

# CHAPTER 4

## THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA AND PUBLIC INFORMATION

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### Introduction

Peace operations – a joint military and civilian endeavour – require public support, which is vital to the attainment of the mission. The central role of public information is to gain and maintain broad support and understanding for peace operations. Public information is a ‘non-lethal weapon’ at the disposal of the mission leadership to convince the parties to the conflict and the population to engage in a friendly course of action.

The delivery of this message requires the media, and those media practitioners who mediate information messages first need to be convinced of the veracity of a non-violent course of action. This is much easier said than done in a country that has gone through more than a decade of debilitating civil war characterised by horrific atrocities and violations of international humanitarian law, including massacres, amputations and mutilations, torture, rape, massive destruction of property, and looting of the nation’s mineral wealth. Even after the war, the situation is that seventy per cent of the population is illiterate; life expectancy stands at 38 years, and infant mortality is 170 per 1,000.

Convincing media practitioners therefore requires credibility – that is, saying it the way it is, providing as much available information as possible, and being equipped to answer questions at any time. In other words, in order to succeed, a proactive public information strategy is required, providing free and open access to the media with completely accurate and timely information.

The aim of this chapter is to highlight the role of the media and public information in the Sierra Leone peace process, with a view to identifying lessons that can be broadly applied in other peacekeeping environments – bearing in mind that each conflict situation differs and public information should be fashioned to suit specific circumstances.

## The media in Sierra Leone

The Sierra Leonean media – not a very dynamic industry at the best of times and virtually entirely Freetown-based – was virtually destroyed by the war. More than 70 per cent of trained media professionals fled the country, leaving the industry in the hands of mostly untrained media practitioners.

When UNAMSIL arrived on the scene in 1999, there was one television station for a population of 4.5 million, owned by the government and based in Freetown, and only three FM radio stations, concentrated in Freetown. Newspapers, on the other hand, sprouted everywhere. The reason for this was simple: they were easy to set up. A couple of hundred dollars would produce a four-page newspaper.

These newspapers served various partisan interests and their views about the way forward were as diversified as the interests they represented. Strikingly, these views were mostly largely uninformed and sometimes downright negative. Nonetheless, these newspapers had a pervasive influence on people and were major opinion-moulders.

The bulk of the population, including the rank and file of the RUF, resided in the interior and was insulated against the news bombardments that took place in Freetown on a daily basis. The consequence of this was that the country was further polarised: Freetown residents often thought quite differently from people in the interior. This made it difficult to mobilise the citizenry in support of any initiative. However, most Sierra Leoneans, including the opposing forces, avidly listened to the radio and were devotees of the BBC Focus on Africa and Radio France International English Service.

There was little interest from the international media in the Sierra Leonean conflict until 1997 and the coup that overthrew President Kabbah, the subsequent invasion of Freetown on 6 January 1999, and, of course, the abduction of 500 peacekeepers in May 2000. The latter event had an extremely negative impact on the image of UNAMSIL.

UNAMSIL was mandated to assist the government in implementing the Lomé Peace Accord signed in July 1999. The international community believed that a negotiated settlement was the only way to save Sierra Leone. Prior to the signing of the accord, there was mounting internal opposition to plans to talk peace with the rebels. The reasoning was that it was pointless talking peace with a group that could not be trusted and which had over the years destroyed

the very foundation on which the country was built. At a consultative conference before Lomé, even President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah asked: "Should we talk peace with those who have killed our brothers and sisters?" The answer was a resounding 'no'. But the president later bowed to pressure and signed the agreement, which brought Foday Sankoh into government in charge of strategic mineral resources, and enjoying the status of a vice-president.

Initial opposition to peace talks was transferred on to the UN peacekeepers, as it was thought that the UN, together with powerful countries, arm-twisted the president into signing the Lomé Accord. The RUF did not help matters. Almost immediately after Lomé, the RUF began to violate the agreement. In May 2000 they took hundreds of UNAMSIL personnel hostage, capturing their arms and ammunition. The international media responded with vitriolic criticism, as typified by the following commentary in the June 2002 New York Review of Books:

The UN mission in Sierra Leone now looks like a ludicrous attempt to apply the loftiest set of moral principles in a sadistic and predatory world. It is another case of precisely the kind of ruinous naiveté that the UN has been accused of suffering from in Bosnia and Rwanda. But it's worth remembering that it was the Clinton administration, and specifically Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who forced on President Kabbah the grotesque shotgun marriage with Foday Sankoh in the first place. It was at least as absurd to believe that Sankoh would be satisfied by power-sharing as to believe that the RUF could be conquered by a campaign of friendly persuasion, or that the rebels would be intimidated by the peacekeepers' modest show of force.<sup>1</sup>

The local press added insult to injury, referring to the mission as a 'toothless bulldog'. It described as disgraceful the abductions of more than 500 peacekeepers, and even agitated for the mission to be closed. In fact, local newspapers coined the word 'U-NASTY' to mean UNAMSIL, and substituted 'beach-keepers' for peacekeepers in their reporting on the mission. Within UNAMSIL, morale quickly plummeted. The mission itself had been grossly misunderstood. Whereas the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), the armed wing of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), had fought the rebels, the UNAMSIL mandate did not permit recourse to war should a warring faction become belligerent.

The first challenge, therefore, for the public information section was to assist people to understand and accept that the UN Security Council Resolution

1270, passed in October 1999, charged the peacekeepers with specific tasks, none of which was to go to war with any of the parties. A basic understanding of this role would help douse the flames of opposition to the UN, not just from the civilian populace, but also from the RUF and other opposing forces themselves.

## **Meeting the public information challenges**

During the period from January 2000 to early 2001 the RUF and other opposing forces felt threatened by the presence of the peacekeepers, while many people believed that the peacekeepers would complicate efforts towards a military defeat of the rebels. The UNAMSIL public information section therefore needed to reposition the mission in the eyes of the public, to launder its image, and to present it as an impartial force and one whose primary responsibility was to assist the Sierra Leone people to bring about lasting peace. It could also hint that the peacekeepers were trained soldiers, capable of fighting if the need arose. In order to achieve this shift in perception, the local and international media urgently needed to co-operate. It was a delicate act of balancing information, with each sector of the public ready to pull the sword at the slightest provocation.

The UNAMSIL public information section was quickly reorganised into various units: radio, print, community liaison and spokesman's office. Each unit has specific duties and responsibilities, though all sections work in tandem.

### ***Radio***

UNAMSIL set up its own radio station, called 'Radio UNAMSIL: The Voice of Peace', with wider coverage than the other FM stations in Freetown. It broadcasts 24 hours daily, seven days a week, on FM and short-wave frequencies.

Radio has been used effectively to send messages of peace to the Sierra Leone people. Thanks to this medium, the mission was not entirely at the mercy of local journalists to put across its messages. Moreover, distorted messages put out by some of the local and international press were quickly corrected by using radio. Soon after it began transmission the station became a main source of information for many Sierra Leoneans. Programming covers the progress of the peace process, such as reconciliation workshops and visits to the mission by ambassadors and military chiefs of staff from Troops Contributing Countries

(TCC). The top management of UNAMSIL, the Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG) and his deputies, including the force commander and deputy force commander, regularly address the nation and mission personnel on topical issues and recent events and milestones.

Programmes have been carefully crafted to suit the mood of the people. For example, there are programmes for children, for the youth, and even some for people in government. The majority of these programmes are participatory, so Sierra Leoneans themselves have an opportunity to discuss their problems and make recommendations. There is excellent public participation in the phone-in programmes, in which a wide range of issues pertinent to peace and reconciliation are discussed. The radio has played a great role in changing people's perceptions and, as will be seen below, it also rendered a remarkable service during the elections.

The public information section is now busy starting up an exciting new project in collaboration with the office of the UN SRSG, for children in armed conflict. This project involves the establishment of an independent radio station – Voice of Children – that will be operated by and for children affected by war. Strategic direction for Voice of Children will be provided by a special advisory board, which will include the minister of Youth and Sport. Although initially the station will be launched by UNAMSIL Radio, the public information section will eventually hand over the station to local partners. Final approval has been received for the project, and UNAMSIL is currently searching for children to staff the station. The station was due to go on air before the end of 2002.<sup>2</sup>

## ***Print***

The print unit is responsible for drafting and disseminating press releases on the mission's activities, which are circulated not only to the international and local media, but also to the various news divisions at UN Headquarters, which in turn disseminate the information to a broader audience. This channel was used very effectively and was responsible for changing negative perceptions of the mission held by UN member states and troop contributors.

