

Humanitarian Stories and the Media

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Ongoing international crises, such as hunger, poverty and AIDS, often don't receive media attention until they erupt into disaster. Then, when a chronic crisis finally becomes "news," journalists assigned to cover the story must scramble — often in vain — to understand the context of the war, famine or other disaster.

A new report, "Toward New Understandings: Journalists & Humanitarian Relief Coverage," examines the problem, and looks at how to increase coverage of humanitarian stories. The study — conducted by Steven Ross, Associate Professor at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, in New York, and commissioned by Reuters AlertNet and Fritz Institute — surveyed press officers from 54 humanitarian relief

organizations and 290 international journalists.

"Lack of journalistic resources and crisis fatigue are the two biggest reasons keeping crisis stories off the news agenda," the report said.

According to the report: "Part of the problem is that journalists tend to be assigned to humanitarian aid stories on an almost random basis; they are general assignment reporters, international reporters, or have another beat entirely such as crime, education, or government."

As a result, journalists are forced to rely on Non-Governmental Organizations, but most NGOs don't possess the resources required to maintain an adequate media-relations office. The report cites NGOs' lack of media

skills as compounding the problem of media inattention.

"Journalists say they need more frequent updating from NGOs and NGOs say they have trouble building lists of journalists to whom they can send information," the report says.

The report suggests that relief organizations increase their media relations activities and make better use of e-mail and the internet to make information more accessible to journalists.

The report also suggested improved training for journalists, so they would be able "to see the early warning signs of famine or disease, and to gauge the adequacy of resources available to ameliorate a problem."