

# INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATIONS FORUM

18th July 1998 Caux, Switzerland



## ***1.1 International Communications Forum hears from crisis areas***

**M**edia professionals from Northern Ireland, Bosnia and South Africa spoke of the role that the media plays in conflict situations. They outlined their sense of personal responsibility and hopes for the future.

The media in the Balkans, divided on ethnic lines, did "more damage than weapons" and had played a pivotal role in "initiating the processes that led to unbelievable bloodshed", said Senad Kamenica, Head of News and Current Affairs Programs for Bosnia and Herzegovina Television. 250,000 people had been killed in the war, including 30,000 children, and Bosnia was still burdened with "the by-products of the factory of evil". But today Bosnians expected the media to help overcome the nation's problems, by "building confidence".

Kamenica described his own struggle to maintain news balance and give truthful information. "The hardest struggle is within ourselves," he said. His Sarajevo-based station has recently been named by the Paris newspaper Le Monde as the most objective TV station in the Balkans. Recently, the station had successfully campaigned, over eight months, to stop proposed legislation for ethnically divided primary schools and the legislation was withdrawn. Jan Pieklo, President of the Polish Journalists Association in Krakow, said he had volunteered to cover the Balkan wars because he wanted to understand what had gone wrong in Yugoslavia, a nation previously considered a success story. There he had experienced his "first lessons in hatred", as the local media on all sides "resurrected clichés from the past". He had seen a "spiral of hate at work," with journalists saying openly that they were ready to lie for their side. But it was hard if not impossible to stay neutral in a situation where women and children were being killed. He described his sense of frustration, feeling "useless and helpless", when no-one outside seemed to want to listen. But he had felt better for also volunteering as a driver for humanitarian aid to Sarajevo. "It is vital to help people to look at the past, if they are to have a future," he concluded.

In Northern Ireland, the future depends on enabling individuals, and the Nationalist and Unionist communities, to "engage in the difficult art of dialogue", said William Stainsby, Director of the Cedar House Cultural Institute near Derry/Londonderry, on the frontier with the Irish Republic. "The transmission of truthful and accurate information is a necessary foundation for dialogue," he said. Dialogue was the only way to break down prejudice, "the main roadblock on the road to progress". The iron curtain had come down in Europe, but still stood between the communities in Northern Ireland. "Many of the problems can be solved if we can only listen to one another," he said. It was to forward such dialogue that he had created with others a centre on an island in the Republic, but reachable mainly from the North. He hoped it would promote inter-religious, cross-community and cross-cultural dialogue. "If we can listen to each other's stories we can make progress. I cannot change others, but I can change myself. I

can try to change my own prejudice," he said. Faustina Starrett, who teaches media and communications in the same city, said she needed "a tough mind and a tender heart" in the face of her compatriots, who were suffering from a rigidity of identity. "There are reasons, but no excuses, and no-one has clean hands," she said. The churches, the state, and the media all played their part in reinforcing ethnic and community identities, but after 30 years imprisoned in history, she saw reasons for hope. In recent days, the leaders promoting the Easter peace agreement had been "tested by fire and held". She called on the media to be "more vigilant about reporting facts rather than reinforcing prejudices".

**W**illiam Smook, a Cape Town-based journalist and vice-chairman of the Cape Town press club, South Africa, also believed that "the media is often at the centre of conflict, acting as part of the problem and part of the solution". Meeting journalists from Bosnia and Northern Ireland had emphasised, for him, the "factors of commonality in areas of conflict"--xenophobia and a history of conflict "where everyone has his own version". He hailed the work now being done in his country by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It was "helping South Africans to look back so that they could look ahead", he said. The lifting of the Internal Security Act had freed journalists but there were still some "no-go areas". "Many of us fell into the trap of thinking that democracy was a magic wand," he said. "But if you walk on our streets, our farms, our land, you will see that it is not so." The press was now more racially integrated, and black and white journalists, increasingly working together, were realising that "we all love our country and we want to do what's best for it". "Personal activism is the best way to bring healing," he concluded.

The journalists were taking part in an International Communication Forum, on the theme of "The Media and the Community -- Building a Creative Relationship", held in Caux, Switzerland.■