Print also produces a quarterly magazine, *UNAMSIL Review*, which provides a compendium of events that happened over a given period of time and some analysis of the way forward. It is targeted at the opinion-makers in government and civil society, as well as at UN staff. The magazine is distributed free of charge. The print unit also prepares media kits for visiting journalists,

leaflets and handbills, which were distributed during all the phases of the peace process.

### ***Community liaison***

The community liaison unit has been very important in reaching the largely illiterate majority of the population with no access to conventional media, through non-conventional means such as theatre, comedy and sports. In addition to its head, the unit includes a company of comedians (the Young Professionals), a theatre/comedy troupe (the Bintumani Players), a theatre director, a women's 'mobiliser', a community-based television star, a cartoonist, a disk jockey, and two professional journalists.

Members of the community liaison unit have been deployed around the country in reaction to events and at different stages of the peace process. Their mandate is to bring communities together and help them heal; to help calm tensions among ex-combatants and between ex-combatants and their host communities; to de-traumatise former child combatants, amputees and other war-affected groups; to sensitise the population on subjects ranging from HIV/AIDS to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission; and even to educate UNAMSIL's own staff. The following examples illustrate the depth and diversity of the unit's engagement with local communities.

*Music:* To build confidence in the peace process shortly after UNAMSIL peacekeepers were deployed in Maken – the headquarters of the RUF, and still under RUF occupation – the unit organised a music concert in collaboration with Sierra Leone's biggest pop star, Jimmy B. The unit brought ten government ministers to the concert, who, for the first time, were entering rebel territory. They also invited the RUF hierarchy to attend, and convinced both the RUF and government representatives to dance together on stage to *Salone, Mi Land* (Sierra Leone, My Country). Footage of this unprecedented event was aired on national television on a regular programme produced by the unit, entitled 'Kapu Sens'.<sup>3</sup>

*Drama:* The unit took a popular theatre group, Spence Productions, on a road show to demobilisation camps around the country to perform a traditional dance drama on reconciliation, entitled *The Throne*. The dance drama was interspersed with comedy performances by the Young Professionals comedians. During the performances, information on UNAMSIL's mandate and deployment of troops, and on disarmament was disseminated.

*Media engagement:* The unit undertakes timely, proactive and deliberate information targeting. The head of the unit drops in unannounced at local media houses to comment on, or clarify stories. The unit has also designed radio programmes aired on Radio UNAMSIL for outreach purposes. These programmes are the most-listened to on local radio. These include ‘Tea Break’ (a morning current affairs and news programme, which after the BBC’s Network Africa, is a must for all radio listeners); ‘Agogo’ (a current affairs programme in Krio); and ‘UNAMSIL Nightline’ (a programme with special appeal to young Sierra Leoneans for its popular music, and peace and civic education messages). To capture the television audience, which although small, is influential, the unit designed ‘Kapu Sens’ – a weekly, one-hour comic programme that features UNAMSIL video footage on the peace process. The main characters are the local village chief and his wife, discussing topical issues.

*Sport:* Sports development is one of the unit’s outreach activities, given the keen interest of Sierra Leoneans in sport, and particularly in soccer. The unit formed a football club, UNAMSIL Peacemakers United, which competes in the local league series. The team has talented young players aged 16–20 who have been deprived of opportunities by the decade-old war. Its participation in the local league series competitions has further projected UNAMSIL’s peace-building image.

*Women’s mobilisation:* The unit, through the women’s ‘mobiliser’, has identified and organised groups of women at grassroots level, such as women in the markets, and women cooks, into a network for information outreach to the population. It organised a nation-wide Women’s March for Peace, which, although controversial, got women out and active as players in the peace process. By forming and educating the women’s network and channelling information through it, the women’s ‘mobiliser’ has been able to sensitise a broader audience to the peace process. Representatives from the women’s network have been interviewed on Radio UNAMSIL and featured on the television programme ‘Kapu Sens’.

*Comedy:* UNAMSIL has found that comedy is a very effective de-traumatising tool. The unit’s comedians, performing skits, plays, songs and jingles that they have written about UNAMSIL, are deployed to counter and neutralise negative publicity, and to intervene where a reduction in tension might be called for. For example, after disarmament in Makeni, UNAMSIL was informed that the citizens were planning some revenge attacks against the demobilised combatants. The unit sent in the comedians to sensitise both the public and the ex-combatants on the need to live together and reconcile. The comedians are deployed

at public places such as markets and motor parks, at schools, at amputee and internally displaced camps, and at interim care centres for child ex-combatants. Other UNAMSIL sections have also used the comedians, for instance to demonstrate safety procedures during UN Safety Stand-down Day, to encourage HIV/AIDS awareness during World AIDS Day, and to provide information on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission for Human Rights Day.

