that the intense pressure of the Great Lakes information vacuum merely highlighted a fundamental institutional failing among many organisations in the humanitarian community. One senior NGO official described it as “pathetic naiveté”.⁵⁹ Information handling and press relations has tended to be a cosy, high-profile add-on to operations for the purposes of image building and promoting the work of the HO or HA. Few UN Agency and NGO officials -- let alone junior field representatives -- have knowledge of, or training in, the new fundamentals of the potent, virulent nature of information in a real-time communications environment. A mix of training for sound bites, familiarisation manuals and limited staff briefings in “How to Handle the Media”⁶⁰ should not be considered the same as acquiring a fundamental understanding in the new and volatile nature of real-time information. One analyst described what he called “the invasion of the kids” in 4-wheel drives. Few had any communication or language skills. Most had only a scant understanding of the complexities of the Great Lakes. However, some NGO officials reject this description as completely at odds with their own day-to-day perspective on their own organisation’s press operations.⁶¹

Yet in simple terms, loose and speculative talk cost reputations when extrapolations or suppositions were beamed around the global media outlets within minutes as ‘facts’ and ‘information’. Such naiveté and simplistic operating procedures cost reputations. From her position for CARE (UK) on location in the Great Lakes, Alison Campbell expressed this naiveté as follows: “Aid workers very often see it as better to go along with an exaggerated version of a humanitarian situation than have it receive no publicity at all because it does not meet the needs of the ‘template’ story”.⁶² Privately others in the HC found such observations “a bit rich coming from CARE”, but they did not disagree with the thrust of the observations. Yet such a strategy is totally flawed and ultimately destroys credibility, as the Great Lakes experience proved. It can be argued that such a tactic should never be repeated. Fortunately some in the HC – but far from all – now realise the price they paid for pursuing a policy that was soon discredited.

The reasons for this failing are clear.

Traditionally many in the Humanitarian Community have viewed the core mission of ‘press relations’, ‘media relations’ or ‘public affairs’ as the promotion of the humanitarian organisation and its role in any unfolding crisis. Increasingly of late, facts of the crisis often seemed to be less important than image and reputation of the HAs or HOs. One senior HO official was more candid when he concluded despairingly: “the humanitarian imperative has gone”. Central to this PR mission has been the public profile of the HO

because of the need to raise funds, both from donor governments and public funding appeals. Others, however, reject in the strongest possible terms this image of HOs. They say their press operations are led primarily by a humanitarian imperative to save lives and care for the living, wherever they are. The PR aims of HOs and HAs have been to press for solutions to crises, and if nothing adequate is being done to reveal the horrors that are taking place in order to create public awareness and interest.⁶³

Yet the impression remains. In this and previous crises, many have resented the HC bidding war for funds that has taken place increasingly in the first high profile weeks of any conflict. It is therefore said by many that The Great Lakes 96/97 merely brought to a head a Public and Media Relations disaster that many inside and outside the Humanitarian Community feared was inevitable, although they hoped it would never happen.

Why did a predicted information-handling disaster take place?

The relationship between the HAs, HOs and media on the Rwanda / Zaire border in late 1996 was fraught for many complex, and interrelated reasons. Without any chance to report at first hand from inside Eastern Zaire in the early period of October and November, journalists in a vacuum had to turn to other sources for what might be happening across the border. They found themselves cooped up with equally frustrated representatives of HAs and HOs who also had virtually no reliable, first hand information of what was happening to the tens of thousands of refugees driven from the Goma camps. Information acquired a high premium. In this context, and with journalists desperate for any snippet, so did informed speculation. But self-control collapsed and -- in a repeat of Rwanda 1994⁶⁴ -- was replaced by exaggeration. This is an indictment not just of the humanitarian organisations, but also of journalists too.

One long-serving spokesperson -- who believes his organisation's public statements were correctly measured during the high emotions of claim and counter claim -- watched other HAs and HOs at work. "I try very hard not to go over the top because it will come back to hit you. I try to be as honest as possible. I make mistakes, but I try to keep within bounds. I tried, but [in the Great Lakes in October/November 1996] others went haywire".

3.3 The Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) announcement of 9 November 1996⁶⁵

"We failed to recognise that information is more than data: it is emotion and humanity."

MSF doctor in the Great Lakes

Central to the collapse of confidence between the NGOs and the media was one press briefing by Medecins Sans Frontieres after the enforced emptying of the Goma, Uvira and Bukavu camps. The announcement signalled that up to 1200 refugees would soon be dying each day. MSF also demanded international military intervention to protect the refugees by way of safe areas.

The MSF announcement backfired within days when hundreds of thousands of adequately-fed and hydrated refugees began streaming back into Rwanda from Zaire. From interviews for this study it is clear from Rwandan government sources that after the MSF announcement on 9 November embarrassing the HC became a central reason to make sure the hundreds of thousands of Hutu refugees returned home to Rwanda in a very visible manner. However, some HOs reject this as “too neat” and a convenient rewriting of history.⁶⁶

Until 9 November, MSF believed “we had enormous credibility because we are [seen as] physicians and high priests. By virtue of the act of being MSF we could respond to human need and plough through political barriers”. The traditional MSF culture was “tight coordination” of information between all offices and “do not overplay for the sake of media attention”. Overall the MSF ideology is a “blanketing effect to suppress and stop going public”.

But for a complex of reasons, the announcement of the MSF extrapolation ended all that. Before explaining how, it is important to understand the circumstances in which MSF issued their alert and appeal on 9 November.

At the time there was an information vacuum in the war zone on the border and much emotional fear about what was feared to be taking place out of sight. A few humanitarian workers were still in Eastern Zaire and unaccounted for. Journalists and cameramen were stuck out of sight on the wrong side of the border inside Rwanda and could see nothing of what was assumed to be an unfolding horror. There was good reason to assume it must have been a reverse mass killing of Hutus in revenge for the genocide of 1994.

At the same time, the capacity of all HAs and HOs, including MSF, to help large numbers of refugees at risk was blocked. “Why was it different this time? The circumstances were so compelling that MSF could not stay quiet”, one senior MSF official explained to this study.

MSF were not alone in their bleak extrapolations of likely death rates across the border in Eastern Zaire. UN agencies like UNHCR, UNICEF and the World Food Programme had made their own calculations and produced similar projections. In line with normal practice for planning purposes, MSF conducted a routine statistical extrapolation. It used the usual projection models refined over the years during previous global refugees crises. “When conditions are like this we can project 2-5 deaths per 10,000 refugees per day. [A rate of] 2 is an alert threshold; 5 is the emergency threshold”, MSF President Philippe Biberson told this author. Based on the scant information to hand from Eastern Zaire, MSF made reasonable assumptions like the absence of fresh water and no more food supplies now that the Goma camps were empty. “We wanted to visualise what our fears were. We made assumptions of people on the roads without food or water”.

In addition, the eleven MSF healthcare posts that were functioning already had 15,000 cases of bloody diarrhoea which signalled “an enormous morbidity rate”. Based on all the evidence in their possession MSF said that “from experience, the rates of death in this type of situation (displaced population deprived of aid) can reach ten deaths per 10,000 people each day”.⁶⁷ As a result they calculated that in a refugee population

estimated at 1.2 million “1,200 people could thus die each day”. MSF added that this figure took no account of war casualties or victims in the Zairean population. They insist that their projections were couched publicly in language like “according to our expectations, we would estimate that . . .”

What happened next is the sharpest possible example of how potent and virulent information can now become in a real-time information vacuum. It also illustrates what takes place if the information handling is naïve and the data provided to the media is then reported selectively through global news systems without the inbuilt conditionality and assumptions of the original announcement repeatedly being made absolutely clear.

MSF sources say they believed that announcing the projection was a legitimate and timely contribution to appreciating unfolding horrors that were probably taking place. UN agencies made public their projections too. The key to the problem was how MSF representatives on the Rwanda-Zaire border handled the information. “We were not wrong in the substance, but in how we communicated to the rest of the world, and our lack of shrewdness in how to handle information”, admitted one senior MSF official.

The journalistic view was far less charitable. The reporters heard not just facts but an “emotionality” in the manner and voice in which the data was presented. On the figure of 1200-a-day dying, Massimo Alberizzi of *Corriere Della Sera* -- one of the reporters present -- says, for example: “It was not speculation, or conditionalisation. It was fact, no question”.

Within hours the MSF extrapolation had taken on a scary dynamic of its own. Any conditionality was soon dropped from copy or television scripts as they flashed around the world in the voracious real-time news cycle from satellite telephones and TV dishes inside Rwanda. The projection was no longer a projection. It was now hard fact and sourced to MSF as “MSF say 1200 refugees are dying each day”. There was never any question that MSF had said it, but they had failed to insist on the heavy qualifications and assumptions behind the figures being reported too.

By now MSF had lost control of its own data. Governments took even more notice of the apparent horrors unfolding. “Our extrapolation became fact. We probably made a mistake” said one MSF insider. Another said: “We failed to recognise that information is more than data: it is emotion and humanity. What we were saying was not inaccurate, but the business of data was infused with emotionalism. That made it more volatile”. Instead of the bald figure of 1,200, MSF’s senior epidemiologist Jean-Herve Bradol privately regretted not having given a bracket of figures of – say – between 1,000 and 1,400 deaths per day as would normally have been the case in operational planning. MSF insiders concede that another failure was that it did not try to roll back the reporting by issuing a forceful retraction or insisting that the media clarify for accuracy. To have done so might have achieved little in reality, yet at least it would have gone a considerable way to restoring MSF’s battered image at that point.

Some reporters who realised the inherent limitations and dangers of the MSF projections found themselves sucked into conforming with the growing consensus of colleagues. Head offices read the stark MSF figures from the wires without the important conditionality. They expected their reporters to reflect the ball-park figures

unquestioningly. International headlines then screamed: “1200 refugees a day are dying”, again without question.

Conversely some reporters and news organisations went even further. They began using the MSF extrapolation to project their own figures and impressions. On air one BBC correspondent even filed a radio report describing “a holocaust” taking place unseen by TV cameras.⁶⁸ Some will argue that in the long term through May 1997, his description could reasonably be said to have been prophetic. But in the immediate short term of November 1996 the impression of a “holocaust” was considered an exaggeration and therefore unsustainable. BBC sub-editors excised the words, but not before the description “holocaust” had been broadcast worldwide several times.

In another example the newspaper *La Croix* said early-on that since the forced evacuation of the camps in Eastern Zaire there must be 12,000 dead refugees. “I agree talking of 12,000 dead is not factual, but we did not announce it as fact,” regretted one senior MSF official.

The credibility of MSF and all in the Humanitarian Community crashed the moment that vast numbers of refugees swarmed across the border from Eastern Zaire from 15 November onwards. It was clear to humanitarian workers on the ground and TV viewers around the world that almost all of the refugees were adequately fed and watered. As Alison Campbell of CARE (UK) wrote: “Cynical observers noted just one thing missing: the mass starvation and death that had been the subject of such clamour over the preceding weeks. It just wasn’t a ‘real’ disaster”.⁶⁹

The impact on the HC’s credibility was devastating.

It can be argued that in part this was no accident or product of straightforward HO misjudgement. Unknown to them, discrediting the humanitarian community had been a central, high-risk aim of the Rwandan government’s strategy in Eastern Zaire.⁷⁰ After all, Vice President Kagame’s disdain for the humanitarian community was almost absolute. Like President Museveni of Uganda he viewed the HAs and HOs as imperialist and colonialist influences who wanted to impose their own western standards with no recognition of new African interests. “I would not go against their activities. But they are harmful to situations because some of them are very political” Kagame told this author.⁷¹ In other words they operated counter to Rwandan interests. So Kigali says it conceived the unexpected appearance and return of 600,000 mainly Hutu refugees as a pivotal moment in its strategy.

The result for the HC was disastrous on four fronts.

1. Opportunism and Distortion.

It confirmed readily the media’s overall picture of HAs and HOs as opportunistic and distorting, even though the media had been party to misrepresentation through their exaggeration of what the HAs and HOs had claimed. “The media -- forgetful of its part in the hype -- turned on its erstwhile sources and joined the chorus of righteous indignation against greedy aid agencies. That done, the media circus packed up and went home for Christmas”, was how an internal CARE (UK) memo analysed events.⁷² The media reporting proved the point. “Many

journalists have relished the opportunity to debunk the apocalyptic warnings of the humanitarian agencies”, Michela Wrong wrote in the *Financial Times*.⁷³ Some journalists did not restrain their anger with the HC. Sam Kiley of the London *Times* was reported as accusing the HC of a “big, fucking humanitarian lie”.⁷⁴ Some humanitarian workers admitted major errors of judgement. “Those refugees looked great and we looked like idiots”, said Samantha Bolton, responsible for MSF media operations on the Rwanda/Zaire border.⁷⁵

Do MSF have regrets? No. There were no regrets about making projections. “We should not be frightened about it. Most of the time we are proved right. This time we got it wrong”.

But others in the HC hit back. “While the media point the finger at aid agencies for ‘crying wolf’, they are equally responsible for generating reports with wildly varying estimates,” wrote Heather Rourke of CARE Canada. “It is international inaction and indifference to the plight of the people in the Great Lakes that should be attacked, not the credibility of the agencies that are on the ground saving lives every day”.⁷⁶

2. **Taking Sides**

For the Rwandan government it conveniently reinforced a suspicion that MSF – commonly perceived as a French-led multi-national organisation – was somehow allowing itself to be used by the French government to lobby on behalf of their allies, the Hutus. This was a convenient but factually incorrect perception for Rwandan officials to perpetuate.⁷⁷

3. **Humanitarian Community’s Image**

At a crucial time into consideration of a multi-national intervention force it conveniently undermined HC standing with the MNF military reconnaissance operation and international governments who had no fundamental national interest in intervening. “Back home, commentators and critics of humanitarian aid played this for all it was worth, accusing aid agencies of having exaggerated the scale of the problem simply to make money”.⁷⁸ In addition, western governments moving towards at least the principle of a multi national force learned a lesson belatedly. “We realised we did not apply the hard filter to initial media reports”. They had allowed themselves to be seduced by the death-rate enshrined in the MSF warnings, instead of making their own checks. In this way HC credibility slumped further.

4. **Attitude of Rwanda to the Humanitarian Community**

Finally, and most worrying, it reinforced the deep suspicions and disdain of the Rwandan leadership for the HC. In retrospect leading humanitarian officials realised this. In the words of one senior MSF figure, encouraging the refugees to emerge from Eastern Zaire “was a fantastic tactical manoeuvre by [Vice President] Kagame”.

As MSF and all HC head offices now concede, many of their original assumptions were found to be wrong, although they had no way of knowing it until the refugees emerged. When the refugees appeared the NGOs discovered that many support systems in the camps had continued to function. There had been access to food and the Oxfam water systems kept going in the massive Mugunga camp. "We were surprised that people in Mugunga had not suffered".

However, well away from the cameras and journalists reporting the extraordinary tide of humanity flowing back across the border into Rwanda, conditions were later found to be almost as bad as the original predictions. Refugees from some camps were suffering in the way that MSF had predicted in their controversial announcements of 9 November. "The projection [of death rates] was not valid for Mugunga, but it was for Uvira, Bukavu and Goma".

Ultimately, however, the problem for MSF and the NGOs was that such differential detail and logical explanations did nothing to restore their overall credibility. In the view of Alberrizzi and other journalists interviewed for this study, MSF had "lied knowingly", and that remains the media's enduring memory. It will scar the HC for some considerable time to come.

MSF, and to a lesser extent Oxfam and other agencies, now accept that getting things wrong gave the impression of poor information handling. MSF believe they have a reasonable and honourable explanation. "MSF was in an information vortex. We were pushed to make comments, but without the facts we talked. A journalist says he will return at six o'clock. He asks: what have you heard? Rumour then becomes fact, often sourced anonymously. Once we start feeding the information machine you have to keep feeding it, even if there is no information".⁷⁹

This is a critical and important self-analysis of failure that signals the heart of the new information challenge. It highlights the central challenge for responsible and robust handling of information: not to get drawn into saying things that are not correct, or exaggerating for political and commercial purposes. As Alison Campbell noted for CARE (UK): "for those spokespeople attempting to put a more realistic line, there is something strange about being a 'humanitarian' who seems to want to downplay a refugee crisis".⁸⁰ And as one MSF doctor concluded: "I do not mind who is right and wrong. It must not happen again".

