

Director's Note on IWPR - Africa

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With this package of articles, the Institute for War & Peace Reporting launches work in Africa. In a troubled continent, there are signs of hope: economic growth, representative governance, regional organizations and international initiatives. British prime minister Tony Blair and his Commission for Africa are preparing comprehensive development proposals for the G8 countries, and the continent will be a key European priority in 2005.

Yet the problems remain: genocide, HIV/AIDS, repressive strongmen and failing states ravaged by warlords. Sudan is currently the world's gravest humanitarian crisis. According to the Global Fund, up to 8,000 people throughout the continent are infected by HIV per day. According to British chancellor Gordon Brown, at the current rate of growth, it will take Africa more than a century to meet its core human development goals.

IWPR has been working elsewhere to strengthen peace and democracy in crisis areas through the development of responsible local media. Through reporting, training and capacity building projects, IWPR helps societies combat hate-speech and politically-driven reporting, and assists in building the kind of fact-based, independent journalism which is a pillar of any democracy. It helps to give people a voice.

Moving to include Africa for the first time, the Institute will be developing a programme of activities across the continent, with a focus on areas of conflict and acute crisis, and its long-standing themes - war crimes and conflict resolution, representative governance, minority and women's rights and development and social concerns.

Open and responsible media has a critical role to play in holding governments to account, combating corruption, building trust among communities, and supporting vigorous public debate on problems and solutions. Indeed, there can be no solutions without a free media.

This special package of articles illustrates the point. Zimbabwe under President Robert Mugabe has cracked down on opposition groups, non-governmental organisations and the independent media. As a result, it has turned from the breadbasket of southern Africa into a basket case.

Yet as it moves forward - and today, October 15, sees the acquittal of opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai on trumped up charges of attempting to assassinate the president - it faces far deeper challenges than just who will succeed the long-standing and aging leader. Civil society, and civil politics, will have to re-emerge, and this will take a long-term commitment by all involved.

"People must be free to express their views and this is not happening on the continent," said Trevor Ncube, chief executive of The Mail and Guardian in South Africa and owner of the Zimbabwe Independent and The Standard in Harare.

"IWPR has a unique model, providing skills, tools and an international platform," said Ncube, who will serve as a co-chair of IWPR's international council and chair of the board of trustees of the newly formed IWPR - Africa. "This is not parachute journalism: the Institute empowers people to produce their own stories from their own communities from a local perspective."

In taking our first step on the continent, IWPR is initiating a series of pilot reports on the Southern African Development Community. We will also be looking at conflict and war crimes issues in central and west Africa. Training activities lead to practical reporting projects, and more extensive institutional capacity building programmes will be developed as appropriate. In this effort, IWPR looks forward to extending partnerships with a wide range of local media, media development and human rights groups.

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Location: Africa

Focus: Zimbabwe Crisis Reports

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