

Darfur: Covering the “forgotten” story

By Lawrence Pintak

MAY, 2007. There is no issue in Arab journalism today that is more controversial than how the region’s media cover Darfur. Not Iraq, where, according to a new report from the Arab Archives Institute, 52 Arab journalists have lost their lives since 2001; not Palestine, where journalists are caught between Israel and the Palestinians and between Fatah and Hamas; nor Lebanon, where reporters have been in the cross-hairs of rival factions and governments.

Darfur is a hot-button issue in the newsroom not because of the physical danger but because the issue bores right to the heart of the mission of Arab journalism and the self-identity of those who practice it.

That was vividly apparent at a one-day workshop on the crisis organized by the International Crisis Group and hosted by the Center for Electronic Journalism at The

American University in Cairo in April this year and it was evident again, two weeks later, at the 2007 Arab Broadcast Forum, the annual gathering of Arab television executives.

The central issue: “The Arabs see the victims are not Arabs, and we don’t care,” Khaled Ewais, Al Arabiya’s political producer, told the Cairo gathering, which brought together reporters and editors from across the Arab world. Fayez el Sheikh Saleik, Khartoum correspondent of *Al-Hayat*, concurred: “Sudan is a marginal country when it comes to the Arab region.”

Darfur “not a popular topic” in the Arab World

Some pointed to an even more insidious issue: In other regional conflicts, Arabs are the victims. In Darfur, Arab militias are the perpetrators. That’s not a popular topic.

“The media are directly responsible for this crisis,” an angry representative of the Liberation Front of Darfur told those assembled in Cairo. While few of the journalists were willing to go quite that far, there was widespread acknowledgement that Darfur has been the biggest untold story of the Arab world.

“Arab journalists are working within non-democratic systems, so you can’t expect them to talk about Darfur,” said Saleik of *Al-Hayat*. The Arab media is “ultimately very

interconnected with the ruling system” according to Ahmed Hissou, a Syrian journalist working for the Arabic service of Germany’s Deutsche Welle radio, and Arab governments “do not accept any internal crises, whether religious or ethnic.” As a result, said Kamal al-Gizouli of the Sudanese writer’s union, when they do report on Darfur, Arab media “are talking only about sovereignty when the real issue is the rights of people to live in peace.”

The numbers are grim. More than 250,000 dead; 2.5 million refugees; four million in need of relief assistance. “Why is there no debate in the Arab mass media?” asked Nadim Hasbani, Arab media officer for the International Crisis Group (ICG).

Dr. Amani Tawil of the al-Ahram Center for Strategic Studies offered one explanation: “Selective information.” Television, she said, “reflects the special agenda of each government in the Arab region,” while newspapers “have a tendency to marginalize stories about other Arab governments.” Until the recent Saudi initiative on Darfur, Arab regimes—and thus most Arab media—had a hands-off approach to Sudan.

Non-journalists like Roland Marchal of the Centre d’Etudes et de Recherches Internationales in Paris and Khaled Mansour, spokesman for the World Food Program, praised some Western coverage—including that of the BBC and the *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof—for putting a human face on the Darfur conflict by focusing on the plight of individuals. *Al-Hayat* was also singled out as “indefatigable in its

continuous coverage of the events in Darfur.” But the overwhelming message was that when most Arab media bother to report on the crisis, they focus on political machinations, not human impact. “Arab media coverage is like a person on a plane looking down,” said Sudanese Member of Parliament and political activist Salih Mahmoud Osman, while Western coverage portrays the pain of the victims.

Arab journalists express unprecedented self-criticism

But it wasn't the “experts” alone who were critical. This writer has never heard a group of Arab journalists so brutally frank in public about the pressures and pitfalls of their own coverage.

“We Arab journalists, sorry to say, deal with Darfur as governments do,” said Tahir el-Mardi, Khartoum correspondent for Al Jazeera. “We have 22 agendas on Darfur and the West has one. Arab journalists, to say the truth, are entangled in political issues.” Mohamed Barakat, political editor at the Egyptian daily *Al-Akhbar*, said that in the Arab world, all politics truly are local: “There is an agenda which is local according to the country in which it takes place.”

Others pointed to the constant talk of Zionist plots and Western conspiracies in Arab coverage of Darfur, the preoccupation with “strategic Arab interests,” and what one

political editor called the “fantasies” about a Western oil grab, all of which came at the cost of reporting on the human toll.