3.4 Some preliminary lessons for NGOs and Humanitarian Agencies

This report recommends that as a result of this debacle in the Great Lakes, the traditional HC PR mission will have to change. The role of 'Press Officers' or "Media Affairs Officers" must embrace a sweeping intuitive grasp of the new realities of what this author has christened 'the tyranny of real-time' communications.⁸¹

This should be recognised as an institutional imperative by the highest levels of the HAs and HOs and implemented under their instruction. It is no longer acceptable for the HA to believe that "our job is to feed 10,000 people, not to think of relations to the military or media".⁸² The price of such narrow mindedness is high indeed.

In addition, awareness of the new dynamics of real time information should be inculcated into most field officers and delegates, whether or not they have any media responsibility or are little likely to have media contact.

As the military realised belatedly at the start of IFOR's peace support deployment in Bosnia from December 1995,⁸³ those charged with handling the media need to be high-profile, high quality and with a fundamental understanding of the pitfalls and hidden trip-wires in the new real-time, communications environment. As the US military have recognised and the UK military are beginning to recognise, public affairs now constitutes an intellectual discipline that requires a *cadre* of trained and savvy information handlers who have the skills, will and competence to embrace a fast-moving challenge.

Handling both information and the new real-time media must not be viewed as a marginal add-on role for a low-paid member of staff who happens to be emotionally committed to the morality of humanitarianism. Information in the new real-time communications environment is a hard, tough, nasty business. As one senior Canadian official put it: "The NGOs need to understand that if you are in something like this for a noble and high moral value purpose then it is no longer the case. You have to understand this. It is a big lesson". That is why the handling of information must be regarded as central to any NGO mission, with a well-qualified and visionary 'information handler' who can foresee the way information will swiftly rattle around global media outlets in minutes, then rebound against the original source via the 24-hour news and information cycle with frightening speed.

In addition, all humanitarian workers – not just those anointed as specialists – should be given a working understanding of the dynamics of information outlined in this paper.

The aim must be to reverse the impression of "alot of very unprofessional people" that was left in the Great Lakes. They "think it is all very exciting as spokespersons – getting yourself on TV and so on. You go to the Great Lakes, get pissed and have fun with the [media] hacks. It must be more serious than that".

In the words of the media and conflict consultant Nick Cater: "There is a churn of younger people in the NGOs at lower levels. We need fewer and better people, and lower churn. Too many aid workers arrive and do not know what they are getting into. They are a danger".⁸⁴

The principle must be the same for anyone : whether doctor, epidemiologist, logistician or media affairs officer. They must 'Get Real' on information and its new central role in managing the dynamics and effects of conflict, whether humanitarian, military or political. Those who recruit and direct the staff of humanitarian organisations must not be allowed to turn a blind eye.

4. THE MEDIA AND INFORMATION HANDLING

4.1 The Myths of the Media

“If the media made claims, we would check, and often the reality was different. The claims were markedly wrong. [We worked on the assumption that] the media were representing the NGOs”.

Military Planner in the MNF

“The media were very ignorant: even to the point of not knowing where the Rwandan border lies”

Senior Rwandan official

“The reality of what is going on is more complicated, more devious and, in terms of human wickedness, a great deal worse than we were able to convey”

Lindesy Hilsum,
Channel 4 News. London⁸⁵

The media want to have a well-informed impact on government ministers, politicians and the public, wherever they might be. Some believe that the aim of good journalism in a theatre of conflict should be advocacy for one of the parties. They want good to triumph over evil; they despise the “nothing can be done club” of journalists; they believe in a “journalism of attachment”, and they want to force outside powers to “do something” to end a conflict.⁸⁶

However, quotations like that from the Multi-National Force planner at the start of this section are a serious indictment of the media’s credibility when it is seen to be partial and taking a view. Many journalists will dismiss the military officer’s observation as inevitable whinging. But this study submits that it would be foolhardy to dismiss them as irrelevant. They are at the heart of the issue of media integrity in conflict.

This is underscored by both Rwandan Vice President Paul Kagame and other Rwanda defence sources. In their different ways they made clear to this study that as part of their strategy they identified a fundamental weakness of journalism in a conflict. They exploited that weakness for their own tactical ends. “Why was the media unable to detect what we would attempt? They did not perceive correctly. They thought we were weak and not disciplined. The media had a wrong perception of us”, said one. The Rwandan government viewed journalists as a resource in the conflict to be manipulated through the denial of information. “We knew how the media works. We never told lies [but] we omitted things”.

Together, the views of the MNF planner and the Rwanda government underline how the great advances in real-time technology have not been matched by improvements in the accuracy of journalism. Indeed, *prima facie* there are grounds to believe that the more immediate the real-time journalism, the greater the inaccuracy, and therefore the lower the credibility.

Some in the humanitarian community make even more far-reaching complaints. “The media now see themselves as humanitarian actors. That is worrying,” said Mark Bowden, Regional Director for East/Central Africa at Save the Children UK. He thinks the media have gone beyond their normal role in these conflict zones, and they expect too much from the humanitarian agencies. “They see themselves as an actor that has a right to information from NGOs. They think we must share information with them as a right. Then they think they must take a view on policy, based on that information. This is wrong.”⁸⁷

Many HA’s and HOs resent being put under this pressure. Often fragmentary information is being turned around quickly by journalists. It is then printed or broadcast and sourced as reliable information. This worries HAs and HOs. So much so that often they are now withholding sensitive information or their own internal political analyses. “There is an assumption that the media should be first, but that is not [now] our priority. Some journalists are telling us that they must have the information because if they use it they’ll get a response, and that’s not necessarily the case at all.” In addition to the autumn of 1996 “during the months of early 1997 journalists did not do enough fact checking,” said Bowden. “They were not wanting to check out what we were saying. They just quoted us”.

The credibility of the media in real-time conflict reporting was already being questioned well before the 1996/7 Great Lakes crisis. After the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, the multi-national, ‘lessons-learned’ analysis had raised core issues relating to all media coverage of conflict. Distortion, partiality and inadequate attention to factual detail were the central complaints. On coverage of the Rwanda genocide between April and July 1994 it concluded:

*“The international media played a mixed role in the Rwanda crisis. While the media were a major factor in generating worldwide humanitarian relief support for the refugees, distorted reporting on events leading to the genocide itself was a contributing factor to the failure of the international community to take more effective action to stem the genocide”.*⁸⁸

The Steering Committee’s report urged the media to learn from their shortcomings. It recommended *“that the media conducts its own self-critical evaluation of the adequacy and impartiality of its reporting of complex emergencies . . . and that they draw lessons for more responsible reporting.”*⁸⁹

But did they? The new evidence emerging from 1996/7 indicates they did not.

As Alison Campbell of CARE (UK) put it: “between them, the journalists and aid workers got the story rather wrong - wrong again”.⁹⁰ This is confirmed in private conversations with journalists who later became horrified as stories of atrocities began to filter out from Eastern Zaire from January 1997 onwards. “There was a dreadful feeling of remorse among journalists from February to May [1997], seeing the slaughter by Tutsis.

We thought: “They are no better. We got it wrong again”” said one leading East Africa correspondent.

As the evidence, then the first-hand experience of atrocities, started to emerge from the forest (see section 6) the emotions of some journalists turned privately against the Rwandan government. A terrifying stench of intimidation and retribution in Eastern Zaire was already in the air – literally. But many journalists have confirmed that they felt restrained from airing the suspicions too openly. They were already finding themselves subject to often unpleasant pressures, both psychological and physical. They feared angering the government in Kigali with whom they had developed “sympathetic relations” of different degrees. They worried that Rwandan troops and officials would be ordered to exact revenge of a possibly extreme kind on the journalists who did not toe Kigali’s line on information management. They knew the Rwandan government could make life unpleasant for reporters, cameramen and photographers who challenged the Alliance and Rwandan government versions of events. Indeed, that is what happened.

Before the crisis exploded in September 1996, specialist Africa analysts had praised many journalists for doing everything in their editorial power to keep on the news agenda and in the public eye the dreadful humanitarian and political problems of the Goma camps that had developed since July 1994. But then, they asked, how could the reporting of what happened next have gone so awry? “The media did a wonderful job in saying there is a major problem,” observed one senior Canadian diplomat. “But they were not good about analysis of it”.

In the humanitarian community, meanwhile, there remains resentment that most in the media were happy to rush to questioning the credibility of others without analysing their own failings. “Journalists will not debate their view,” is a common and justified complaint. “They do not want even to concede they might have been wrong, or their reporting was in error. It is not a matter of conscience. For example they think that Hutus can only be extremists”. Another asked what right the media have to take a position on who among the Hutus and Tutsis was guilty and who was innocent – in other words the right to exercise what the former BBC war correspondent Martin Bell has christened a “journalism of attachment”.⁹¹

What is particularly interesting is that some experienced and sensitive journalists with extensive African experience arrived in the Great Lakes at the start of the camps crisis in September/October 1996 determined to reverse what they accepted had been their failures of 1994.⁹² They arrived with personal emotional baggage and a “conscience of failure”. Nick Stockton, Emergencies Director of Oxfam, described how “some of the best British correspondents who knew the region and its politics rapidly promoted a consensus that here, at last, was the chance to deal with an entirely murderous group [the Hutus] who had been foolishly succoured by aid”.⁹³ As one MSF doctor put it: “the template through which the media looked at this crisis was biased. It was informed by a prior sense of injustice of what happened in Rwanda in 1994. They did not look at the facts”. This in turn skewed perceptions.

The sub-text is that often the journalists’ emotions took over to the exclusion of whatever facts were available. The complaint comes from many sides, including the

Rwandan government who in the eyes of many benefited most from such journalistic attachment. One senior Rwandan official complained of journalists who reported more what they felt than what they knew; of journalists who relied on gut instincts more than facts; of journalists “who imagined things and were not correct”. Journalists argue robustly that such complaints are laughable. They say Rwandan irritation merely reflects that fact that many things that were reported simply did not fit the Rwandan line.

Yet failings there were.

Most journalists knew them because they had continued to work and report in the region during the intervening two years between the Goma crisis of July 1994 and the start of the Rwanda/Alliance operation in October 1996.

Interviews for this report make clear that even those journalists determined to reverse past wrongs found themselves swept along by a herd-like misreading of -- or emotional bias towards -- unfolding events. As Alison Campbell described it for the record (reflecting a larger number of off-the-record interviews), the media on the ground failed again because of “an absence of any real information” which resulted in a “frenzy of speculation”.⁹⁴

Editorial managers and journalists at head offices are equally culpable. One source even described the attitude of many of the most senior white editors as “inherently racist”. During the destruction of the Eastern Zaire refugee camps reporters on the ground had to fight what one complained was a “determination of editors not to portray the [Hutu] refugees [who were not *genocidaire* killers] as innocent”. So far removed from reality, most editors in head offices gave the impression that they believed that events were unfolding according to the well established template of previous crises as they remember them. Comprehension was superficial, as much because of the incomplete nature of information emerging. Anything different was far more difficult to embrace, especially if the overall consensus seemed to move events in a predictable, and therefore broadly comfortable direction. There was little will to perceive a new dynamic -- let alone adapt to it.

Worse still, there was an institutional failure in many media organisations to take on board that the politics of Africa had undergone significant change recently – a dynamic process that continues to this day.⁹⁵ There should have been efforts to catch up with the new realities. Some analysts now refer to a ‘Great Undeclared War’ in Central and Eastern Africa. New fighting fronts have opened up virtually unseen. New alliances have been established by political leaders and ethnic factions.

Information control is said to be central to this political strategy⁹⁶. But none of these new political arguments is easy to explain in a simple journalistic form. The “reflexive falling back” by journalism “upon the simplest explanation”⁹⁷ tends to demand a “black hat” and “white hat” and no further confusion of third, fourth or fifth forces. This is the new reality, but like the humanitarian community, has journalism taken this on board?

Overall, the evidence is not encouraging. Surely the aim of all journalism should be to inform in the most accurate, impartial and authoritative way, with the expectation of inputting into any public debate or political decision-making. Clearly there were serious shortcomings in the Great Lakes when a key member of the MNF military planning staff

said: “After about the first week working in the Great Lakes Crisis, I ignored the media reporting, It was too inaccurate and too irrelevant to the political and military decisions that I was involved in”.

So what were the central shortcomings? They can be identified as follows:

- **The International Media: a Tool for Rwandan Manipulation**

One Rwandan official detailed their media policy as follows: “We did inform the media. But we chose what to tell them. We never told lies. We never admitted. We omitted saying we were in Zaire. We just said: ‘This is not the point’”. However, despite the cold calculation Rwanda made for its policy of manipulating media coverage, one senior official made clear that it had been “touch and go” on occasions and “we had to improvise at times”. “we never controlled the media”.

Once the operation into Eastern Zaire was underway, the Rwandan government says it had had at least three strategic aims for information handling.

Firstly, they had to block information from inside the conflict zone for fear that it would provide France with justification to intervene on the side of the Hutus. This might have lead to a more intense conflict. It would also have threatened worse instability on Rwanda’s western border : the kind of instability the clearing of the Goma camps was designed to stop. The Rwandans set out to deny information. “We did not want to say anything. We did not say the RPA [Rwanda’s national army] was supporting the Alliance”. The impression had to be that “Rwanda did not attack Zaire as such. We had to make sure that no one knew. We did not want to let France know, and then prepare [for military intervention to back the Hutus]”.

Secondly, they were determined to prevent the deployment of a multi-national force. An MNF would have probably frozen on the ground the Hutu threat inside Eastern Zaire and not removed the problem. “We knew that if the situation dragged on, then there were much greater chances of intervention. We told [Lt-General] Baril there was no need for intervention. He did not see that. But after they [the Hutu refugees] all came back he was aware there was no need for intervention”.

Thirdly, in a dramatic way they wanted to wrong-foot the international perceptions of what was taking place. They set out to do this once the HAs and HOs were speculating on large numbers of Hutu refugees dying in Zaire. “We wanted to embarrass the world; far from what they were saying, we wanted the Hutus to go home. We had a perception problem. We wanted to de-mystify the perception that Hutus would not go home because of a [claimed] Tutsi threat.”

Overall, Rwandan officials believe their strategy succeeded. “We got the desired results. We got the return of the refugees and we proved our point. The media witnessed it”.

However, one element of all this – the likely and assumed deaths of large number of refugees in Eastern Zaire from mid-November 1996 onwards -- carried potentially a very high price for Rwanda in image terms. To this day the argument continues over the definition of a “large” number of refugees unaccounted for.⁹⁸ But the central issue is the

tactical risk Rwanda took in denying access to humanitarian workers and journalists that might disprove the suspicions and eventual accusations of mass killings⁹⁹. “People misconstrued obstruction [of access] as being for a specific reason”, conceded the senior Rwandan official. It fuelled the international suspicion that denial of access was a strategic cover for mass slaughter of Hutus, and that this had been a central part of Kigali’s ultimate intentions all along. “It was wrong. No one was going to Zaire to kill Hutus. Never! Never!” insisted the Rwandan official.

In time, it seems likely that history will probably make a different judgement.

• **The Media : Distortion and Misrepresentation ?**

“The media turned up and did not know what is happening”

Senior Rwandan official

“I make no accusation of an effort to mislead. But it is important to understand a human phenomenon: the fallibility of information gathering”.

Senior NGO doctor & Head of Mission

Many in the humanitarian community say -- and many among the journalists concede -- that distortion and misrepresentation of facts took place, especially in the early weeks of information shut-down across the conflict zone between September and December 1996.

