

## Damning report exposes media failure in Haiti

**Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) yesterday released a damning report exposing the media's unbalanced coverage of international humanitarian crises last year.**

The report criticises the media's "under-reporting" of stories such as the drug war in Columbia or the lack of R&D on AIDS, and highlights the devastating effect this can have.

One of the crises supposedly under-reported by the media is the terrible violence in Haiti (see 'Key Facts' box), which accounted for zero of the 14,529 minutes of the three major U.S networks' nightly newscasts in 2005.

So, has the violence in Haiti been 'under-reported'? Human Rights Watch's Urmi Shah describes the "constant battle with media outlets" to get stories such as Haiti covered. "The media is only interested if the story has moved on...[it has been] an uphill struggle...to get our work on Haiti covered in the UK media," Shah said.

Neither *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Guardian*, *The Times* nor *The Independent* has ever mentioned the murder by death squad of 24 Haitians in the town of Saint Marc last February. In contrast, the suicide bomb attack that killed 16 Israelis in Beersheba in August 2004 has been mentioned in no less than 30 articles by the same newspapers.

It seems the discrepancy of media coverage is not just limited to violence. Hurricane Jeanne, which smashed into Haiti on September 24<sup>th</sup> 2004, killing 2,000 people and leaving thousands homeless and without access to food or clean water, was mentioned just four times in *The Daily Telegraph* in the three months following the event. *The Guardian* mentioned it twice, *The Independent* five times and *The Times* six.

When compared with the staggering 128 *Telegraph* articles mentioning Hurricane Katrina in the three months following the date it struck New Orleans, or the 155 *Guardian* articles, or the 235 *Independent* articles, the contrast becomes clear. *The Guardian* afforded Hurricane Jeanne in Haiti just 1.29% of the coverage it gave Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. *The Independent* gave it 2.13% and *The Telegraph* 3.13%. It would appear as though Haiti's place on MSF's list is deserved. Indeed, it could be argued that 'under-reported' is a massive understatement.

Several theories have been put forward attempting to explain the 'under-reporting'. David Edwards, co-editor of Media Lens, a UK media watchdog, argues that U.S foreign policy, designed to create a favourable environment for private investment at the expense of the Haitians, is largely culpable for the current situation in Haiti. The U.S, for instance, funded, armed and trained the right-wing paramilitaries that overthrew the democratically elected Aristide during his first stint in power in 1991. It is the corporate elite that would have the most to lose were this issue reported properly, and the corporate-owned mass media, who depend on commercial advertising for 75% of their income, may be unwilling to risk upsetting them.



As Edwards put it, covering the violence in Haiti properly would mean "exposing how the West has selected, trained, established, armed and supported dictators for the purpose of subordinating the needs of the poor and defenceless to Western profits and power."

Andrew Buncombe, of *The Independent*, disagrees. "I don't think it's an active decision." He cites practical difficulties as a reason for poor coverage of Haiti. "[Haiti is a] complicated story you can't do simply from the office; you have to go to Haiti and make the investment." Buncombe adds, "In Haiti there has been violence for so long that maybe the media asks 'what's new about this?'"

ITN's Jon Snow suspects the UK media may view Haiti as an "American hemisphere problem", and that its lack of British colonial links, unlike places such as "Zimbabwe", might be a reason for the lack of interest.

Of course, it could be argued that it is not public opinion that shapes what is reported in the media; rather, it is the other way around.

Whatever the reasons, Haitians will be hoping for increased international attention to help end the violence and poverty that has left them living in a state of fear. Although MSF's report raises important questions of the media's performance in covering far away crises, the situation appears unlikely to change in the near future.

**Reported by Jamie Stern-Weiner.**

### Haiti crisis - Key Facts

- 55% live on less than \$1 a day
- 42% of children are malnourished
- MSF treated 1,500 gunshot wounds last year, half of them women and children

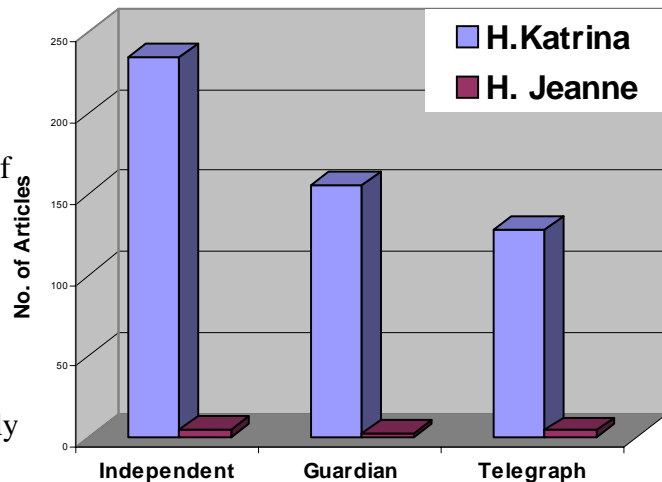
## Media's double standard puts Third World lives at risk

In February 2004, twenty-four people from the Haitian town of Saint Marc were brutally murdered, one burned alive, by a pro-government death squad. September 2004 saw 2,000 Haitians killed and thousands more left homeless by Hurricane Jeanne. Had either of these events taken place in a Western country, there would have been wall-to-wall media coverage, scrutinising from every angle the devastation and destruction, leaving no stone unturned. As it was, they occurred in a small, incredibly poor, black South American nation over 4,000 miles away, and the media shockingly feigned blindness to the horrific destruction and violence that has left the already crippled Haitian people living in a state of fear.

This callous double standard, which places the value of a Third-World life below that of a Western one, is widespread within the media. Indeed, the other humanitarian crises on Medecins Sans Frontieres' list of under-reported stories (see page 3 article), for example the civil wars in DR Congo and Uganda, also took place in poor, black, Third World countries. When compared with the level of coverage afforded to, for instance, the terrorist attacks in Spain or Hurricane Katrina, a clear and consistent discrepancy is apparent.



Flooding in Haiti caused by Hurricane Jeanne  
([www.ammara.com](http://www.ammara.com))



What makes the Western media's treatment of Haiti particularly galling is that it was US and World Bank policies, designed to maximise corporate profits in Haiti at the expense of its people, that brought Haiti to its knees.

Not one British newspaper deemed the slaughter of the innocent Haitians in Saint Marc worthy of mention in even a single article.

The Media plays a crucial role in allowing human rights atrocities to continue. If newspapers, including this one, continue to ignore Third World suffering, editors in Fleet Street will have as much blood on their hands as the death squads in Haiti

By  
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