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Better Press Skills Could Help Relief Groups

By Stephen G. Greene

A lack of training in how to work with reporters often prevents relief groups from getting the kind of favorable news coverage they depend upon to draw public attention -- and attract donations -- to humanitarian emergencies, according to a new report.

The report, commissioned by the Fritz Institute and the Reuters Foundation, is based on separate surveys of press officers at 54 relief charities and 290 journalists who write about humanitarian emergencies. Its author, Steven S. Ross, is an associate professor at Columbia University's journalism school.

Few relief charities give any training in press relations to the people who run their field operations in the complex emergencies that often follow wars or natural disasters, the report says -- in part because donors are reluctant to see any money earmarked for relief go to support such training, even if it could generate more revenue in the long run.

Competition among relief charities also complicates the picture. Seeking publicity to promote their own efforts, aid organizations often are reluctant to give credit to their colleague organizations, the report says, so journalists often get a partial or dis-

torted perspective on relief operations.

Journalists, for their part, seldom cover relief efforts full time, and so few develop much expertise in the area, the report says. They typically are assigned for short periods to cover crises in various parts of the world, and often lack the kind of background knowledge of a region's history and culture that would give more depth and authority to their reporting.

The high cost of covering emergencies in remote areas overseas is perhaps the biggest obstacle to such efforts. And journalists say that imperatives of the news cycle tend to discourage editors from paying much attention to chronic crises that may not involve lots of deaths within a short period.

Among the steps the report recommends to improve the situation:

- * Create or identify a single organization that takes the lead in providing journalists with background information and frequently updated status reports about current crises around the world.

- * Encourage journalists to take advantage of the resources that do exist (like AlertNet,

ReliefWeb, and Web sites run by United Nations agencies and other bodies).

- * Provide continuous training in press relations for staff members of relief groups, particularly those in regional offices.

- * Create some mechanism for training journalists in covering emergencies -- and, in some cases, help to underwrite the cost of their trips.

The journalists who participated in the survey included reporters, editors, and columnists, of whom 58 percent came from the United States. The remainder came from Western Europe, Asia and the Pacific region, Africa, South America, and elsewhere.

Nearly half of the aid officials were from Europe; 20 percent were from Asia, and 11 percent from North America.

Copies of the complete report, "Toward New Understandings: Journalists & Humanitarian Relief Coverage," as well as the executive summary are available on the Fritz Institute's Web site, <http://www.fritzinstitute.org>. Single paper copies may also be requested by sending an e-mail to info@fritzinstitute.org.

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