In-theatre consumers of media output who were already doubtful became increasingly sceptical as daily coverage unfolded. Analysts created their own weighting system for which agency and/or journalist was likely to be close to the truth, and which was likely to be exaggerating for the purpose of headlines and ephemeral journalistic impact. “We have to look at the original source, and we weight or grade it according to possible bias”, said one MNF insider. In other words: no fact was a fact, it was merely a view – except that some views were closer to facts than others.

According to officials leading the MNF operation in Canada especially, this often created pressure for action but based on erroneous information. “We went wobbly, driven by CBC Newsworld [Canada’s 24 hour all-news channel]. If someone [a field correspondent] is on a satellite dish, even if he or she was wrong, we did not have anything to counter it. We had to do ‘x’ because that is what the media were saying, even though we advised that it was not happening. It is not [a question of] what is happening, but what is perceived to be happening”. Officials realised the danger of such divided perceptions. “We wanted to turn a blind eye to the media, but our ministers were too sensitive to it”.

Broadcast journalists who realise the shortcomings believe they know where many (but not all) of the failings come from. The new real-time technology allows virtually immediate access to correspondents in the field for broadcast on a proliferation of

channels at any time of the day or night. This leaves less and less time -- and often no time -- for the basic ingredient of good journalism: getting out to report and check facts.

During the normal 24-hour news cycle one BBC correspondent has talked of filing live up to thirty times a day in the Great Lakes. The pressure allowed this correspondent virtually no time for 'reporting'. In addition, the average 50- to 90-second news bulletin dispatch gave no scope to provide the kind of context that promotes better understanding.

Many broadcast reporters privately claim no great enthusiasm for the new reality, which is driven less by media managers and more by the new instant, real-time technology that has made possible the new, instant demands of continuous news channels. The senior BBC News correspondent Fergal Keane has talked publicly of the fear among many of his colleagues in every broadcast news organisation that the typical radio or TV reporter is now becoming a "pack donkey, capable of bearing huge loads but braying a forlorn gibberish every time he opens his mouth".¹⁰⁰ Not surprisingly, Keane's BBC managers are less pessimistic, although privately some do concede the dangers that he identified.

This massive workload and the volume of reporting commitments further aggravated the issue of quality of the information reported from the Great Lakes Crisis of 1996/7. In the media's defence, there is no dispute that information control and access denial in the border areas made it difficult -- if not virtually impossible -- for journalists to check out independently the claims and counter claims by both the different Alliance leaders and the various humanitarian organisations. Many HC workers accept the explanation, but they do not think it is an adequate excuse.

However there is a widely held complaint that many journalists took a specific, partial view both of what *was* happening and what *should* have happened. Lindsey Hilsum wrote of issues being fudged, with "moral simplifications" being built into the media coverage and a ready inclination to describe "good guys and bad guys".¹⁰¹ In turn, Nick Stockton, Emergencies Director of Oxfam, has warned that such cheap labelling of "good and bad Africans" or "Tutsi good, Hutu bad" has an alarming resonance that carries a more ominous tag. It is racist.¹⁰²

Others complained that many journalists too readily undermined the humanitarian organisations by saying they were working to support Hutu *genocidaires* who had been in the refugee camps. Many reporters refused to believe that NGOs were saving the lives of innocent people who were not killers and never had been.

As noted already, because of what they saw as their conspicuous failure to stop the Hutu killings of Tutsis in 1994, the personal instincts of most journalists were seen as readily pro-Tutsi to the exclusion of what one journalist accepted was "any other more balanced possibility". The media were not alone. One NGO doctor observed: "there was an inherent sympathy by the media, NGO's and outside governments for Kagame because his people had been the victim of genocide. It was a moral sympathy. The international community wanted a 'moral legitimacy' for Kagame".

But in terms of balance, impartiality and factual accuracy, that 'moral legitimacy' carried a high price. The ready "fixation" of many reporters that all Hutus in Eastern Zaire were "extremists" or "genocidal maniacs" remains a central concern. One senior NGO worker went so far as to describe many experienced Africa-based journalists as "brain

damaged” by what they saw as their moral failure during their 1994 Rwandan experiences. This repeats the complaint of “distorted reporting” in the official, multi-national analysis of the 1994 Rwanda genocide.¹⁰³

Critics in the humanitarian community complain that when it came to the Hutu refugees in Eastern Zaire, many reporters were too simplistic and used too much shorthand description. Figures suggest that about ten per cent of the Hutu refugees could be classed as *genocidaires*.¹⁰⁴ Most were not killers, especially the women and children. Yet the immediate need of the media to use shorthand generic descriptions meant that all Hutus were often implicitly written off as “killers” or “extremists”. The NGOs complain that this reinforced stereotypes, mis-informed international governments and public opinion, and therefore created bigger obstacles to what should have been straightforward humanitarian operations.

The complaints go further. Some named reporters are accused of ruling out any outcome that did not involve a massed repatriation to Rwanda from Eastern Zaire. These correspondents are viewed as what one source called “RPF groupies” -- that is pro-Tutsi dating from Kagame’s 1990 military operation into Rwanda from Uganda. They are accused of being “blindly pro-Tutsi and pro- the rights of the diaspora to return home” to the exclusion of any other viewpoint in balanced reporting. This, say critics, led to location reporting that blurred reality and excluded other realistic options.

Thus in many ways the personnel in HOs, HAs and the media all face the same problems: how to overcome personal partiality and subjectivity.

• **The Media : Partiality and Sympathy ?**

Not only did many journalists with long experience in Africa and appalling memories of the Hutu genocide against the Tutsis in 1994 arrive in the Great Lakes crisis 1996 with a “lens of sympathy”. In a blinkered way they also conditioned themselves to expect a “humanitarian catastrophe on the legendary scale of Goma, 1994”.¹⁰⁵ Yet they found it near impossible to change their preconception as events unfolded in a different way.

“The press looked at the Alliance with greater sympathy. Everybody of us (sic) was sympathetic to the Alliance because we were terrorised by the Hutus and Mobutuistes,” said Massimo Alberizzi¹⁰⁶ reflecting the private views of many other reporters. “Journalists and NGOs were in bed with the RPF” conceded another.

Between 1994 and 1996 many journalists had reported intermittently the deepening difficulties of the Goma refugee camps. They had reported the political indifference in the UN Security Council to listening to UNHCR warnings that a long term solution had to be found for the vast numbers of Hutu refugees living on Rwanda’s border – including the murderous *genocidaires*. Like the HC all reporters knew this was a situation that had to be resolved.

But many resented personally the UNHCR and others for not rooting out the Hutu killers. As a result they developed additional antipathy towards the UN in particular. They accused the UNHCR of covering up that they were feeding killers. This was a claim that

the UN made clear was “bullshit”. The UNHCR found it difficult to counter the overall reporter resentment because as the UNHCR official line still makes clear, the agency did not have a mandate to separate the *genocidaires* from the normal Hutus.

Yet, it was this reporter resentment towards the UN after two years of the Goma camps that went a long way to fuelling the personal media sympathies for the Rwanda Tutsi government and their determination that the Hutu threat from murderers on the loose must be removed from their borders. “Any initiative by Kagame, Kabila or Museveni to end the Eastern Zaire problem and end Mobutu [at the same time] was bound to appeal to the western media. They [the Alliance and their backers] exploited it very successfully. They had a good, sexy cause to sell. They were right,” said one senior humanitarian worker.

In the words of one Africa correspondent: “Eastern Zaire had been such a dreadful place for journalists that there was a sense of relief at working with Kagame’s Rwanda. There was more order and decency, and it rubbed off on journalists. There was empathy for Rwandan Tutsis. We got into the minds of the people. It did skew perceptions and create [some sort of] allegiance to the Tutsis”. In other words, by its manipulation the Rwanda government captured the critical majority of media minds.

Interestingly, however, one senior Rwandan official questioned the idea that his government saw journalists as broadly sympathetic to their overall aim of removing by any means the threat from Hutu *genocidaires*. Instead, they feared the media as a political tool of the NGOs. “We did not see the media as sympathetic to us. [From our point of view] there was no room for softness with the media. The media were manipulated by the NGOs”.

Critics of apparent overall partiality by the international media point in particular to the unwillingness of reporters to challenge the US reporting on 22 and 23 November of its overflight reconnaissance missions [for more detail see later in section 6.2]. The US figures of total refugee numbers in Eastern Zaire announced by US Major-General Smith was more than 400,000 less than the consensus of figures broadly agreed by most in the humanitarian community at the time. Yet humanitarian workers were astonished that no reporters wanted to challenge the US version, especially at the briefings in the US embassy.

As one senior humanitarian figure put it: “NGO workers were far better and far more accurate than journalists because they were far more cynical and disbelieving [of the US overflight intelligence]. Journalists were much more frightened than NGO’s. They feared expulsion [from Rwanda]”. Nick Stockton, Emergencies Director for Oxfam, said that after the US produced its evidence at the embassy briefing “the real issue was that no journalist was really looking for evidence of continuing misery”, and this amounted to a “dereliction of duty”.¹⁰⁷ He had earlier written that failure to challenge the US briefers in November had given the low claims of refugee numbers a “legitimacy that US official information managers could barely have dreamed of”.¹⁰⁸

An MSF head-of-mission believes the media failed to question the US briefings because “they rejected information that did not fit absolutely the template. They assumed

US information only fitted the paradigm. They did not question it. It fitted the media perception that Hutus were the problem and needed to be coped with”.

Which is why the central accusation of partiality and sympathy by journalists remains. What is the media response to the dilemma of the US embassy briefings on refugee numbers in Eastern Zaire?

“We heard the US briefings and the journalists were split. What do we do?” said Massimo Alberizzi.¹⁰⁹ The US briefer described “a line of 4,000 people on a road that must be Interahamwe [Hutu fighters]”. The journalistic instinct is always to confirm. “I must check, but I had no way of checking. I could not get to the area to see for myself”.

One extreme example of the journalistic willingness to accept without much question the US embassy line from Kigali came from one NGO spokesperson. He related the anger of a “pro-US, pro-Tutsi video journalist” who came to him after the US briefing and said “I have been listening to you for several days and you are full of shit, because I have been to the US embassy. The United Nations is propagandist”. In the words of the spokesperson: “he was not willing to listen” to another counter view. “We had a fight. I stood my ground, and the journalist did not like it. The journalists seemed surprised that I told them they were wrong”.

To NGOs and the humanitarian agencies all this is seen as further evidence of an overall passive media sympathy for the Rwandan Tutsi government and Alliance. Much of this was seen to be due to reasons of “history, racism, ideology” and the Fashoda syndrome¹¹⁰ dating from the end of the 19th century which has long symbolised the British and French competition for dominance in Africa.¹¹¹ Many journalists felt they had to be on one side or another, and they chose to sympathise with the Tutsis.¹¹² One other more practical reason was also a lingering fear of being removed from the country if they openly challenged the US, and thereby the Rwandan government position. The fear was not unfounded. As one example to others in the media, the Rwandan government summarily expelled the staff correspondent of the Reuters newsagency having disliked some of the stories he filed.

Senior NGO officials also complain about the apparent reluctance of almost all reporters to reveal how in the fall of 1996 the Alliance operation had been reinforced by Rwandan troops inside Eastern Zaire for the 13 October attack on Uvira. “They saw the Rwandan Zodiacs [inflatable boats] going across the lake; they heard the artillery, but they seemed reluctant to reveal Rwandan military action” complained one. The same was later true in November when humanitarian workers had to negotiate their release from Rwandan troops in Goma who had occupied the area. Many NGO workers were privately amazed. Rwandan howitzers and gunboats were filmed from the Meridien hotel along with “Rwandan troops in their hundreds” returning from Eastern Zaire. “But nothing seemed to be reported by the international journalists,” said one.

Why? This is the analysis of one senior and highly respected NGO figure. “Many of them [journalists] were fed up with the *status quo* that had happened since 1994. A lot of bang-bang journalists saw in the rebellion [in Eastern Zaire] an African army that was succeeding. Rwandan officers were seen directing them. The journalists held the Rwandan army in esteem so it was not portrayed as an invasion”.

Was this partiality and sympathy for the Tutsi cause? And if so, did it lead to a skewing and distortion of reporting?

Prima facie the answer is yes.

• **The Media : Ignorance of Basic Issues ?**

The long forecast, but sudden emptying of the massive Goma refugee also led to a sudden influx of non regionally-based press with a negligible working knowledge of the Great Lakes and – worse still – little understanding of the issues – especially the complex fundamentals of the Tutsi / Hutu and tribal sub-divisions that were central to the whole crisis. As he left after several weeks covering the Rwanda / Zaire border conflict, one TV correspondent was even heard to confess that he still was not sure if he understood the difference between Hutus and Tutsis.

The quote is perhaps apocryphal, but the gist of the alleged remark is well founded. Many journalists who were assigned at short notice to work in the Great Lakes region were factually illiterate. Mark Richardson, media coordinator for CARE wrote that “while many of the journalists were professionals, many others (especially photographers) were freelancers with tenuous affiliations, who had scammed free flights into Africa and were out to make a name for themselves”.¹¹³

One NGO official pointed to what he considered to be one particular human characteristic that undermines accuracy. It relates especially to TV and radio reporters. “If you have journalists who do not know or understand what is going on, but sound authoritative [with a deep voice], then you have a root problem of credibility”.

Some journalists are enlightened enough to accept the criticism. There is a “great need to have people who have covered conflicts before,” said one leading television journalist who worked in the Great Lakes crisis of 1996/7. “There is a need to understand that you do not know as much as you should. The journalist’s job is to be well informed”.

• **The Media: A Conflict Too Complex for Accurate Reporting?**

“It was Africa that won, not the technology.”

*Ray Wilkinson,
Spokesman for UNHCR¹¹⁴*

In many cases there was a fundamental failure of comprehension that was probably fuelled by an unwillingness to take reporting and understanding beyond a certain, simple level of complexity.¹¹⁵ As one well-informed regional representative of a leading humanitarian organisation put it: “It was not always so much that the Rwandans managed information, but that the media went for the easier stories”. Another senior NGO figure said: “I tried patiently to explain the reality of who was doing what to whom. But the reporter just closed her notebook and said it was all too difficult for a few hundred words in a US newspaper”.

Government officials in several capitals believe the media in general were slow to grasp some of the fundamentals. “I do not think the media made the Kabila-Kagame connection,” suggested one Canadian diplomat. “Only the humanitarian crisis was playing [in the press].” This conformed to a widely held belief in the humanitarian world that unless a crisis is seen to be humanitarian with a prolific supply of photogenic human misery and distress, then the media – especially TV -- finds it too complex to articulate the political processes at work. An unfilmable alliance between two of the region’s leading figures fits into that category.

5. HIDDEN HANDS AT WORK ?

5.1 Information Control and Intercepts : Were Hidden Hands at Work ?

“The ‘new belligerents’ are not necessarily illiterate gunmen with meagre, parochial views. In the most unlikely place, the most unlikely people watch CNN, listen to the BBC, and even ICRC press-releases [by fax or by satellite phone on the web-site]. The ‘new belligerents are very often ‘press conscious’, more so than many in the press realise”

*Urs Boegli,
Head of Communications, ICRC¹¹⁶*

There is one more central question relating to the information issue in the Great Lakes Crisis of 1996/7. It can loosely be headlined under intelligence gathering and signals intercepts. More broadly: who knew what and who – if anyone – might have listened to who?

On this issue the description “sinister” returns once again to centre stage.

“NGOs are naïve about tapping and surveillance,” one leading humanitarian official with years of experience said with a shrug of despair. There are good grounds to believe that the media may be equally naïve in the new technological environment. “The moment we broadcast in real-time in the Great Lakes, there was someone who harassed you,” said Massimo Alberizzi. “You have to calibrate your words and cut [out] some things that you might think are bad”.¹¹⁷ Information and knowledge became the justification for threats and intimidation. “I was scared that we would have a full stop, then a dead delegate at the end of sentences in reports,” said one ICRC delegate.

