

Closing Statement
Roundtable on Media Coverage of the Darfur crisis
Amman, Jordan
28 August 2008

A group of Arab and Sudanese journalists held a roundtable discussion in Amman August 27 and 28 to discuss media coverage of issues related to the crisis in Darfur. The round table developed a number of recommendations with a view to improving both the quality and quantity of news coverage regarding Darfur.

Presented at the meeting were the research findings of a content analysis of the coverage of Darfur by 21 Sudanese and Arab media outlets over a period of one month in late 2007. Researchers also conducted phone interviews with 13 journalists from these same media outlets. The goal of this research was to provide a snapshot of how Darfur is covered and create the basis for the media to develop recommendations of how this coverage, where relevant, could be improved.

Highlights of the research show that the Sudanese media devoted significantly more time and space to the crisis than their counterparts from other Arab countries.

The research shows that the main topic of the news coverage tended to focus on the work of the diplomatic community with 33.7% of total time devoted to Darfur coverage (electronic media) while conditions of refugees received only 4.7% of time. Results were similar for the print media.

The findings also reveal that the geographical focus of the stories varied. In most cases (64.8% in Sudanese electronic media and 86.2% of non-Sudanese media) the story was presented as an international story with a focus on such issues as the International Criminal Court and diplomatic negotiations. On the other hand, the national dimension of the crisis received less coverage. Again, findings were similar for the print media.

The main focus of the stories tended to be the political dimension for both Sudanese and non-Sudanese media. Stories focusing on human interest and human rights violations received less time and space particularly in non-Sudanese media.

In terms of sources used, in 22% of the cases the source was not identified. A similar percentage saw Sudanese government officials as sources while international NGOs were used as sources in less than one per cent of the cases.

After reviewing the results, the participants agreed that the Arab media coverage of the crisis in Darfur fell short with respect to the following aspects:

1. Inadequate attention to the conflict in Darfur by Arab media;
2. Little coverage from the field;
3. Focus on the political side and neglecting humanitarian and human interest stories;

4. The events in Darfur did not provide comprehensive coverage of the conflict in a way that reflects, to an Arab audience, all aspects of the dispute; and
5. The media coverage often lacked objectivity, accuracy and balance.

The participants identified a number of challenges involved in covering Darfur which resulted in the weak coverage of Darfur. These challenges include:

- The difficulty of obtaining information, and access to the conflict zone because of restrictions imposed on journalists by the parties of the conflict;
- Some of the media lack a clear editorial policy while others were biased towards one party or the other;
- Restrictions and controls imposed by the parties of the conflict;
- Self-censorship;
- Lack of adequate financial resources for some Arab media while others did not allocate sufficient financial resources to cover the conflict often due to editorial policy; and
- Weak professionalism and lack of training regarding the coverage of conflict, war, investigative reporting, human rights and human interest stories.

The roundtable developed a set of recommendations which was adopted by the participating media institutions:

1. Inviting the Sudanese government, the militant movements and all parties of the conflict to facilitate the access of journalists to Darfur and ensure their safety, and lifting all restrictions imposed on them.
2. Inviting Arab governments to desist from interfering in the work of media organisations and lifting all restrictions on journalists, ensuring media freedom, and introducing democratic legislations to ensure freedom of the press and media.
3. Respecting journalists' rights in obtaining information so they can perform their duties professionally.
4. Requesting the Arab media to adhere to objectivity, credibility, accuracy and balance in the coverage of Darfur conflict and upholding professional ethics.
5. Inviting the Arab media and the responsible parties to train journalists to cover conflict and promote a culture of peace and human rights.
6. Calling upon Arab media to give more attention to the conflict in Darfur and to human rights issues with interest and concern for the coverage in the field.
7. Inviting media organizations and Arab journalists to diversify their sources of information searching for alternatives through the community and humanitarian organizations operating in Darfur and any other available sources.

The round table expects that these recommendations will lead to substantive initiatives and that initiatives addressing these recommendations will be developed.

The round table is part of a project developed with a number of organizations working in media and human rights issues including: AmmanNet/Community Media Network, Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, Khartoum Center for Human Rights and Environmental Development, Osservatorio di Pavia and International Media Support.

The final report with research findings and round table recommendations will be released later this year.

The participating media in the round table were:

1. Al-Sahafa daily (Sudan)
2. Um Durman (Radio) (Sudan)
3. Al-Ahram daily (Egypt)
4. Al-Masry Al-Yawm daily (Egypt)
5. Alarabiya TV (Dubai)
6. Abu Dhabi Satellite TV (Abu Dhabi)
7. Alsharq Alawsat daily (London)
8. Al-Nahar daily (Lebanon)
9. Al-Sijill newspaper (Jordan)