Al-Gizouli of the Sudanese writer’s union said the history of Arab journalism is to blame. An entire generation of journalists and intellectuals were weaned on the notions of Arab mobilization and confrontation in the face of the imperialist and colonialist aggressor. That legacy is heard in the Darfur coverage. “There is no voice but the battle with Israel and the imperialists. That is what has been fed to the Arab intellectuals. If there is no role for Zionists, [the Arab reporter] creates it from his own imagination and Zionism means conspiracy, the main gallows on which hangs the conscience of the journalists.”

“The Arab journalist is an offspring of his environment,” agreed Hissou of Deutsche Welle. “We had imperialism and Zionism with double-standards. Arab officials say Bush is jeopardizing Sudan, so Arab journalists must accept this conspiracy.” He read a series of excerpts from Arab coverage that, he claimed, demonstrated that the reporting “is heavily freighted with ideological and political assumptions that ... imperil our journalistic neutrality.” Hissou quoted *Al-Hayat’s* influential columnist Jihad Khazen as writing that the Bush administration and the Israel lobby are using Darfur “as a smokescreen to hide other crimes, from Palestine to Iraq” and Hissou claimed that while Al Jazeera has given substantial coverage to Darfur, “it has invited Arab analysts, writers, and physicians to ridicule all reports transmitted by the global television networks on the various acts of murder, rape, and forced displacement.” El-Mardi of Al Jazeera’s

Khartoum bureau countered by saying that the channel covers the crisis “in an objective manner” and “any topic concerning policy in Sudan has the opinion, the facts and the counter-opinion. If it does not, it does not go to air.” However, he added, “Darfur is a political issue in the first instance” and “there is a very thin line between the professional journalist and the political person.”

Ewais of Al Arabiya presented data showing that Arab media devotes a small fraction of the time and space to Darfur as it does to crises like Iraq, Palestine and Lebanon, while the Western media gives it significantly more attention. Salih, the Sudanese MP, said covering Darfur “doesn’t prevent us from discussing the humanitarian suffering in Darfur as well.”

“If we say there are violations of human rights in Darfur, we are not denying violations by Israel and the US in Iraq and Palestine,” agreed Al-Gizouli. Still, he lamented, “It is very hard to put Darfur on a par with Arab stories.”

“I know, sometimes the story is complex and difficult to communicate,” Khaled Mansour of the World Food Program told those gathered, “but the Arab media’s coverage of the humanitarian side of the conflict has been very weak” when compared to that of Western news organizations.

Who to blame: money, time or governments?

For many newspapers, money is a big issue when it comes to Darfur. Several Egyptian editors said their publications simply don't have the resources to cover the crisis properly. But others pointed out that the pan-Arab newspapers and satellite TV channels have plenty of money and a level of professionalism that has brought a human face to other regional tragedies. "Al Jazeera focuses on the human side in Palestine," said al-Gizouli. "So you have to ask why they don't do the same in Darfur. There is a double standard on human feelings. Al Jazeera is operated by Arabs so they show sympathy for the Palestinian and Iraqi people and show the dead babies there, but when it comes to Darfur, they don't. They want to show Arabs always as victims."

At times the debate grew heated. Some journalists in the audience objected to the constant criticism. "We are here to participate in a discussion about developing better coverage, not to have scorn heaped on us," an Egyptian editor snapped at one speaker. "I have traveled to Darfur; I am not here to listen to criticism."

Yet the comment opened a far-ranging discussion about the fact that many Arab news organizations get—and report—a distorted view of Darfur because they visit as part of tours arranged by the Sudanese government which, according to Sudanese columnist Alhaj Warrag, takes the view that "everything in Darfur is a conspiracy of the Zionists" and imposes "redlines" on its own media that mean Sudanese reporters cannot cover

anything about violations of human rights, police or security. “I am an Arab and a Muslim and I was nearly ready to accept this,” he said, until he went to the camps “and I met someone who watched his sister being raped by the Janjaweed.”

Barakat of al-Akhbar said guided tours and journalist visits as part of official delegations “pave the way for getting to Darfur but you are besieged by the agenda of this particularly diplomatic mission which means you cannot flee.” The other problem is that such visits present a skewed view. “Most of the journalists invited by the Sudanese government go to camps in good condition that seem like the Hilton hotel but Western journalists go in through Chad and see the real situation,” said el-Mardi from Al Jazeera.