The issues of information control and the intercepting of satellite communications are potentially the most explosive for the future management of conflicts. This study has already detailed some claims of evidence of sophistication in communications technology inside Eastern Zaire. It has also reported the Rwandan denials.

However many suspicions continue to exist, based on circumstantial evidence. For example, one senior HO official who operated in the Great Lakes region talked of a visit to the foreign ministry of one non-regional government.¹¹⁸ “I was patted condescendingly on the back when I enquired from one individual about he knew so much about little [NGO named] and my itinerary” over a specific two week period. An official was said to have replied: “We have extensive intelligence on the area. Our control of information is the key to winning the war for Kabila, and this indirectly will save a lot more lives than the humanitarian efforts like yours which only really paper over the cracks”.

If evidence of intercepts is proven beyond doubt, then there are major implications for the operational security of all HAs, HOs and media personnel working in a theatre of conflict. They will have to work on the assumption that any text, voice or video

communication made by satellite – whether for public transmission, or merely internal contacts within their organisation – is being listened to, and the factual contents noted. Handling information should therefore be part of the security audits being urged for the new “serious challenges” now faced by HA and HO operations in the field.¹¹⁹

This carries great dangers for the humanitarian community and the media because of the way legitimate ‘humanitarian’ information can quickly be adopted by a warring faction as ‘hot military intelligence’. It sharpens the vulnerability of NGOs and their staff, the media and also the potential war victims that the HAs and HOs are struggling to save or support in a theatre of conflict. Vice President Kagame of Rwanda has confirmed that he considered the humanitarian information exchanged by the humanitarian community to be a military threat. In his view “NGO information is not just humanitarian information, it is also military information”.¹²⁰

The determination of Alliance forces to intimidate or compromise humanitarian and human rights workers¹²¹, then to exploit the HC’s knowledge of refugee locations in Eastern¹²² Zaire for “bait and kill” operations¹²³ was a frightening reality. Some seasoned humanitarian workers said things were no different than fifteen to twenty years ago both in Africa and elsewhere. But others warned of a troubling new pattern of interception and deceit. Some Alliance fighters, for example, were found to be travelling in trucks with a false UNHCR logo. Such a use of deception techniques forced rapid new thinking among the few inside the HC who were sharp enough to realise what was taking place – even to the extent of actually ignoring refugees because then they might have a better chance of survival if their location was not revealed.¹²⁴

The new potential for a low-tech “rubber boot” force like the Alliance to access humanitarian and media communication systems – whether by themselves or using the technical expertise of a third outside power -- created a further ominous extension to this dilemma that should not be ignored, even though some in the humanitarian community believe such fears to be over conspiratorial.¹²⁵

The evidence on this issue has been the most difficult to tie down with absolute certainty. Yet despite firm Rwandan denials – including from Vice President Kagame himself¹²⁶ -- there is significant hearsay and sometimes circumstantial evidence, and the fundamental dangers to any HC or media operation are clear. One NGO worker related how “we had barely sent a sit-rep to headquarters before we were challenged by army commanders on the ground” about the contents of their messages. “We were strongly advised by UNSECOR [UN Security] that all calls by satellite phones will be recorded”. Another said he was convinced “that the rebels had a capability to listen to satellite phones, or someone was doing it for them”. One MSF doctor was told by a western ‘diplomat’ that the organisation’s radio traffic in Tingi Tingi, Kisangani, Goma and Bukavu was being monitored by Tutsi fighters inside Eastern Zaire. “They [the fighters] were worried that we were passing on information that may have military significance”. MSF read this as a warning that their legitimate humanitarian work was now being regarded by Kabila’s Alliance forces as intelligence gathering or spying.

One source cautioned that some HO and HA situation reports quickly ended up in the hands of the Rwandan and Alliance army commanders because of the partial position

taken by some humanitarian organisations. “I observed how one particular NGO partial to the Rwandan government would fax this [sit-reps] directly to Kagame’s office”.

However, the possibilities for leakage are far broader and more complex than this back-door conduit. It is the view of this study that given the latest advances in relatively lower-priced digital intercept technology, and its availability on the open market, all HAs, HOs and media in a theatre of conflict should now assume that the contents of their satellite communications will be monitored by other interested parties, whether they are the warring factions, supporting governments, or leading world powers through their monitoring agencies. This means the humanitarian community must consider adopting the same procedures as they use already for telephone land-line, walkie-talkie and handset VHF communications on the assumption that they are monitored. Similar provision should also be made for satellite communications, probably to include the eventual use of encryption, although that no longer guarantees fully secure radio traffic either.

The Rwandan government and the Alliance deny they had any capability, whether their own or from another country. One senior Rwandan official rejected suggestions that non-regional powers were supporting them. He said they “refused to sell [alot of military] equipment to us, so they did not tune in for us.” Yet during the same conversation, almost as a way to justify listening in, one Rwandan source did say that Kigali resented the NGOs monitoring the Rwandan radio traffic to check for Human Rights abuses.

HAs, HOs, some media and members of the MNF on the ground are not convinced. They say there remains strong circumstantial evidence that someone enjoyed a new level of communications monitoring and signal intercept capability. As for the type and quality of communications equipment, one senior military expert said that great sophistication is not needed anyway. Communications experts in the largely classified field of intercepts told this study that once there is a political commitment to go ahead then such an operation is relatively straightforward and productive, with out a massive demand on resources. For example, on another operation, Canadian forces operating elsewhere in the world were alarmed to be sent transcripts of their own satellite communications. They came from an amateur hacker in the United States!

One senior MNF officer describes how Kabila’s Alliance “put quality people in place at all stages” of their advance, including SIGINT capability. But others with long years of expertise in the area caution that the value of intercepts can be over-stated not least because of the resources needed to handle all the information produced.¹²⁷

The implications of this are sinister because any intercepted signals from the humanitarian organisations will have given Alliance forces valuable insight into who knew what, along with who among the NGOs and media might have known about their campaign of mass slaughter. Despite the Rwandan denials that intercepts took place, there remains evidence that the Alliance used information obtained from them as grounds for intimidating and threatening both the HC and the media. “The way players responded suggested they knew what we were doing, either through phone bugging or local staff”, said one MSF worker.

Not all agree. One leading humanitarian official in a large organisation claimed he detected no evidence. He believed that the theft of his lap-top computer at one stage was

confirmation that others were interested in what he knew because they had no way of pulling his data transmissions down from satellite phone paths.

If there was an intercept operation, who else might have supported it?

Non-regional involvement remains a possibility. Fingers also point to the growing breed of private security contractors who can be hired on a “plausibly deniable” basis using “black budgets”.¹²⁸ Recent operations around the world and interviews for this study confirm that they have the highly skilled manpower, expertise and know-how. Some speculate that the Rwandan government hired such private commercial expertise. However when this suggestion was put to him, one senior Rwandan government official thought such suggestions were not even worth discussing.

5.2 Information as Intelligence : the danger of naiveté

“We were very scared to be identified as a spy. During the war [in Eastern Zaire] we were not only witness to the story, but also actors in the story”

Massimo Alberizzi

Africa Specialist, Corriere Della Sera ¹²⁹

“This is the first time that there has been such a blatant interference in the humanitarian loop”

Senior UN official

“We had a dilemma. We could not reveal how much we knew, but we often knew it. If you go public to the media, governments and so on [with information] you deprived yourself of doing the job for the living [people] that you were there to do”.

UN worker in Kisangani

“The NGOs reached a stage where the information they used was not neutral or impartial: it was intelligence”

Senior Rwandan official

“We are in the same fish tank of the Great Lakes and you have to swim with them. We have victims, refugees and killers all together”

Senior NGO worker

The suspicions about signals intercepts highlight a further problem. No longer are the agencies in the Humanitarian Community seen as impartial and in the zone of conflict solely for humanitarian purposes. Increasingly in recent years, warring factions and other interested parties have assumed that HOs and HAs are partial adversaries and intelligence

gatherers. The traditional sprinkling of former military officers and government officials inside HOs and HAs heightens that suspicion, despite the obvious value of their organisational and logistics skills to humanitarian operations. The perception in the Great Lakes was no exception. “NGOs serve interests,” a senior Rwandan official told this study, “they are not doctors, but intelligence gatherers”. Therefore ultimately they see HC workers as a potential enemy and an obstruction to their military aims like killing on a large scale.

Many in the humanitarian community find offensive the accusation that they are effectively “humanitarian spies”. However they must live with this reality of how the warring factions now view them. “We have not the slightest confidence in the NGOs. They can’t be neutral [any more]. It is impossible. There has not been a single NGO that has been impartial”, said the Rwandan official. “They have to be seen to be criticising both sides to show they are neutral”. Therefore for Rwanda the aim has been to exploit for military purposes whatever humanitarian information they can get hold of, and by any means.¹³⁰

Such suspicions are exacerbated because the HAs and HOs are not viewed as operating as transparently as a warring faction like the Alliance want them to be. For the humanitarian community, however, total transparency leaves open the likelihood that sensitive information will be betrayed. In turn this puts lives at risk. The alternative is encryption, but that creates even greater suspicions of what HOs and HAs might be doing. The contradiction is stark and cannot be resolved easily.

It is thus a complex and dangerous interface. In some ways the inherent dilemma is now increasingly understood.¹³¹ However all signals are that the role of information in the equation, along with its new and virulent nature, has not been considered adequately.

The visible capability to transmit voice, video and text instantaneously from virtually anywhere by mobile satellite dish reinforces the perception of ‘spies’ in the mind of a military commander with an ultimate vested interest in victory. To him there is no such thing as ‘humanitarian information’. The fate of refugees is a matter of military tactics, not humanitarian survival. To a commander, instant transmission of ‘humanitarian’ information is transmission of militarily sensitive information that carries a high premium, and therefore a high risk.

The way HAs and HOs are perceived, is central to this problem. Whether right or wrong, perception is what dictates the view of warring factions. “Some of them do not understand what they are doing with information. Others know very well what they are doing. They serve themselves, not the parties in the conflict. They prolong the conflict”. In such ways, the cause of an HO like MSF is undermined fatally when a Rwandan official observes: “There are those [HAs and HOs] who are paid to serve other interests. MSF is a vehicle for the French government”.

In private, however, Rwandan officials do not make the same connection. They pay tribute to MSF’s engagement with the RPF in the early 90’s and MSF’s swift recognition of the genocide against Tutsis in 1994. They also acknowledge the very limited French backing for MSF.¹³² However such public propaganda against organisations like MSF is

designed to weaken the NGO's standing, and such accusations remain the convenient and enduring perception.

Traditionally the Humanitarian Community has had no problem with the routine by-product of humanitarian operations: laundering information that is not directly related to the mandate. "If you cannot use it, then you pass it on" within the humanitarian community, as one official put it.

But many say that for the first time, things were different in Eastern Zaire. "It was worse than that. NGOs were so well watched and monitored that they could not pass on information". Only after it was too late did the HC realise that the passing of information carried a price and potentially a high risk in human lives. It threatened them and the victims of war who they were trying to help. "If the Save the Children person in Bukavu radioed that he had refugees [usually a legitimate message that carried no risk], then those refugees would be under threat because networks were bugged."¹³³

For the most part HAs and HOs had assumed they could operate as usual and that their communications were safe. They were not. As one senior humanitarian official put it: "The NGOs and UN were naïve about the protection of information." For example, only when it was too late did they ask questions about who among their local staff was feeding faxes onto the machine, or filing faxes and messages within the NGO offices. Usually the local personnel hired by the HC had to be approved by the Rwandan government, who kept a tight rein on who was "suitable". In addition the Rwandan government monitored routine open-source information and situation reports. One source explained how "I was present in the Ministry of Defence as this information would come across the fax lines from NGOs in Britain. One NGO was particularly notorious on (sic) this".

Only a few senior NGO personnel seem to have realised how this suddenly made highly sensitive the routine information they gleaned from refugees in camps. It increased the vulnerability of those refugees because leaked information from NGO offices or communications could be traced back to sources. Eventually it led to reprisals by Alliance forces against both HC staff and the refugees they were there to assist and support.

"We were in a very tight loop," said one MSF doctor. As the Alliance forces advanced west into Zaire in the first weeks of 1997 "one officer from the rebel forces issued a clear warning : 'Chechnya: it is like Zaire. Anything can happen'". This was taken as an explicit warning that HC workers could be murdered just like the six ICRC delegates in Chechnya on 17 December 1996.

One head of mission fast realised that the naiveté of his ex-patriate staff was his responsibility. "The price of loose information could be high indeed". He realised he had to hide documents about refugee locations and the sites of alleged massacres which would normally remain safely locked in his office. Satellite telephones and Standard 'C' fax transmitters were being targeted by the Alliance for theft. Even basic medical data carried a risk. There were messages asking for medicines, but that data alone helped to locate refugees. It left them vulnerable to be massacred if the information reached the wrong hands. "For us it was medical data; for a warring faction it was military intelligence".

Continuing the presence of HAs and HOs in such an environment of hostility, deception and manipulation became a delicate balance of judgements. Politically around

the world, the Alliance needed humanitarian organisations to be seen to be located in the zone of conflict. But the HAs and HOs were not allowed to undertake the full humanitarian mission they expected, especially with full access to refugees. “We were there, but not there”, said one MSF doctor.

Matters became even more sensitive from late January until May 1997 when evidence emerged of a systematic Tutsi policy of killing Hutus either in camps or roaming through the vast expanses of forest in Eastern Zaire. Traditionally in such situations, the humanitarian community would go public with graphic descriptions of what was taking place, as well as appeals for international action. Usually the real-time media would play a central role in this. But for the first time that any HA or HO can remember the Alliance intimidation and threats made such a public profile highly risky and therefore near impossible. “I was scared to speak”, said one usually loquacious senior UN official. “In May 1997 a UNICEF delegate was raped and beaten up just after UNICEF condemned the Alliance”. Was there a causal connection? “You can believe it, but you can’t prove it”. Did the incident scare NGO workers in the way the perpetrators must have hoped? “I was never frightened of a mine under my car until the UNICEF delegate was gang-raped”, said one senior UN official. This underlined a capacity and will by the Alliance forces to intimidate.

The aim of any HA or HO will always be to remain located as close to victims as possible. Usually this relies on the approval of warring factions. But in Eastern Zaire the Alliance used its policy of information management to exact a high unspoken price from the HC for keeping even a modest toe hold in single locations like Kisangani. They imposed a devilish bargain. The HC could stay, with very limited access to Hutu refugee camps. But their travel was restricted and in public they were expecting to remain silent, or at least be vague in their public comments on whatever they might discover about the mass murders of Hutus being committed by Alliance forces.

As one put it: “We had a dilemma. We could not reveal how much we knew, but we often knew it. If you go public to the media, governments and so on [with information] you deprived yourself of doing the job for the living [people] that you were there to do”.

This ‘bargain’ underlined the new and extreme premium being forced on the NGOs who have always considered their staple fare of conflict to be basic information acquisition and transmission. Now there were new risks. “I have never seen anywhere in the world guys like these [I saw] in Eastern Zaire. They are serial killers. We are in the same fish tank of the Great Lakes and you have to swim with them. We have victims, refugees and killers all together” said one senior NGO official.

In such a ‘fish tank’, information and accuracy clearly had no place, when many HC workers privately viewed the Rwandan state as “the serial killer” and often the most pressing issue was simply their own personal survival.

Worse still, the Alliance made no distinction between humanitarian organisations. It assumed they worked together, shared information and therefore ultimately were equally culpable. It was moments like the description by EU Commissioner Emma Bonino of a “slaughterhouse” in Eastern Zaire that created heightened pressure and Alliance

resentment against all of them. Potentially this created a high risk for all the HAs, HOs and the media. As many sources made clear, this left them acutely vulnerable.

Unusually, therefore, those in the HC had to make a strategic decision between their interests in those still able to live, and those who had died or been killed, regardless of the appalling manner in which they had been slaughtered, and by whom. For some humanitarian workers it was immoral to have to choose between the dead and the living. What about trying to stop a situation where more and more of the living become the dead? As one UNHCR official described it: “Usually information on the dead is something we have and we share with the right people. But our interests are the living and keeping them alive”.

