Role of Media in Covering Humanitarian Conflict

BY Shaili Chopra

Media coverage raises public awareness of an issue, at the same time bringing the concern to the attention of policy makers and international governing bodies. Images of dead bodies and deserted streets, the genuine uncertainty over what was happening are bound to coerce a reaction. Linked to this, is the tendency of the international media to miss the subtleties of an issue and report superficially such as in the case of Yugoslavia during the Great Lakes crisis. The events were reported as the conflagration of age-old ethnic hatreds rather than a current power struggle, unaffectedly urging a different reaction from the international community than it would have, if the real situation were conveyed.

There is also a tendency among the media to portray a bleak image of helplessness and play up the matter. For instance, in Current Events, a mini-magazine for middle school students published by Weekly Reader, a report carried a story "six 'infants' were killed in the Aug. 9 bombing at the Jerusalem pizzeria." While six Israeli children between the ages of two and 16 were tragically murdered, no infants were killed. Incidents such as these add fuel to the fire in previously sensitive subjects such as the ongoing discord in Israel.

As an intermediate, it is crucial for the media to highlight the capacities of people and their ability to cope with crisis, thus acting as a platform for informed international support and not just sympathy. Also, traditionally, there is a causal link between media coverage and the extent of resources allocated. Increased media coverage helps attain-
ing a sustainable momentum and mediation-support mechanism for non-governmental organisations. "Field Presence" for humanitarian crisis legitimises the work of relief agencies world over. In fact increased media coverage increases aid supplies toward the place. The problem of many NGOs to work only in "media-attracting" activities could be thus addressed.

There is a need for the media to distance themselves from official sources and propaganda and seek out for in-depth coverage of any conflict. Perhaps an effort toward future examination of the media can be strategically used to further enhance humanitarian relief operations rather than undermine them.

Till we connect again...