As with the Western media, Arab journalists face huge logistical hurdles in breaking out of the guided tour approach to covering Darfur. Saleik, the *Al-Hayat* Khartoum correspondent, recalled that for a July 2004 visit to Darfur, he went on a cross-Africa odyssey from Khartoum to Nairobi, to Lagos, to Chad, and finally into Darfur. “The nature of the crisis is different from Iraq or Palestine,” he told the gathering. “In Darfur, you can walk a long time in the desert to reach the news, but in Palestine it’s easy.”

Could editors do more?

Then there's the issue every reporter around the world ultimately confronts: How important is the story to the editor and the reader? "Palestine and Lebanon was the priority," Saleik recalled of his coverage in recent years. "We sent many stories from Darfur, but they didn't get published."

"There is the problem of who compiles the news," explained Hassan Satti of *Asharq Alawsat*, pointing to psychological, cultural and religious factors which can shape an editor's outlook. "Coverage is with the spirit of the editor and he can fall victim to his traditions," he said.

As one Egyptian journalist whispered to me in an aside, "You need to know who you are working for." He also said that when he tried to write stories about Darfur from Cairo, his editor would ask suspiciously, "Why are you writing this? What is your motive?"

The most emotional attack on Arab media coverage of Darfur came from Nabil Kassem, producer/director of *Jihad on Horseback*, a documentary about Darfur commissioned by Al Arabiya three years ago but killed after pressure from Saudi Arabia. Kassem, who still works for Al Arabiya, was bitter about what he calls "fantasy" reports in the Arab media that Arab tribes were forced to flee attacking Africans and claims that the refugee camps were Zionist propaganda.

“The Arab tribes fleeing from the Africans, where are they?” he asked. “Then I went to the camps the Arab media said didn’t exist.” Kassem said he left his objectivity in the dust of the Darfur desert. “I am speaking as a humanitarian, not a journalist who is neutral,” he told the gathering. “How can anyone go and see millions of displaced people and remain balanced?”

“Until now, I cannot forget what I saw. I left women and children lying there dying.” With tears in his eyes, he confronted the Egyptian editor who had earlier bristled at criticism of Arab coverage and boasted that he, too, had visited Darfur. “Did you see that? Did you see them dying?” Kassem challenged the startled journalist. “Then why didn’t you write it? I am in a rage. Arabs should be ashamed having one million Muslims begging for help. Shame!” (For more on Kassem, listen to my audio interview).

Nabil Hasbani of the International Crisis Group said Al Arabiya largely abandoned Darfur coverage for several years after the documentary was pulled. Most of the channel’s reporting was confined to pieces filed by UN correspondent Talal Haj. There was “no information from the ground,” which “left the audience thinking the UN controls the crisis” and thus, it’s not an Arab issue.

Al Jazeera also largely ignored the crisis until its coverage “changed drastically” between 2004 and 2006. In recent years, Al Arabiya’s coverage has likewise dramatically stepped up. “We run very critical coverage of Darfur now. We don’t care who we

offend,” one executive of the channel told me. Why then, I asked, had *Jihad on Horseback* been killed and other Darfur reporting abandoned? “Back then,” he said with a sardonic smile, “we cared.” That Al Arabiya’s news executives shared the dais with producer Kassem said much about that change of viewpoint.

The debate continues in Abu Dhabi

Darfur was also on the agenda at the Arab Broadcast Forum in Abu Dhabi two weeks later, but the discussion was far less frank—possibly because the session was broadcast live on Abu Dhabi TV and Al Jazeera Moubashar. Instead of candid discussion of government restrictions and ethnic biases, news executives, including those from some Western channels, alternated between boasting of their own coverage and kissing up to the head of Sudanese TV, the man with veto power over Sudan visas and Darfur permits.

Still, there were moments of candor.

“I think we have less coverage from Darfur, print and broadcast media. I think sometimes we editorialize many issues in this part of the world, we feel that this is part of our pan-Arab world and we feel we should keep [our] hands off this,” a representative of Kuwait TV told his colleagues.

“If you watch any Arab station any night you will have reporting on Iraq, on Palestine, but it is rare to see news about Darfur. So no there isn’t enough,” concluded Samir Sabbah, head of Middle East media for Reuters TV.

The debate which began in Cairo between those who track the Darfur issue and those who covered it, continued in Abu Dhabi. And once more Al Jazeera was in the crosshairs. “Al Jazeera sees itself as voice of Muslims and Arabs in the world, but why don’t they implement this policy in Darfur? Why don’t they tell us it’s Muslims killing Muslims?” asked Hasbani of International Crisis Group.