In Eastern Zaire, for the first time, most reporters and HC workers realised that if they overstepped an undefined line, they would be expelled and perhaps killed. On several occasions this was made clear by the Alliance. “They said something will happen to you. We will expel you if you continue to share the information with the outside world”.

This is vital for all those working in a theatre of conflict. They have to realise how swiftly video, sound and text news transmissions now boomerang back by satellite into the offices, hotels and tents of all the protagonists. This is the ‘tyranny of real time’¹³⁴. “I listened and watched the satellite TV [almost all the time]. I knew what the world knew, and we knew their analysis. We reacted to what we were seeing”, said one senior Rwandan government official. It was the same for Laurent Kabila and his close officials. Their attitude to the media was described as un-enlightened and reminiscent of oppressive Soviet-style principles.¹³⁵

Such speed in the information loop carries sinister implications for humanitarian workers. “The new fighting people, for all their media worldliness . . . are to us, at least, very unpredictable,” warned Urs Boegli, Head of Communications at the ICRC. “Their objectives are not necessarily harmonious with the concept of humanitarianism,” he wrote with understatement. “Probably never has the fine art of communicating had such power of life and death over so many people”.¹³⁶

The evidence bears out Boegli’s analysis. Senior Rwandan officers, including the Vice President himself, have confirmed to this study that they are avid watcher of global satellite TV news channels like BBC World and CNN. There is strong evidence that based on what the officers monitored off the airwaves, Alliance troops were ordered to intimidate any in the humanitarian community and media who reported too much of what was happening, and thereby threatened their military operation. One senior HC figure who often spoke publicly to the media related how “if I got play on CNN or BBC World, I would be hauled over to the [Alliance] villa in an hour. It is just something you would have to deal with”. Was there a need for self-restraint and self-censorship in what was reported publicly? “It depended on the issue. But the fact that you could be [seen or heard] instantaneously [worldwide] was a factor. When you are talking to someone who knows what is going on, then it is very hard. It has to be very nuanced”.

During one period, Alliance officers warned different NGOs that on their satellite TV’s in the forest they had noted the fate of the six ICRC delegates murdered in their beds in Chechnya in December 1996. The explicit and unambiguous Alliance message had been

“we can do that to you too”. One senior humanitarian worker related how “when I made an interview with even a small [news]paper or media outlet, the alliance and Rwanda knew everything very quickly”.

Throughout this difficult period in the first half of 1997 right up to the present, the Alliance has continued to harass the HC and media. They have made life permanently difficult, if not dangerous. One correspondent was seriously intimidated, persecuted to the point of fearing imminent death in a faked road accident, then left the country terrified, whereupon it was discovered that agents for the Alliance were stalking the reporter into a neighbouring country. As late as October 1997 a senior humanitarian worker detailed how the Alliance had once again tried to intimidate the ICRC by accusing them of transporting 17 tonnes of weapons. “It was intimidation”, and when the ICRC complained, the response from the Alliance was “You shut up”¹³⁷. Such tactics of harassment and intimidation were a core part of Alliance and Rwandan strategy. They were the main reasons why the UN Secretary General decided he had no option but to withdraw the UN investigative team from the Democratic Republic of Congo.¹³⁸

Thus this was, and still remains, a relentless game of jungle poker where for the first time the humanitarian community and media realised they had virtually no cards they could play safely. The sensitivity of the information issue meant the HC had to calculate how much they were prepared to undermine their neutrality and impartiality in order to be allowed to remain the zone controlled by the Alliance. For example, from September 1996 onwards MSF was not willing to give ground with Vice President Kagame. “MSF realised he was not a knight in shining armour or that we accept what he was doing. So MSF became a thorn in his side. Our allegiance was to humanitarianism and what is fair and right. Inside MSF it was a big debate”. For MSF and others the way they handled information thus became a key yardstick by which the Rwandan leadership judged how far it would tolerate their humanitarian activities.

The Alliance’s will and power to exact swift revenge against those who revealed too much information was always evident. On a couple of occasions in April and May 1997, risky leaks of information about the mass murder of Hutu refugees forced the Alliance to respond to growing international outrage. They allowed brief and limited HC/media access to camps at kilometres 9 and 36 outside Kisangani. But in line with the Kagame doctrine on tight information control the access was token, limited and brief. The visits revealed very little except that the Alliance were determined to cover-up all traces of the alleged slaughter of Hutus that was still underway.¹³⁹

In such ways the Alliance was able to continue shutting down the conflict zone to the outside world. This allowed the bloodletting to continue unseen so that both the Alliance and Rwandan Vice President Kagame could reject emphatically¹⁴⁰ all evidence assembled by human rights organisations.¹⁴¹ Their continued refusal to allow access to a UN investigation team through the later months of 1997 and into 1998 underscored the single-minded nature of this new anti-humanitarian organisation and anti-media strategy. It paid off. On 17 April 1998 the UN Secretary General announced the abandoning of all on-site efforts to investigate the alleged mass killings in Eastern Zaire.¹⁴² Given its success in shutting down all first hand impressions of the reverse ethnic killing taking place, there has

to be a good chance that other warring factions will adopt similar tactics against the humanitarian community and media in future.

The warning signs are there and must not be ignored by either the humanitarian community or the media.

6. THE BATTLE FOR THE INFORMATION HIGH GROUND

6.1 Numbers of Refugees in Eastern Zaire

This study does not intend to examine in detail the claims and counter claims relating to the numbers of refugees: where they were, or which organisation claimed what and when. That specialist study is for others,¹⁴³ and the arguments will continue over who is right and who was knowingly wrong or trying to distort.

But it is clear that what became known as the *bataille des chiffres*¹⁴⁴ reinforced the general perception of a humanitarian community ill-equipped and – at times -- irresponsible at handling a basic raw material of any conflict analysis – namely facts.

Once the estimated 646,000 mainly Hutu refugees had visibly returned to Rwanda by the end of November 1996,¹⁴⁵ the HAs and HOs made various claims of perhaps another 400- to 500,000 refugees still at large in Eastern Zaire. However these claims became virtually impossible to sustain. The credibility of the HC was undermined by a combination of massed emotional scenes of refugees trudging home, the already damaged reputation of NGOs because of poor information handling around the period of 9 November 1996 [see section 3.3], and the clever presentation of claimed intelligence figures.

The UNHCR, which had claimed there were 1.2 million refugees in the Goma camps in September before the Alliance military push began, found its credibility at rock bottom. “The UNHCR was in the middle and we were being hit by both sides” said one angry UNHCR official at the heart of the operation. As a second official put it: “There was a big battle for the UNHCR that we lost”. Another UN source explained how the initial figure of 1.2 million refugees (which included some 120,000 in Burundi) “became burned in the mind” of both the HC and media, even though the UNHCR knew 1.2 million was only a “ballpark figure”.¹⁴⁶ By comparison, the MSF estimate of total refugee numbers was 950,000. The Rwandan government says that after discussions with the HAs and HOs they now believe the more accurate figure is likely to have been 900,000 +/- 100,000.¹⁴⁷

The UN’s 1.2 million had not been acquired by census in the Goma camps. It was the kind of normal working figure that is always extrapolated for operational planning. It was an upper figure because in humanitarian circles “you cannot under-target for food supplies”. No one ever has accurate figures in Africa, “but 1.2 million was calculated in the best humanitarian traditions and we stood by it”. So the figure “became gospel and we [the UN and HCR] had to defend it. We could not go back and say we were wrong.

Defending it in the Great Lakes would not have been important. But then [other non-regional governments] decided to dramatically underplay the figures”.

The numbers became a central issue even though in the HC view it was “the scale of the problem that mattered, not the precise figures”. Because of their low credibility due to earlier poor information handling and apparent manipulation two weeks earlier, the UN and NGO’s found themselves skewered. “They found it impossible to counter credibly with one voice the Rwandan statements that “The problem is over . . . all refugees have returned . . . and any ‘refugees’ still in Eastern Zaire are *genocidaires* . . . the idea of a Multi-National Force is now redundant”.

On one side the international community with a vested interest in not launching a military intervention questioned the motives of the UNHCR. By innuendo some leading non-regional nations accused the UNHCR of “grossly inflating” the figures for the pursuit of political advantage and portraying a problem that did not exist. To further undermine the UNHCR in the eyes of the Rwandan government, they even hinted that the UN was part of an anti-Tutsi conspiracy. “We played into their hands by having a UN figure that was fuzzy and not reliable.”

On the other side, the UN was accused of failing to reveal horrors to the world as part of a Tutsi campaign to protect Rwandans inside Zaire. France claimed the UN was “an accomplice to genocide”.

“How many times did I feel there was a gross injustice against the UNHCR because of the allegations? Never has the UN been in this position before,” said one leading official.

Overall, this underlines the devastating costs of failing to handle information sensitively and professionally in the earlier stages of the crisis, and especially right at the start.

6.2 Reconnaissance Overflights: a Search for the Truth, or Excuse to Deceive?

“We find ourselves faced here with individuals who no longer exist; who could not be detected by the world’s most powerful armed forces with ultra-sophisticated satellite equipment at their command . . . The International Community has to admit it made a mistake”

EU Commissioner Emma Bonino
Speaking in Tingi Tingi
February 1997¹⁴⁸

“There was deliberate obstruction, obfuscation and misleading . . . of the international community”.

A senior NGO official.

The issue of the limited international overflights by US P3 *Orions* and a British *Canberra* remains controversial. These operations were supported by US satellite imagery and other unspecified National Technical Means (NTM).

The enduring belief among most of the humanitarian community remains that the reconnaissance operations were set up as a fig leaf to justify an eventual high-level, international political decision not to go ahead with any kind of significant military intervention by a Multi-National Force (MNF). One senior MNF officer said: “It was clear from Day One in mission planning that began in Germany that when the One-Stars [Brigadier-Generals] came in there was an acceptance that the mission would never happen. Still, planning went ahead up and down through the national structures”.

The following evidence does not claim to be all embracing. However it came to light during interviewing for this paper, and is therefore included as an important contribution to further insight on the handling (or skewing) of information.

The widespread complaint in the humanitarian community remains that the reconnaissance evidence made public at the US embassy in Kigali on 22 and 23 November knowingly understated the refugee numbers by large amounts.¹⁴⁹ One HC source described them as “grotesquely wrong”. Another UN source asked: “I still do not understand how people assumed to be there could not be detected by the planes. I do not understand how pictures never revealed the presence of refugees, of which 300,000 were later repatriated”.

Nick Stockton, Emergencies Director for Oxfam, cynically labelled the US handling of reconnaissance data as “Operation Restore Silence” in which “misinformation was so successful” and “the US, UK and other governments who managed the magical disappearance have escaped all scrutiny”. Central to Stockton’s assertion is that on the morning of one public US briefing US officials made available to the UN’s Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA) a mass of photogrammetric data that was described as magnificently detailed. Later at the embassy US officials produced data that included much reduced refugee figures that bore no relation to the higher figures shown to the DHA officials.

Whatever the claimed technical explanations might be for the enormous discrepancies, overall the MNF overflight figures continue to be seen by some as a disinformation operation designed to “airbrush refugees”¹⁵⁰ out of existence, and therefore minimise the massive humanitarian challenge following the sudden, unexpected return to Rwanda of the estimated 600,000 refugees (later 646,000) in the days following 15 November.

All this was taking place at the same time as political efforts to discredit the humanitarian community’s evidence and their belief in much higher numbers of refugees remaining in Eastern Zaire.

By this stage HC credibility was already close to rock bottom [See section 3.1: *‘NGOs - Not Good Operators’?*]. As Alison Campbell of CARE (UK) wrote: “Had the aid agencies not already compromised their media credibility, they may have been able to sustain a stronger argument against international pressure to write off the refugees”.¹⁵¹ Another HC source complained that they never had enough detail of what government

channels were saying to discredit the HC claims. As a result, it was hard to mount a counter offensive to discredit what they viewed as official disinformation.

Meanwhile, inside the MNF planning cell it was clear that deployment of a full-blown MNF was never considered a realistic option. The Canadian force commander, Lt-General Maurice Baril, instructed his chief of staff to draw up a list of African countries and their possibilities for committing troops, and then to plan to visit these countries. But nothing happened. Everything was blocked at a high international political level.

Were those undertaking the reconnaissance missions involved in a complex deception authorised at the highest political levels? The question remains unanswered in any definitive way. However most of the humanitarian community continue to believe that either the intelligence experts directing the operation were incompetent, or they were designing reconnaissance missions that were flawed to make sure that only the minimum numbers of refugees were detected.

The evidence points to the latter scenario, which is reminiscent of the tactic of Lord Nelson during battle as he put the telescope to his blind eye and remarked: "I see no ships". As one senior NGO official put it: "They were looking in the wrong places. [Based on radio reports from missionaries] we told them [where refugees were] and they did nothing about it."

The MNF view was different. Officially it was claimed by the MNF that by early December the overflight imagery was showing no significant refugee numbers in Eastern Zaire, because the vast majority had returned across the bridge into Rwanda by the end of November.¹⁵² With their limited numbers of personnel on the ground inside Zaire the HC knew otherwise. But their evidence was disregarded. "The justification for halting the operation was wrong, and the information was later proved to be wrong".

There is one apparent and important weakness in the HC argument that overflight intelligence itself was used as a tool of deception. Senior Canadian sources told this study that -- as leaders of the MNF operation -- they downloaded raw data either direct from the US satellites or from the original photographic images. Overall they referred to it as a "live feed" of data. Despite its own justified suspicions and under robust questioning for this study, the senior Canadians believed that on balance there was no interference with the integrity of that raw data.

When it comes to the numbers of refugees there is one further somewhat sobering fact. Canadian analysts who had the direct access to the US reconnaissance data told this study that their own reading of the imagery often suggested a number of refugees *even lower than* the controversially low figures announced in Kigali on 22/23 November and disputed by the HC. On balance however, despite the howls of complaints from the HC, the Canadian intelligence assessments came close to the US figures.

Some military and diplomatic insiders who saw the raw data claim that the value of the pictures was far less than most non-experts assume. They describe many images as "very fuzzy". Instead of from celluloid, "the best pictures came from human eyes. The pilot of the [British] Canberra [reconnaissance aircraft] gave the best idea, even with his own hand-held camera", said one insider. In addition, the business of interpreting indistinct

images of partly concealed groups of people under often triple tree foliage is not as perfected as many might assume from the precise images known to be possible from satellite imagery.

However, Nick Stockton, Emergencies Director of Oxfam, rejects such attempts to downplay the contribution and accuracy of some aerial imagery. He was one of the very few outsiders who had any chance to examine in person the photogrammetry supplied to the United Nations DHA. He testifies to the MNF mapping of the images of refugee concentrations and says they prove there was a cover up¹⁵³ Later that same day officials denied the existence of sizeable and identifiable refugee that Stockton had seen. They made no effort to give reasons for apparently re-interpreting the data. Hence Stockton's "airbrush" analysis.¹⁵⁴

So was there deception, and if so how far did it go?

Views are divided across a broad spectrum. Giving the benefit of the doubt, one leading humanitarian official made the following general observation. Nations involved in the MNF operation "were not out to deceive the international community, but they were not going to help people discover what was happening. It was not a concerted deception, but there was deliberate obstruction, obfuscation and misleading . . . of the international community".

Evidence points to adequate photo-imagery, but suggests that large areas were omitted from the overflight planning schedules. One angry UN official conceded: "I saw the black-and-white pictures. They clearly supported the Rwandan line that refugees were not there, and that our statistics were inflated. So the refugee problem was considered over by 20 November. But [the problem remains that] the pictures available to [Lt-General] Baril were not an accurate representation of what was happening compared to what the UNHCR knew of refugees on the ground. Baril would tell me there are no people, but there were tens of thousands in the forest".