### ***Spokesman's office***

This is the hub of the entire public information section, where information about the mission and the peace process is sought by all and sundry. The mission spokesman has an enormous responsibility, in that the release of one wrong piece of information can snowball into unintended consequences. For example, in May 2000 the then UNAMSIL spokesman erroneously announced that the RUF fighters were 35 miles away and advancing towards Freetown. What followed was panic and confusion, and the already traumatised populace was once again on edge. It was later discovered that the information released was not correct. Efforts were made to reduce tensions, but only after the damage had been done.

Soon thereafter Ms Margaret Novicki was appointed as mission spokesperson. She monitored developments both in the mission and in the media with great sensitivity. Press conferences were initially called on a daily basis to update journalists on the latest developments. Now held on a weekly basis, the press conferences have opened up the mission and demystified it. They have brought about greater interaction between the media and the mission, something that has been invaluable to the image and success of UNAMSIL.

The spokesman's office is also involved in news distribution, which is done on a daily basis. News about the mission's activities is compiled and distributed electronically to foreign news services and local media. To ensure the stories get to print and air, especially in the local media, hard copies are sent to the various newspapers, radio and TV stations. These media get up to date information, and they get it on time. The same stories are posted on the UN and UNAMSIL websites.

The UNAMSIL public information section has, over the years, consciously and cautiously wooed the local media. The local media, especially some of the newspapers, can be erratic and uncooperative, but they can also be quite supportive. To get journalists to attend UNAMSIL press conferences, the public



information section ensures that transport is provided to and from mission headquarters. The fact that the journalists themselves need the news is subsumed by the mission's greater interest to have stories put out correctly. The public information section also facilitates journalists' travel to various parts of the country by making UNAMSIL helicopters available. They respond positively to every request and, where the information is simply not available, trouble is taken to explain why this is so. Suffice it to say that there is a continuous flow of information from the mission to the media.

UNAMSIL has also tried to build the capacity of the local media by organising a series of training workshops. These workshops have been quite helpful in taking media practitioners through the basic rudiments of journalism, and there has been a remarkable improvement in the quality of reporting. Journalists now at least make efforts to cross-check their information before they publish or broadcast.

### ***Lessons learned***

There is no doubt that the media has a great role to play in any peace operation. This cannot be ignored. Yet this institution can very easily be wrongly used, to devastating effect. Where it is positively employed, it becomes a major catalyst for positive change. The appropriate application of media influence should thus be a major cause for concern in any peace mission.

There are, of course, basic tenets, or ethics, of media practice. These include fair and objective coverage of events, respect for the truth, right to rebuttal, etc. However, ethics are basically moral principles and can hardly be legally enforced. The editor's headline is influenced by his mind-set, which in turn stems from his experiences and environment. Environments differ. The facilities available in various environments also differ. People's reactions to media stories differ from country to country. This can be understood as a function of the literacy rate. Where the bulk of the population is illiterate, media institutions become extra-powerful. The public does not question half-truths or even lies. The nature of the society, the cause of the conflict, the characteristics of the warring parties etc are all factors determining the final media product.

It is therefore important to conduct a careful study of the environment in which the mission is deployed. In the course of studying this environment, an effort must be made to know the various sectors of the public that the media and/or a public information department have to influence. For example, answers

should be sought to such questions as: What is the literacy level? What are the reasons for the conflict? Who are the main actors in the crisis as a whole? How sophisticated is the media industry? Who are the opinion makers?

A public information section must also have the capacity to establish a constructive and positive relationship with the media. In a situation of conflict, the media is usually sharply divided, with each side holding tenaciously on to their positions. However, there ought to be a constant in this interplay of forces. This is the need to have peace, to sheathe the sword, to negotiate rather than to slug it out at the battlefield. In some instances, the need to preserve the state as a corporate entity becomes the driving force. Where the media fans the embers of discord, peace is elusive. But where the media becomes a vehicle for the promotion of harmony, the attainment of peace is accelerated.