Al Jazeera’s Aref Hijjawi defended his channel’s coverage. “We always talk about Darfur and we do our best. Darfur is not easy to access. Darfur in the media is a political issue. And the documentary recently transmitted by Al Jazeera clarified that there is petrol in the issue.”

Western and Arab broadcasters alike bemoaned the difficulties they face in getting crews into Darfur. “It’s not very easy. You might get as far as Khartoum and never get in,” explained Anna Williams, the planning editor at BBC World. She said the BBC’s Khartoum correspondent had not been able to access Darfur in more than six months and now had to pull out of the country after his work permit was revoked by the government.

“The interpretation of ‘difficult’ is relative to the expectations of people,” the head of Sudan TV shot back. “Darfur is full of media people.”

“There are times when we feel the authorities in Sudan are very supportive of our work but that doesn’t sometimes tally with the reaction we get sometimes locally from the security people,” Hosam El Sökkari, head of BBC Arabic, interjected.

Octavia Nasser, Middle East editor at CNN, agreed. “When you talk about access, it depends on who you ask. Is it easy to get to Darfur, yes and no. We live in a dangerous world we are all covering. Access is difficult, but it’s attainable. We all have different standards for access. We have to worry about security of correspondents, security of crews. While someone may give us a pass, we need to weight different things.” Abu Dhabi television trumpeted the fact that its documentary unit had just returned from Darfur, but others quickly pointed out the crew had traveled on a Sudanese government-escorted tour.

A new report on Darfur from Reporters sans Frontiers talks of a “bureaucratic fence” that is blocking access, where “the usual red-tape is complicated by the Sudanese government’s arbitrary measures” that includes blacklisting of news organizations and individual reporters.” Meanwhile, those reporters who approach the story from Chad often end up basing their reports solely on the word of refugees, thus producing stories that are “inevitably incomplete” and often “misrepresent reality”

Even so, RSF adds, despite the stereotype that Sudan is “a land of massacres, a terra incognita in which the 21st century’s first genocide is unfolding in Darfur, out of sight, without foreigners reporting what is happening, without any Sudanese voicing

criticism,” the reality is much more complicated, with even some Sudanese newspapers producing coverage that is highly critical of the government and giving an outlet to opposition “voices that find it hard to make themselves heard outside Sudan.”

But not everyone bemoans a lack of coverage. For at least one person at the Abu Dhabi conference, it wasn't a question of not enough coverage, but of too much. “Darfur has pre-occupied every person in the world,” said Sudanese social scientist Dr. Mahmoud Majout Haroun. “The definition of Sudan is Darfur. The media has created a problem. There is a dramatization and a magnification of the situation. It is merely a media situation now. There is coverage which is more than any event in the third world.”

Between self-congratulatory pats on the back from representatives of companies as disparate as Fox and Al Jazeera, there was a general acknowledgement from Arab broadcasters that Darfur suffers from the same subtle racist overtones that colors US coverage of sub-Saharan Africa, the perception that, in the brutal newsroom maxim, it's just ‘more flies on black faces;’ just another interminable African conflict.

In fact, James Zogby, president of the Arab American Institute, unveiled a new survey that found that more than 80 percent of the Arab public in four Arab countries believes pan-Arab satellite channels should devote more coverage to Darfur. “The myth that Arabs don't care about Darfur is just that, a myth,” Zogby told the broadcasters.

That may be so, but some Sudanese journalists are still skeptical that their Arab colleagues will give Darfur more than a glancing look. In Cairo, columnist Warrag used

Auschwitz as an analogy for Arab media denial of the reality in Darfur. “Can you imagine having your village burned and people say nothing happened to you?”

“We shouldn’t kid ourselves—any coverage of the conflict is fraught with practical issues. It’s often dangerous, it saps resources and access is difficult. But it’s a story we must cover,” CNN’s Nasser told the Abu Dhabi gathering.

Andrew Simmons of Al Jazeera English said Western and Arab journalists alike—“regardless of your branding”—have a responsibility to take a more comprehensive look at the conflict. “It is a great TV picture to look at Darfur,” he said. “But we have a responsibility to our viewers to analyze, explain, to further the political debate over Darfur.”

Which begged the ultimate question raised earlier in Cairo by an angry and frustrated representative of the Darfur Liberation Front: “Arab mass media talk about journalists being killed in Iraq. But why don’t you send journalists to be killed in Darfur?”

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Journalists and others who track the Darfur issues are invited to contribute comments and articles to continue this discussion in future issues.