Those working in the MNF say Lt-General Baril was insistent that any claims of refugees must be backed up with clear evidence. He knew perfectly well the shortcomings of the overflights because on many days he flew personally in a C-130 over the region to assess the accuracy of intelligence "using his own eyesight". Baril was also receptive to new information about where refugees might be located. But as one MNF insider put it: "Baril would say: 'Prove it to me'. The HC would say: 'We have heard . . . ' The general would insist: 'That's not proof'".

The policy seemed to be one of reinforcing a negative, rather than proving a positive. "Alternatively in order to weaken the case, information was not made available". One highly placed source believes Baril's MNF was "told to lose 160,000" refugees to reinforce the overall international imperative not to get involved.

Just as explosive is the issue of who outside the international MNF had access to the overflight imagery and intelligence. The official line remains that the overflight intelligence provided to the MNF was "benign". Yet the fact remains that information considered benign in one set of hands (the MNF) is malignant and highly potent in the hands of a warring faction (like the Rwandan military and Kabila's Alliance) that is seeking all possible information about its enemies and military targets.

Many in the humanitarian community fear that the details of Hutu refugee concentrations were passed quietly to the Rwandan government, and then on to the advancing Alliance forces. This would have used already well established channels of contact for passing information. They fear that what was being seen publicly as part of a humanitarian multi-national operation that might save lives was also covertly being used to provide intelligence to Alliance troops under orders to search out Hutus and kill them.

Central to NGO fears and suspicions about real intent was the language used at the embassy briefings in Kigali in late November 1996.¹⁵⁵ Describing the concentrations of refugees recorded by reconnaissance overflights, the US Major-General briefer described not only “refugees” but “targets of [military] opportunity”. Without any way to be certain of identification he would then say of the concentrations of refugees that “we assume this group to be Interahamwe”. This may have been no more than a senior military officer instinctively using his usual lexicon of military phrases without being aware of the significance of such a mis-speak. Yet in the circumstances it caused much concern among humanitarian workers, and the concerns continue to this day. “It definitely felt like a military briefing to me,” said one. And the doubts continue to this day. How could refugees – especially those who were not Hutu *genocidaires* – be described as “targets of [military] opportunity” when the majority were civilians, women and children who were fleeing the fighting as refugees?

Yet the Rwandan government and the Alliance viewed all Hutus as targets of revenge. Which begs the question: were the overflights knowingly used as cover for gathering military intelligence, rather than humanitarian intelligence. If so, then a linear sequence of further questions becomes relevant.

1. Was the “refugee intelligence” passed to the Rwandan government and the Alliance?
2. If so, did this enable Alliance and Rwandan forces to achieve more swiftly and completely their systematic slaughter of Hutus in Eastern Zaire?
3. If this is the case, then some in the humanitarian community and media ask whether ultimately it can be said that the MNF forces did more than just turn a blind eye.¹⁵⁶

Again, in the interests of accuracy one must be cautious. One humanitarian worker who often flew for hours above the jungle searching for refugees does not support the idea that the information from overflights could have been that useful to the overall Rwandan aim of eliminating Hutus in Eastern Zaire. “These things are not neat”, he said. “The pictures of the jungle were pretty useless. You could not really see anything, and I did it frequently”. These limitations are confirmed by conversations this author had with one US aircrew who said they flew sectors over Eastern Zaire.

Did the Rwandan government receive the multi-national overflight imagery?

One senior Rwandan military official told this study: “They never gave it to us [at the time] . . . The first time I saw the pictures was many days after the briefings – and from an HO!”.

However the problems of establishing accurate facts in this whole murky train of events in the Great Lakes in 1996/7 became clear when the author was finally able to meet Rwandan Vice President Kagame. Kagame was asked whether any non-regional powers directly supplied refugee data from the humanitarian overflights to either him or his officers and/or officials. Kagame replied: “This is not true”. He then continued: “[However] at a certain stage we shared information . . . on refugee movements”.¹⁵⁷ This suggested that – as many in the humanitarian community suspected -- a direct back channel existed exist for passing overflight intelligence to Rwandan officials. Kathi Austin of the Human Rights Watch Arms Project says that from both her working knowledge and personal observation in Kigali there was such a conduit for the information and assessments from the satellite imagery to be passed directly into the Rwandan Defence Ministry.¹⁵⁸

But Kagame again denied that. He said that his government officials and officers got the humanitarian information from the same embassy briefings that were attended by HAs, HOs and the media. “Certainly it [the briefings] provided us a lot of information. It corroborated our information. It was very technical and very helpful. It allowed us to identify locations of refugees and those that were hostile. If they were moving away [from the Rwanda border] they were [Hutu] soldiers. If it is close we tried to find out what groups was doing We helped them to turn around”.

And what about the value of the overflight imagery?

Humanitarian officials who believe the MNF reconnaissance missions dramatically understated the refugee numbers do, however, accept the imperfections of the system they believe should have uncovered more. As one defence official is said to have told one HC worker: “I have been to see Kabila 15 times. I have been there [in the jungle]. There is nothing to be seen!”.

Was this a lie or a deception?

Overall, the primary aim was to use the imagery and intelligence interpretations to ensure no multi-national intervention took place that might obstruct Kagame’s determination to remove the Hutu threat from across Rwanda’s western border.

6.3 Was the Mass-Killing in Eastern Zaire a Genocide ? Should it have been described as such?

What follows must not be considered a complete debate on the issue of whether and when the events in Eastern Zaire should have been labelled as genocide. It is an analysis related solely to the information issue and the effect on judgements about how to label what was taking place.

Some HAs and HOs complain that the failures of 1994 were repeated in 1996. In 1994 Oxfam was one of the first in the humanitarian community to go on record to label

the mass slaughter as genocide. But they still ask why no one else – including journalists -- was willing to follow their lead. As much for reasons of international law and the Genocide Convention, the failure to define genocide meant a much slower response to the mass killings. Such tardiness in 1994 contributed to the international muddle, muted response and overall indifference to what many feared was going on. However the confusion and self-restraint was based on a dreadful logic for personal survival. Releasing information could have carried an appalling price.

After 1994, some humanitarian workers saw the same reluctance to use the word genocide during the unfolding slaughter in Eastern Zaire in late 1996 and into 1997. They believed that there was a case to be made. *Prime facie* there seemed to be an intent by the Tutsi-led Rwandan/Alliance forced to wipe out a whole class of people – the Hutus who were refugees.

Identical dilemmas faced the HC and media alike. Was genocide taking place? HAs and HOs believed they had no option. Even if they believed it was going on, they could not risk making such a statement. On balance they believed the risks to their own delegates on the ground were too great. “We would have been out in a few days,” shrugged one HC official. They also feared for the lives of their workers. “If we speak out the result is that we are killed, but you [journalists] are kicked out and leave”. Which is preferable: to announce genocide and leave an area empty of humanitarian workers? Or do they keep quiet and *de facto* allow the killings to continue by saying nothing?

For many, therefore, it was literally a matter of life and death. Many of the humanitarian workers interviewed for this study feel uncomfortable talking about this appalling moral dilemma. “So how many more people do WE kill because we do not stay there?” asked one HC head-of-mission despairingly. There is no logical and comfortable answer that helps stop people being killed.

One NGO representative who was responsible for talking to the media on the record inside Eastern Zaire put his dilemma like this. “If I was asked [on air]: are Tutsis killing Hutus? I could not say yes. That was very difficult because it was impossible to say yes once we [the HO] had taken the decision to stay [in Kisangani]”. But this spokesperson had an important role. He was the public foil. He was cover so that humanitarian workers had the chance to do the work they were there for. “I always felt that I was the most exposed. That was fine. If it means field and protection officers have plausible deniability, then that is good”. Was it lying or deception? It was both a pragmatic and skilful adjustment to a very dangerous environment.

For journalists too the constraints of trying to work in Eastern Zaire were formidable.

On the one hand, they were corralled, harassed and intimidated by Alliance forces who were determined that like the NGO workers the journalists should witness nothing. Some of the intimidation involved Laurent Kabila’s military intelligence force. It was unpleasant and prolonged. On occasions it involved the use of weaponry. It stopped short of physical assault, but the overriding message was clear: ‘for your own sakes, do not get too close to the truth’.

On the other hand, leading news organisations like the BBC insisted to their correspondents that any pointers to unfolding mass slaughter had to be rigorously sourced. “I had to see it with my own eyes and source it. But people were scared,” recalls the BBC’s East Africa correspondent Jane Standley. “The UNHCR wanted to get as many people [refugees] out as possible. People I knew very well would not talk to me”. Sources on location in places like Kisangani were reluctant to go on the record because of the vulnerability of both their personal positions and the position of their parent humanitarian organisations which risked being expelled by Kabila’s Alliance at any moment.

As detailed in an earlier section, many journalists experienced a profound emotional reversal as the evidence emerged of mass slaughter in Eastern Zaire starting in January 1997. The emotional scars still run deep as the reporters relate the stories. “We were all so terrified of everything we heard,” said one. But as another put it: “Something had to be said and we had to keep saying it”.

But at what risk?

Overall this personal determination created major dilemmas of how to report information seeping out, especially for news organisations that on principle require two sources before details can be reported. Overall the double sourcing principle had to be abandoned. “At the start our journalism was very wrong, and we were going on intuition. It was not good. There were times when we had good information of massacres in January 1997. But it was only one source and we could not say anything. They [the Alliance and Rwandan government] made sure that we did not get it right, and they then shifted the goal posts”. This reporter’s impression confirms the earlier remarks of a senior Rwandan official who described how Kigali’s principle in handling information was to omit details and shift the focus by declaring “this is not the point”. This undercut a journalist’s chance to report something authoritatively.

The anger and determination of some reporters grew. “People emerged [from the forest] in a dreadful state and people were dying in front of you at a location where all the refugees had been. Journalists then wanted to prove a genocide and links to Rwanda. They were so revolted that they were determined to make sure it was known, despite the risks. But it was too late”.

Kabila’s Alliance had to approve a journalist’s presence in towns like Kisangani in Eastern Zaire, as well as the surrounding forest. Alliance officials usually demanded large amounts of US dollars for very little in return.¹⁵⁹ On occasions reporters somehow found ways to travel out of the town. “We were able to get pictures at kilometres-28, -38 and -82. But there were too many people controlled by Kabila’s troops. Then they wanted to review your tapes. [One correspondent] was terrified. The RPA [the Rwandan army]’s line was that you are either with the RPA or against them”.

The difficulties for journalists to substantiate the killings in Eastern Zaire were made even greater by non-regional governments. They were reluctant to provide any collateral information from intelligence overflights that confirmed the blood letting was unfolding.

In retrospect, the HC and media failure to force the issue of genocide creates much broader and troubling questions. Some senior figures in the HC say their organisations were “traumatised”. For reasons of internal politics and self doubt after the information

debacle, they felt they had to hold back on what they knew and suspected. There was particular resentment at the loose manner in which journalists began pressing the genocide question without realising the political and legal implications of using the term. Once again it was easy to equate the emotive image of mass killings with the word genocide, but with little regard for the legal implications of whether events unfolding in Eastern Zaire could really be classified within the strict definition of genocide.

In one leading HO, some claim that embarrassment caused by the abject failure to handle information well during October 1996 explicitly led to an official reluctance to label the slaughter in Eastern Zaire as genocide. The resulting heated internal debate was described as a “blind funk”, with what some insiders labelled a self-destructive collapse in the organisation’s humanitarian image. Others, however, reject this emphatically. They admit there was a “confidence deficit”. But after the information-handling failure the HO instituted far more rigorous criteria for handling and examining information. They did not automatically accept the word of their delegate on the ground. Officials scrutinised evidence with far greater care in order to assess whether in any way a high level of killings could *prima facie* be called genocide.

As a result, instead of going public with accusations that the Rwandan-backed Alliance forces were not just killing large numbers but perhaps threatening genocide, the HO passed on information to selected journalists and Amnesty International. This established an unattributable profile of public concern and formally raised the issue of abuse of human rights at the same time..

“I had no doubt in my mind about genocide. I took legal advice and consulted Amnesty International”, said one insider. But at the highest level in the various parts of the humanitarian community the majority political view was against taking the risk of declaring that genocide was taking place. In the words of one source “I have no doubt we held back because if we say genocide then [under the Genocide Convention] there has to be a military intervention if we identify genocide”.

The HO in question was haunted by the failure of its humanitarian image during the exaggerated claims and reporting in November 1996 of assumed death rates in Eastern Zaire. The executive board wanted no more risk of humiliation if it later discovered it had cried wolf again and mistakenly inflated the level of killing. “In October [1996] we had made a fool of ourselves; we had been discredited by the information problem”. The HO board did not want a repeat, even though “we knew large numbers of people were being murdered. We still had no doubt, but should we say it was genocide? No.”. So the HO compromised. It saved its public image and reputation by labelling the slaughter as *crimes against humanity*.

It could therefore be said that the possible price for failed handling of information can be frighteningly high when the overall mission of any HA or HO is to save lives. Instead of worrying about lives, organisations can be reduced to fearing that the Rwandan government might neutralise its workers and shut down its vital toe-hold in the country – its office in Kigali. The outcome was depressing for those who wanted swift action on the slaughter in Eastern Zaire. “We had to massage information and put *institutional* imperatives over humanitarian imperatives”.

The unexplained murders of Humanitarian Community delegates inside Rwanda at critical moments added to the sense of vulnerability. In early January 1997 alone, three HO doctors and four UN human rights monitors were murdered in unexplained circumstances. Several homes of HA and HO workers were machine gunned. During the previous month the MSF headquarters in Kigali was raided by 'burglars' using teargas. MSF insiders reported that the raid had a "particularly military feel to it". Although nothing could ever be proved, the murders and attacks – along with attacks, detentions and harassment inside Eastern Zaire -- had to be seen by the Humanitarian Community as official warnings to toe the line, or face the consequences.

The price for not reading such warnings was high indeed, whether in terms of information or just personal security and safety.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

“We shall have to learn to navigate between the rock and the hard place of modern institutional communications”.

Urs Boegli,
Head of Communications, ICRC¹⁶⁰

“An Information Strategy remains the orphan in our operations. Most of my time was spent dealing with information, but I struggle to get ahead of the curve. The analysis never caught up. We need an information strategy, with a media plan as part of it”.

A Senior Humanitarian Operations Official

“There is an absolute necessity for credibility. Once you lose it, it is virtually impossible to get it back”.

NGO spokesperson

HOs “have lost their traditional role and have to contend with charges of being on the side or one or the other faction. . . . We are still left with the question of how humanitarian organisations are supposed to adjust to this new situation – one that can undermine all their efforts”.

ECHO News
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7.1 Overall:

- Be more savvy in the new 24-hour, instant, real-time information environment.
- Change the instinctive mindset
- Get Real on the new communications technology, the speed of change and developments, the ‘reality warp’, and the overall implications for both transparency and control.
- Assume that what seem to be low-tech warring factions involved in intra-state conflicts are in reality more sophisticated in information handling than you might ever envisage. Expect such factions to have adopted a new doctrine of information management that can be as sophisticated as the information warfare and Psy-Ops doctrines of leading military powers like the US and UK.