The leadership of any public information department is a crucial factor in forging a relationship with the media. Journalists prefer someone they can trust, someone they can relate to, and who shows sympathy and understanding for the constraints under which they operate. Journalists hate a stiff-lipped, cocky, or rigid information officer who churns out press releases and barks when there is a misrepresentation of the facts. The good intentions of a mission may easily be misunderstood and misrepresented simply because of the perceived arrogance of an information officer. Yet it is also possible for a peacekeeping mission that is in difficulty to be helped out by a sympathetic media, purely because of the level of rapport between the information officer and the journalist. Leadership therefore matters a great deal.

It is also important for the information section to help the local media to set an agenda for both government and civil society. For example, when it was time for disarmament in Sierra Leone, the public information section sought the assistance of the local media. They brought them on board and told them precisely what was expected of those who carried arms. The media then joined in the crusade to have all ex-combatants disarmed, including militia groups whom the government armed and who initially felt they should not be disarmed.

The leadership of any mission would normally urge people to reconcile. However, a statement to this effect may easily end up being a once-off, page six news item in a local newspaper. It is therefore the responsibility of the public information section to carefully work out a blueprint for the dissemination of messages of reconciliation, because without this vital element, the whole concept of peacekeeping becomes null and void.

It is important to realise that there will inevitably be crises in the course of any peacekeeping operation. Sometimes accusations fly like kites – from allegations of sexual abuse to charges of reckless driving by mission personnel. The job of the public information section is made much easier if strict in-house disciplinary codes are mapped out and enforced in order to reduce areas of friction between the mission and the civil populace.

However, the very nature of third-party intervention means that it is impossible to eliminate all areas of friction between the peacekeepers and the host population. The important factors are the frequency of incident occurrence and the effectiveness of the method used for damage control. Where an effective public information section is in place, damage can always be controlled. A mission that has suffered severe damage to its image will soon lose its confidence. Such a mission cannot be trusted, and the overall goal for which it was set up becomes unattainable.

It is thus clear that the public information component should be part of the advance team of any peace mission, deployed with all its equipment before the rest of the mission. It can then begin to sensitise and educate the population on what peacekeeping is all about – and, equally important, on what it is not about. In a volatile security environment the military will obviously be key partners to the public information section.

Adequate interaction and collaboration between the public information section and the military component fosters a good understanding of the terminologies and concept of operations adopted by the peacekeeping force. Although the ready availability of military commanders for media interviews and press briefings prevents speculative reporting on the prevailing military situation, it is also advisable to establish a post for a military spokesman to assist the mission spokesman at headquarter level.

In Sierra Leone, the assistance rendered to both the local and international media visiting the peacekeepers in the field encouraged the presentation of balanced account of mission activities. Military press information officers attached to the battalions in the field facilitated the speedy dissemination of information, covering a wide spectrum of community concerns. In fact, the military provided a very useful pool of human resource for the public information section, providing help with the writing of articles, and assisting with radio broadcasting to keep the broadcast service running on a 24-hour basis. Nevertheless, the senior mission leadership could be more forthcoming in sharing information with the spokesman, and adequate media training is recommended at this level.

## Conclusion

A peace operation is a joint military and civilian endeavour, demanding public support for the attainment of the mission. The central role of public information is to gain and maintain broad support and understanding for peace operations. All ways and means must be exploited to communicate to the public the mandate of the operation.

Since May 2001, UNAMSIL has made amazing progress towards the achievement of their mandate. The disarmament of about 60,000 combatants, including over 4,000 children, has been completed. The public information strategy has focused heavily on promoting the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration process, as well as on the peace-building activities of UNAMSIL. The mission has also assisted in the successful parliamentary and presidential elections of May 2002.

The focus is now on assisting the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Special Court. More importantly, all peace operations have their exit plans, and UNAMSIL is currently implementing an adjustment, draw-down and withdrawal plan. There is a vigorous media strategy to ensure that UNAMSIL does not incur the wrath of the people they were sent to assist in the first instance. The PI section will go to a great deal of trouble to explain the draw-down process in a way that does not create unnecessary panic. It must also create a sense of responsibility and a realisation among government officials that they will have to systematically take over all those services currently provided by UNAMSIL.

## Notes

- 1 James Traube, *New York Review of Books*, June 2000.
- 2 Interview with Margaret Novicki, Mission Spokesperson and Head of Public Information Section, Freetown, 22 August 2002.
- 3 UNAMSIL Pulse, *Kapu Sens: showcasing UNAMSIL, UNAMSIL Review*, Sierra Leone, 2002, p 32.