7.2 For HAs and HOs:

- Recognise that you are now part of a tough, nasty, ruthless battle for the Information High Ground on the new Information Edge in conflict. Do not assume (or hope) that it is all overblown and will go away.
- Accept that many journalists (but not all) may have their own agenda, and there is a good chance that it contradicts the way you and your HO or HA see events developing.
- Assume that you will be part of a process of manipulation, mis-information and dis-information. Warring factions of whatever kind will try to use you for their ends as part of the battle for the Information Edge. Even in a low-intensity, intra-state conflict they will use the most manipulative and ruthless methods to ensure you conform.
- Realise that there has been a fundamental change in the new 'real-time' communications environment
- Accept that information is now a volatile, virulent, potent factor in every conflict, and that others may handle it better than you.
- Understand the new dynamics of the 24-hour continuous news environment.
- Grasp that possession of satellite communications does not mean that any humanitarian organisation, media operation, or other players in a theatre of conflict have secure communications and a confidential monopoly on information.
- Assume warring factions – or their political supporters – have the capability to intercept all satellite communication, then to monitor and take advantage of information that is believed to be 'humanitarian', but which for them is viewed as 'of military value'. Consider the use of encryption to ensure your own organisational security as a priority.
- Grasp the high price of dabbling in exaggeration and extrapolation in the hope of short-term tactical gain. The medium- to long-term cost in credibility, integrity and image is likely to be far higher than any short term advantage possibly could be.
- Expect to be the target of accusations of not being impartial or neutral. Increasingly, claiming 'humanitarian action' will not be viewed as an adequate explanation or alibi.
- Come to terms with the reality that what you consider is legitimate humanitarian information is viewed as intelligence by others, and it can threaten military ambitions, thereby making you vulnerable.
- Train and educate all staff in the new realities of information in a field of conflict. Everyone in the field needs to understand the new potency of real-time information. Do not confine the need for information awareness skills to those assigned to jobs as press officers, media

officers or public affairs officers. Training for sound bites or ‘handling the media’ is not enough. Understanding the new dynamic is the fundamental challenge.

- Prepare staff for the worst-case scenario in gaming simulations before departure to the field. Role play the situation where the survival of the HA or HO mission is at stake, large numbers of refugees are being killed, and the media are pressing delegates to confirm that a genocide is unfolding down the road. What will the HA or HO staff do? How will they cope with the real-time information pressures?

7.3 For the Media:

- Revise instinctive and inappropriate assumptions about the new nature of conflict. Old tramlines of perceptions in war do not fit the new realities of an inter- and intra-state conflict as seen in the Great Lakes from late 1996 through to May 1997 and arguably beyond.
- Understand that the humanitarian community resent the new impression that the journalists and media have a right to expect information from HOs and HAs.
- Understand that the humanitarian community also resent the new impression that journalists and the media believe they alone have a better chance of resolving conflicts and humanitarian crises than the HOs, HAs and the policymakers in government.
- Assume from the start that warring factions – even if their troops wear gum-boots -- have now acquired sophisticated military doctrine and techniques for fighting low-level information warfare using manipulation, disinformation, misinformation and obstruction.
- Accept the criticisms of the 1996 Multi-disciplinary Steering Committee study into the reporting of the 1994 Rwanda crisis. Act upon the appeals for a change in journalistic approach, rather than ignoring them as if they are irrelevant and too theoretical.
- Accept that assigning generalist reporters to a conflict like the Great Lakes is inappropriate and irresponsible if the aim is to provide well-informed and accurate reports. The complex ethnic and tribal nature of such conflicts make it impossible for parachute journalists “just in from London” to comprehend the complexities. Experience shows that most of them have difficulty comprehending even the basic variables, let alone assimilating them, before they are required to report or perform.
- Accept the high price to be paid in credibility if there is a perception that journalists in conflict are partial and taking sides. Such partial reporting may make for more vivid journalism. But the cost in terms of accuracy, balance and therefore overall believability will be high. Policy makers will not be convinced.

* * *

A note about the author

Nik Gowing has written this study in a personal capacity as a consultant analyst on the role of information and the media in conflict management. The work is his alone and has not been influenced in any way by EU policy.

In February 1996 Nik Gowing was appointed a main programme anchor for the BBC's international TV news service BBC World, broadcasting to an audience of 60 million in 174 countries. The new appointment draws both on his extensive reporting experience over two decades in diplomacy, defence and international security and his presentation / chairing skills.

From 1989-1996 Nik Gowing was Diplomatic Editor for the one-hour nightly news analysis programme *Channel Four News* from ITN in London . His reports were aired frequently by the *MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour* on PBS, NBC's SuperChannel and CNN International. His reporting from Bosnia was part of the *Channel Four News* portfolio which won the BAFTA 'Best News Coverage' award in 1996. His investigations confirming covert US weapons air drops into Tuzla and on the fall of Srebrenica were singled out for praise in the Independent Television Commission programme review for 1995.

Since 1978 Nik Gowing has reported on many of the main international conflicts. He collected a BAFTA award for his exclusive coverage of martial law in Poland in 1981. In 1989 he broke the news that Russian troops were secretly leaving Afghanistan. He received an award from the New York TV Festival for his military and diplomatic analysis of the Gulf War.

During the 1980's as Foreign Affairs correspondent, then Diplomatic Correspondent, Nik Gowing reported extensively from Central and Eastern Europe, and the former Soviet Union. In 1989 he reported the revolutions marking the end of Communism, as well as the unrest in China. He remained an accredited correspondent in Moscow, where he reported the assault on the White House in 1993.

From 1991 he reported extensively on war in the former Yugoslavia with particular emphasis on diplomacy and the politico-military. His Channel Four documentary *Diplomacy and Deceit* on the limits and failures of diplomacy in conflict management was widely acclaimed.

In 1994 he was a resident fellow at the Joan Shorenstein Barone Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy in the John F.Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. His published Harvard study challenged conventional wisdom of an automatic cause and effect relationship between real-time television coverage of conflicts (the 'CNN factor') and the making of foreign policy.

His 1997 study for the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict in Washington DC has similarly challenged conventional wisdom on assumptions about a role for the media in preventing conflict. Like the Harvard study it has received wide attention and stirred new international debate.

As a result of both studies, he receives numerous invitations to both participate in workshops and address defence/international relations institutes, strategic studies/humanitarian affairs conferences, government departments, the UN, the ICRC, military staff colleges, NGO's and humanitarian organisations.

He is also a governor of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, a Visiting Fellow in International Relations at Keele University, a board member for the British Association for Central and Eastern Europe, and a member of the Director's Strategy Group at the Royal Institute of International Affairs in London.

¹ Interview with Vice President Paul Kagame of Rwanda by the author on 8 April 1998

² "My summer as a Media Coordinator, or Jackal Herder" by Mark Richardson, Employee Newsletter of the *Ottawa Citizen*, [date uncertain]

³ "In the Land of the Lion King" by Lindsey Hilsum, Diplomatic Correspondent of Channel Four News, London. *Times Literary Supplement*. 23 May 1997 p.9

⁴ The international humanitarian community (HC) comprises the United Nations humanitarian agencies (HAs) and the international humanitarian NGOs (HOs) like CRS, World Vision. Medecins Sans Frontieres, Oxfam and Care.

⁵ Description by BBC correspondent Allan Little, BBC Radio 7 November 1996.

⁶ For example, when the Taliban took control of the Afghan capital Kabul, in September 1996 they assumed naively that they would shut down all outside communication. International broadcasters defied the shut-down using a new briefcase-size satellite transmitter called TOKO, which feeds news video on a digital telephone line. TOKO can be set-up and dismantled in a few minutes, and can be easily hidden from the security forces. There are many other examples.

⁷ See the five volume report "*The International Response to Conflict and Genocide: Lessons from the Rwanda Experience*" by the Steering Committee of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda. Published by the Danish Foreign Ministry. 1996.

Inter alia the SCREAR report concluded in Volume 5 that "The international media played a mixed role in the Rwanda crisis. While the media were a major factor in generating worldwide humanitarian relief support for the refugees, distorted reporting on events leading to the genocide itself was a contributing factor to the failure of the international community to take more effective action to stem the genocide". It went on to conclude that "inadequate and inaccurate reporting by international media on the genocide itself contributed to international indifference and inaction". The study added: "The report recommends that the media conducts its own self-critical evaluation of the adequacy and impartiality of its reporting of complex emergencies in the developing world, and that they draw lessons for more responsible reporting".

See also “Media Coverage and US Foreign Policy” by Steven Livingston and Todd Eachus in chapter 10 of *“The Path of a Genocide: the Rwanda Crisis from Uganda to Zaire”* eds. Adelman and Suhrke. Trenton NJ: Transaction Books. Forthcoming 1998.

⁸ ‘Moral Authority’ (Zaire) on *CBC’s Fifth Estate*, broadcast on 24 November 1997. (Prog.No.9650404)

⁹ Remarks in Toronto by Sharon Rusu, Head of Information Services at UN Department of Humanitarian Affairs to the ‘*Synergy in Early Warning*’ Conference of York University, Ontario Canada. 17 March 1997.

¹⁰ Abstracted out of the ‘From Our Own Correspondent’ special reflecting on what took place during the Zaire/Great Lakes Crisis. Transmitted on *BBC Radio 4* on 2nd August 1997.

¹¹ For an early signal of this institutional failure to embrace the new nature of conflicts see “Conflict reporting: No Room for Shoddy Journalism” by Nik Gowing in *Crosslines Global Report* March/April 1997 for the ICHR Weapons of War, Tools of Peace conference in Boston, MA in April 1997.

¹² Contribution by Nick Cater of the media & conflict consultancy “Word and Pictures” to the International Institute of Humanitarian Law Round Table in San Remo, Italy, on 4 September 1997

¹³ Massimo Alberizzi, Africa correspondent of *Corriere della Sera* in remarks to Institute of Humanitarian Law Round Table in San Remo, 4 September 1997.

¹⁴ *op.cit* Hilsum 23 May 1997

¹⁵ See EU Commissioner Emma Bonino quoted in “*Refugees in a Desperate Plight*”. ECHO News No.14. March 1997.

¹⁶ “What Kabila is Hiding: Civilian Killings and Impunity in Congo”. Human Rights Watch Africa Vol.9 No.5 (A) October 1997 p.3

¹⁷ See, for example, “*The New Africanism*”, a discussion paper by Mark Bowden, Regional Director East/Central Africa for Save the Children UK. December 1997.

¹⁸ ‘*Building Political Stability in Sub-Saharan Africa*’ by Dr.Christopher Clapham from the University of Lancaster. Wilton Park paper from the 8-11 September 1997 conference due for publication in “*Current Issues in Diplomacy and Foreign Policy*”. London: HMSO (forthcoming 1998)

¹⁹ *ibid*

²⁰ *op.cit.* Interview with Vice President Kagame by author on 8 April 1998

²¹ *op.cit* “*The New Africanism*” by Mark Bowden, December 1997. He wrote: “The use of the media to make humanitarian statements and pressurise world powers is seen to give NGOs far greater importance than their actions merit. However, there is also a recognition of the need to manage the media more effectively to promote the New African agenda. This will result in attempts to separate the NGOs from the media, most probably by restricting NGOs access” p.4

²² *op.cit.* Interview with Vice President Kagame by author on 8 April 1998

²³ *op.cit.* Interview with Vice President Kagame by author on 8 April 1998

²⁴ *op.cit* Hilsum, 23 May 1997.

²⁵ *op.cit.* Interview with Vice President Kagame by author on 8 April 1998

²⁶ See the evidence assembled in *op.cit* “What Kabila is Hiding: Civilian Killings and Impunity in Congo”. Human Rights Watch Africa Vol.9 No.5 (A) October 1997 p.3 and pp.14-15

²⁷ For details of “deliberate and arbitrary killings” in the form of “massacres” see, for example, “Deadly Alliances in Congo Forests”. Amnesty International. 3 December 1997. eg p.9

²⁸ “Uncertain Course: Transition and Human Rights Violations in the Congo”. Human Rights Watch Africa Vol.9 No.9 (A) December 1997 p.6

²⁹ *op.cit* Human Rights Watch Africa Vol.9 No.5 (A) October 1997 p.15

³⁰ Interview with Vice President Kagame conducted by the author for BBC World’s *HardTalk* programme, transmitted on 17 April 1998.

³¹ ‘Zaire - Policy in the Dark’ an internal memorandum by Alison Campbell, Media Liaison Officer for CARE International (UK) dated February 1997. Campbell had watched and been part of the NGO / media information ‘feeding frenzy’ in the Great Lakes in late 1996

³² See for example “Uganda Reportedly Aids Rebels in Zairian War. Sources say Arms, Money, Advice Provided” by Stephen Buckley. *Washington Post*. 4 March 1997.

³³ “Why Rwanda admitted to its role in Zaire” Interview with Vice President Paul Kagame by Mahmood Mamdani in the *Weekly Mail and Guardian* (South Africa), 8 August 1997. In the interview Kagame is quoted as saying about his US trip in June 1996: “I delivered a veiled warning: the failure of the international community to take action would mean Rwanda would take action . . . My purpose in my June [1996] trip was to make sure they would not be taken by surprise. Their response was really no response. And yet I was not disheartened by it”. Kagame was also quoted as saying: “I returned from the United States last July, briefed my colleagues and said, either we solve it or face another catastrophe” [like the 1994 genocide]

³⁴ *op.cit.* Author’s discussion with Kathy Austin on 17 April 1998. Austin says she has seen US administration documents confirming this US assessment.

³⁵ See volume 2 of “*The International Response to Conflict and Genocide: Lessons from the Rwanda Experience*” *op.cit.*

³⁶ *op.cit.* Interview with Vice President Kagame by author on 8 April 1998

³⁷ “Rwanda Planned and Led the Attack on Zaire”. Interview with Vice President Paul Kagame by John Pomfret. *Washington Post* 9 July 1997.

³⁸ *op.cit.* Kagame interview in *Weekly Mail and Guardian* 8 August 1997.

³⁹ ‘Kagame’s Advisers Deny Report on Rwanda’s Involvement in War in Former Zaire’. Radio Rwanda, Kigali 16 July 1997 in *BBC Monitoring Service: Africa* RBB, 18 July 1997

⁴⁰ *op.cit.* Interview on BBC World’s HardTalk on 17 April 1998.

⁴¹ *op.cit.* Kagame interview in *Weekly Mail and Guardian* 8 August 1997

⁴² *op.cit.* See the various reports by Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and Physicians for Human Rights.

⁴³ Integrated Regional Information Network (IRIN), Update 245, 10 September 1997.

⁴⁴ *op.cit.* “What Kabila is Hiding: Civilian Killings and Impunity in Congo”. Human Rights Watch Africa Vol.9 No.5 (A) October 1997 p.28-34

⁴⁵ Letter from US Congressman Christopher H. Smith to President Clinton dated 28 August 1997.

⁴⁶ *op.cit.* Interview with Vice President Kagame, *Weekly Mail and Guardian*, 8 August 1997.

⁴⁷ *op.cit.* Interview with Vice President Kagame by author on 8 April 1998

⁴⁸ ‘*Warping and Hype: story of an at-times difficult relationship*’. Speech by Urs Boegli, Head of Communications at the ICRC to the International Centre for Humanitarian Reporting symposium ‘Weapons Of War, Tools of Peace’ in Boston MA, on 4 April 1997.

⁴⁹ Based on contacts in advance of the ECHO ‘Dispatches From Disaster’ conference in London 27/28. These thoughts came in private discussion and correspondence during April 1998 with Don Redding, Head of the Oxfam Press Office for the 1996/7 Great Lakes crisis.

⁵⁰ *op.cit.* Christopher Clapham Wilton Park paper, September 1997.

⁵¹ *op.cit.* Interview with Vice President Kagame by author on 8 April 1998

⁵² For a fuller discussion of the absence of homogeneity in the media see pp 19-24 ‘*Media Coverage: Help or Hindrance in Conflict Prevention*’ by Nik Gowing. Washington DC: Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict. 1997

⁵³ *op.cit.* Contacts with Don Redding, 15 April 1998

⁵⁴ For a full analysis of the motivations and working practices of humanitarian organisations during the 1994 Rwanda genocide see Vol.3 of *op.cit.* “*The International Response to Conflict and Genocide: Lessons from the Rwanda Experience*” by the Committee of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda. Published by the Danish Foreign Ministry. 1996.

⁵⁵ Remarks to the round table of the Institute of Humanitarian Law in San Remo, Italy 5 September 1997.

⁵⁶ Recommendation No.7 from ‘*Lessons Learned from the Zaire Mission*’ by James Appathurai and Ralph Lysyshyn. Joint study by the Canadian Departments of Foreign Affairs and Defense. June 1997.

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- ⁵⁷ *op.cit* Vol.3 of “*The International Response to Conflict and Genocide: Lessons from the Rwanda Experience*” by the Committee of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda. Published by the Danish Foreign Ministry. 1996.
- ⁵⁸ *op.cit* Cater 4 September 1997
- ⁵⁹ Interview by e-mail dated 16 April 1998.
- ⁶⁰ See, for example, “*Safety First - Protecting NGO Employees Who Work In Areas Of Conflict*” by Mark Cutts and Alan Dingle. London: Save The Children 1998.
- ⁶¹ Comments at one of the review meetings for this study, 17 April 1998. [*op.cit*]
- ⁶² ‘*Media and Aid Agencies – whose catastrophe?*’ dated 2 February 1997 by Alison Campbell, Media Liaison Officer for CARE International (UK).Campbell 2 February 1997 p.2
- ⁶³ Comments at one of the review meetings for this study, 17 April 1998. *op.cit*
- ⁶⁴ *op.cit* Vol.3 of “*The International Response to Conflict and Genocide: Lessons from the Rwanda Experience*” by the Committee of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda. Published by the Danish Foreign Ministry. 1996.
- ⁶⁵ Press Release from MSF on Kivu-Zaire “Each Day Without Help For Refugees Could Provoke The Death of 1200 People”. 9 November 1996.
- ⁶⁶ Comments at one of the review meetings for this study, 17 April 1998. *op.cit*
- ⁶⁷ *op.cit* MSF Press Release 9 November 1996.
- ⁶⁸ *op.cit*. Allan Little, BBC Radio 7 November 1997. BBC Editors later cut the reference to “holocaust” from the radio dispatch.
- ⁶⁹ Abstracted from Campbell 2 February 1997 *op.cit*.
- ⁷⁰ confirmed by Vice President Paul Kagame in his interview with the author 8 April 1998 *op.cit*
- ⁷¹ *op.cit*. Interview with Vice President Kagame by author on 8 April 1998
- ⁷² *op.cit* Campbell
- ⁷³ Financial Times 25 November 1996.
- ⁷⁴ Quoted in “Anatomy of a Phony Famine” by Gretchen Lang. *Shift>Magazine* May 1997 p 40.
- ⁷⁵ Quoted in *ibid* Gretchen Lang in *Shift>Magazine*, but which reflected detailed discussions by the author with Samantha Bolton, and also interventions by her during the ICHR conference in Boston, MA on 1-2 April 1997.
- ⁷⁶ “Aid Agencies Doing their Best in Zaire”. Letter from Heather Rourke, Communications Officer of CARE Canada to the *Ottawa Citizen*. 2 May 1997
- ⁷⁷ Official audited figures supplied to this study by MSF in a memorandum dated 16 April 1998 detail that MSF France has a policy of limiting French official funding to no more than 5%. Actual contributions stand at 2%. Income from French regions is 0.47% of total income. Individuals from the French section of MSF provide a quarter of the organisation’s income. “Our policy is to diversify sources of funding to limit potential political interference from governments”.
- ⁷⁸ *op.cit* Campbell
- ⁷⁹ For a similar view from Care International see *ibid*. Campbell p.2 or *op.cit* Richardson
- ⁸⁰ *ibid*. Campbell p.3
- ⁸¹ For the full description of the ‘Tyranny of Real-time’, see “*Real-Time Television Coverage of Armed Conflicts and Diplomatic Crises: Does it Pressure or Distort Foreign Policy Decisions?*” by Nik Gowing. Joan Shorenstein Barone Center, John F.Kennedy School of Government. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University. 1994. This concept has been further elaborated in “Late-Breaking Foreign Policy - The News Media’s Influence on Peace Operations” by Warren Strobel. Washington DC: US Institute of Peace Press 1997.
- ⁸² From the closed proceedings of a conference on ‘Journalism in Crises’ at the Lester B.Pearson International Peacekeeping Training Centre, Clementsport, NS, Canada, 7-9 October 1997.
- ⁸³ “Conflict, the Military and the Media - a New Optimism?” by Nik Gowing. *The Officer* May/June 1997 pp 24-26, also reprinted in *ARRC Journal*, September 1997.
- ⁸⁴ *op.cit* Cater 4 September 1997

⁸⁵ *op.cit* Hilsum 23 May 1997

⁸⁶ For a strongly principled argument of such journalism, see both “*In Harm’s Way*” by Martin Bell. London: Hamish Hamilton 1995 and later thinking in “Conflict of Interest”, an edited version of Martin Bell’s speech to the Chichester Festival, reprinted in *The Guardian*, 11 July 1996

⁸⁷ Interview with author, 17 April 1998

⁸⁸ *op.cit* “*The International Response to Conflict and Genocide: Lessons from the Rwanda Experience*” by the Steering Committee of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda. Published by the Danish Foreign Ministry. 1996. Vol.5 p66

⁸⁹ *ibid*

⁹⁰ The source is an unpublished part of ‘*Media and Aid Agencies – whose catastrophe?*’ by Alison Campbell of CARE International (UK). 2 February 1997. *op.cit* p.1

⁹¹ *op.cit*. Martin Bell speech in Chichester Cathedral, reprinted in *The Guardian*, 11 July 1996

⁹² *op.cit* Campbell 2 February 1997 p.2

⁹³ With agreement, from Nick Stockton’s speaking notes to a seminar at the Refugee Studies Programme, Queen Elizabeth House, Oxford in February 1997. Later published in ‘*Crosslines*’.

⁹⁴ *op.cit*. Campbell

⁹⁵ See, for example, “Africa’s New Bloc” by Dan Connell and Frank Smyth. *Foreign Affairs* Vol.77 No.2 March/April 1998 pp.80-94

⁹⁶ *op.cit* Christopher Clapham: Proceedings of Wilton Park conference, 8-11 September 1997.

⁹⁷ ‘*Humanitarian Action: Perception and Security*’. Keynote lecture to the ECHO-ICRC conference in Lisbon on Modern Welfare and Humanitarian Action by Dr G Prins, Senior Research Fellow at RIIA, London. 27-28 March 1998. p.13

⁹⁸ This study will continue to distance itself from the continuing differences of argument and calculation about overall refugee numbers. However a sample of those differences may be helpful to some, not least to get a sense of the scale of the differences.

Professor Howard Adelman of the Center for Refugee Studies at York University, Ontario, Canada maintained in an interview with this author on 25 April 1998 that the maximum number of refugees unaccounted for (and therefore probably killed) in Eastern Zaire is around 40,000. This is calculated as follows:

	UNHCR figures for camps on 1 September 1996	760,000 (exc. 120,000 in Burundi)
less	Confirmed returnees Nov.1996 (UN & Agencies)	646,000
less	Interahamwe and FAR arrivals in Brazzaville	70,000
less	Returned by other disparate means	5,000

	Likely total refugees unaccounted for (dead?)	39,000

By comparison, the UNHCR in New York confirmed on 17 April 1998 that it estimated 180,000 refugees still remained unaccounted for.

⁹⁹ *op.cit* investigations and reports by Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and Physicians for Human Rights.

¹⁰⁰ “The Art of the Reporter” by Fergal Keane. The 1997 Huw Wheldon lecture on BBC 2. Text printed in *Television*, October 1997 pp.6-9

¹⁰¹ *op.cit* Hilsum 23 May 1997

¹⁰² *op.cit* Stockton, February 1997.

¹⁰³ *op.cit* “*The International Response to Conflict and Genocide: Lessons from the Rwanda Experience*” by the Committee of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda. Published by the Danish Foreign Ministry. 1996. Vol.5 p66

¹⁰⁴ Figures set out by Professor Howard Adelman during interview with the author *op.cit* on 25 April 1998.

Rwandan estimates (supported by Candian calculations):

ex-FAR	30,000
Interahamwe	40,000

Total <i>genocidaires</i>	70,000

Official Hutu figures (from documents found in the abandoned refugee camps)

Ex FAR	18,657
Interahamwe	50,000

Total <i>genocidaires</i>	68,657

Professor Adelman says that the Rwandan estimates are lower than these figures.

¹⁰⁵ *op.cit.* Campbell 2 February 1997 p.2

¹⁰⁶ Africa Correspondent of *Corriere Della Sera* interviewed by author on 5 September 1997 in San Remo, Italy

¹⁰⁷ *op.cit.* Stockton, February 1997

¹⁰⁸ “*Rwanda: Rights and Racism*” by Nick Stockton. A paper dated 12 December 1996. Published with the author’s permission.

¹⁰⁹ *op.cit.* interview on 5 September 1997 in San Remo, Italy.

¹¹⁰ Comments at one of the review meetings for this study, 17 April 1998. *op.cit.*

¹¹¹ At the end of the last century British and French colonial forces almost went to war at an obscure outpost in southern Sudan. In 1898 the eastbound French forces of Captain Marchand met the southwards-moving British army of Lord Kitchener. The Cape-to-Cairo and Dakar-to-Djibouti dreams of Britain and France were in collision. After the Fashoda confrontation, the two imperial powers agreed to divide Central Africa into spheres of influence. Sources: ‘The Great Race for Africa Resumes’ by Eric Margolis in *Foreign Correspondent*, 9 March 1997. ‘Encounter on the Nile - the Fashoda incident of 1898’ by Darrel Bates. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1984.

¹¹² Humanitarian workers point, for example, to the articles by Sam Kiley of *The Times* of London during late 1996 early 1997.

¹¹³ *op.cit.* Richardson in Employee Newsletter of the *Ottawa Citizen*.

¹¹⁴ Quoted with agreement from a private conversation.

¹¹⁵ *op.cit.* Campbell ‘Zaire - Policy in the Dark’

¹¹⁶ *op.cit.* Boegli

¹¹⁷ *op.cit.* interview on 5 September 1997

¹¹⁸ *op.cit.* Interview by e-mail dated 16 April 1998.

¹¹⁹ See proceedings and papers from the ECHO-ICRC conference on *Humanitarian Action: Perception and Security* in Lisbon, Portugal 27-28 March 1998.

¹²⁰ *op.cit.* Interview with Vice President Kagame by author on 8 April 1998

¹²¹ *op.cit.* “Uncertain Course: Transition and Human Rights Violations in the Congo”. Human Rights Watch Africa Vol.9 No.9 (A) December 1997 p.28-9

¹²² *op.cit.* “Deadly Alliances in Congo Forests”. Amnesty International. 3 December 1997 p.36

¹²³ *op.cit.* “What Kabila is Hiding: Civilian Killings and Impunity in Congo”. Human Rights Watch Africa Vol.9 No.5 (A) October 1997 p.16

¹²⁴ *ibid* p.16

¹²⁵ Comments at one of the review meetings for this study, 17 April 1998. *op.cit.*

¹²⁶ *op.cit.* Interview with Vice President Kagame by author on 8 April 1998

¹²⁷ *op.cit.* Author’s discussion with Kathi Austin, 17 April 1998.

¹²⁸ For the growing evidence see “Privatizing War - How Affairs of State are Outsourced to Corporations Beyond Public Control” by Ken Silverstein. *The Nation*. July 28/August 4, 1997. See also *Private Armies and Military Intervention* by David Shearer. Adelphi Paper No.316. London: International Institute of Strategic Studies, 1998.

¹²⁹ *op.cit* interview with Massimo Alberizzi on 5 September 1997 in San Remo, Italy

¹³⁰ For confirmation see interviews in ‘Moral Authority’ (Zaire) on *CBC’s Fifth Estate*, broadcast on 24 November 1997 *op.cit*

¹³¹ See for example the words of Pilar Estebanez, Chair of Medicos del Mundo, quoted in ECHO News No.14: “The attacks against humanitarian workers are perpetrated according to pre-defined strategies designed to scare and intimidate the volunteers, so as to keep them away from trouble spots. Those carrying out the attacks want to be able to attack with impunity, without control, without witnesses, without any proof of the crimes committed against the civilian populations”.

¹³² See *op.cit* memorandum from MSF dated 16 April 1998.

¹³³ See interviews quoting for example ECHO evidence in ‘Moral Authority’ (Zaire) on *CBC’s Fifth Estate*, broadcast on 24 November 1997 *op.cit*

¹³⁴ *op.cit*. Gowing, 1994

¹³⁵ Much later in the year, President Kabila provided an important insight into his attitude to the media during a press conference in Kinshasa. He ordered that journalists in the Congo must behave “responsibly” or face disciplinary action. He said that the state “was obliged to defend itself against a section of the media which is always quick to demand its rights, but quite unconcerned about accomplishing its duty”. Source: IRIN Update No.297. 21 November 1997

¹³⁶ *op.cit* speech by Urs Boegli in Boston, MA on 4 April 1997.

¹³⁷ Incident reported to have taken place on 14 October 1997.

¹³⁸ “UN Pulls Out Investigators of Congo Refugee Killings: Annan Cites a ‘Total Lack of Cooperation’”. *International Herald Tribune* 18-19 April 1998 p.5

¹³⁹ See, for example, the reports of BBC correspondent Martin Dawes who described how he had discovered muddy, neatly-dug burial pits in refugee camps where refugees cannot have been expected to have access to mechanical excavators that must have been used for the digging. (Video was re-run in *CBC’s Fifth Estate op.cit*)

¹⁴⁰ *op.cit* Interview with Vice President Kagame conducted by the author for BBC World’s *HardTalk* programme, transmitted on 17 April 1998.

¹⁴¹ See for example *op.cit* “Deadly Alliances in Congo Forests”. Amnesty International. 3 December 1997. Also *op.cit* “What Kabila is Hiding: Civilian Killings and Impunity in Congo”. Human Rights Watch Africa Vol.9 No.5 (A) October 1997

¹⁴² *op.cit* “UN Pulls Out Investigators of Congo Refugee Killings: Annan Cites a ‘Total Lack of Cooperation’”. *International Herald Tribune* 18-19 April 1998 p.5

¹⁴³ As a sample of the continuing debate over the large differences in claimed numbers of refugees see “How many refugees are in Eastern Zaire? Why Estimates vary widely”. News release by *US Committee for Refugees*, Washington DC dated 26 November 1996

¹⁴⁴ The battle of figures

¹⁴⁵ Consolidated figures now agreed by various humanitarian agencies and the Rwandan government.

¹⁴⁶ Kathi Austin says that documents in her possession say that the initial US intelligence calculation was also 1.2 million refugees.

¹⁴⁷ Professor Adelman says that the work of the Center for Refugee Studies at York University indicates that because of counting inconsistencies the estimates of refugee figures usually tend to be 20 per cent higher than the actual figures. Exaggeration is even greater when refugees are under military supervision, as in the Goma camps. This is partly to justify inflated demands for food.

¹⁴⁸ *op.cit* ECHO News No.14 March 1997

¹⁴⁹ See for example *op.cit* “What Kabila is Hiding: Civilian Killings and Impunity in Congo”. Human Rights Watch Africa Vol.9 No.5 (A) October 1997 pp.35-6

¹⁵⁰ *op.cit* Nick Stockton's speaking notes, February 1997.

¹⁵¹ *op.cit* Campbell memo 2 February 1997 p.3

¹⁵² By 9 May 1997 MSF estimated that 915,000 Rwandan and Burundian refugees had been repatriated or moved to a third country. 342,000 refugees remained in Zaire.

¹⁵³ Interview with Nick Stockton on 26 August 1997, reconfirmed on 25 April 1998.

¹⁵⁴ *op.cit* Nick Stockton's speaking notes, February 1997.

¹⁵⁵ 22 and 23 November 1996.

¹⁵⁶ *op.cit*. "Uncertain Course: Transition and Human Rights Violations in the Congo". Human Rights Watch Africa Vol.9 No.9 (A) December 1997 p.44

¹⁵⁷ *op.cit*. Interview with Vice President Kagame by author on 8 April 1998

¹⁵⁸ *op.cit*. Author's discussion with Kathi Austin, 17 April 1998.

¹⁵⁹ See, for example, Lindsey Hilsum 23 May 1997 *op.cit*

¹⁶⁰ *op.cit* speech by Urs Boegli in Boston, MA on 4 April 1997.