

Development and Shashi Tharoor's Media Priorities

■ MEHRU JAFFER

How many media people are aware of the United Nations (UN) list of ten stories that its department of public information would like the world to hear more about? People on the street may know all about Muhammad as caricatured recently by a Danish cartoonist and much more about Madonna's music and marriages, but obstetric fistula?

Looking at headlines news and prime time programs

around the world today, it seems that the media has no clue as to what the UN is talking about. However Shashi Tharoor, under secretary general for communications and public information, is convinced with a passion that information is key to the success of both the UN and development. He tirelessly draws up a list each year of ten more stories that the world should hear more about, if only to ensure that these issues do not fall off the media agenda completely.

"I don't think we ever thought that the list was going to change the priorities of prime time news programmes overnight," Tharoor told Vidura. "Rather we want to make it as easy as possible for busy news rooms and journalists to understand what is important and interesting about these unreported stories, and how to get more information on them if their interest is sparked."

It was in 2004 that Tharoor first introduced the 10 Stories concept on May 3, World Press Freedom Day, spotlighting some international issues and developments that often do not get sufficient media attention. The list presents a snapshot of the most compelling stories. It includes a number of humanitarian emergencies, conflict or post conflict situations, women as peacemakers, over fishing as a threat to marine biodiversity and other matters of concern to the UN.

Tharoor admitted that it is very difficult to gauge the success of the list scientifically. But feels it is his duty to continue to press on behalf of those, whose stories remain unheard.



"The reason we seek to push these issues is not simply to gain media attention, but also to gain the attention of those who can address the problem we are spotlighting like obstetric fistula, for example, that are not easy to talk about," he added.

Fistula, a debilitating and in extreme cases a deadly condition, is causing suffering to millions of women. But this preventable medical and social tragedy remains unknown to most people. Caused by complications during childbirth, when emergency obstetric care is not available, the condition results in long-term, chronic incontinence and can lead to kidney disease and even death.

Damage to the nerves in the legs leaves some women unable to walk. In 95 percent of cases, the baby dies. Without treatment, prospects for work and family life are greatly diminished.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that more than two million women are living with fistula in developing countries and that an additional 50,000 to 100,000 new cases occur each year. Women suffering from fistulas are ostracised by their communities and abandoned by their families. Many become beggars and eventually die from untreated infections.

Doctors campaigning to bring the dimensions of fistula to world attention say it can be prevented if young girls married later, had adequate medical care during pregnancy, and received emergency obstetric care if they developed complications. In developing countries, however, only 58 per cent of women deliver their babies with the assistance of a professional midwife or doctor, and only 40 percent give birth in a hospital or health centre.

"Obstetric fistula is a double sorrow because women lose their babies and they lose their dignity," Thoraya Ahmed Obaid, Executive Director, UN Population Fund (UNFPA) pointed out. "It is possible to make this foolish and destructive stigma - a cause today of social as well as a physical trauma - as rare in Africa and Asia as it is in other parts of the world, with support of governments and influence wielders in the media

By shining a spotlight on it, we pave the way for a discussion on a problem that has festered in darkness," insisted Tharoor, who has enough evidence he says to suggest that his list of ten stories idea has worked in the past, and believes that its influence can only grow. Yahoo News has posted the list on the Internet and a major Arabic language daily ran all the ten stories as a feature once.

"We know that we are making only the smallest of dents in the public consciousness, but we believe this is a good start, something we can build upon," he continued.

He said that the ten stories concept has indeed succeeded in reaching a global audience. Attention peaked soon after the annual launch of the list on World Press Freedom Day in May, and in many cases familiar stories on issues highlighted by the list in newspapers around the

world ran throughout the year.

Besides, the English language version of the website continues to receive hundreds of thousands of hits every month, and 20,000 page views are on record of users who have delved beyond the list to the detailed account of the story underneath.

"And that is just the English version," Tharoor emphasized. "We provide this material in all six languages of the UN. Have we radically changed the way mainstream media chooses to cover one story over another? Not yet. But has the list made a real difference? Most definitely!"

To properly address its global agenda, the UN has long insisted that a partnership with civil society at large is not an option but a necessity. One way of taking this idea forward is the ongoing exercise of organising continuous Communications Workshops for NGOs, so that UN related information spreads more rapidly and is easily available.

At a similar workshop it was once pointed out that the UN has no direct control over what the media writes, but the UN can provide information to the media in a manner that it wants a story to be told. Part of the work of Tharoor's office is to bring together voluntary organisations, educators and other components of civil society for discussions with the UN system on issues that are not just universal in their scope but also have a direct and palpable impact upon the lives of children, women and men everywhere.

In an effort to disseminate information relevant to the dialogue amongst civilisations and the culture of peace, seminars and exhibits are organised routinely on unlearning intolerance through education, inclusion and example.

The seminar series includes topics like confronting anti-Semitism and confronting Islamophobia. "Fanning the Flame of Tolerance: The Role of the Media" considered ways to counter the effects of hate media on societies.

"No one is born intolerant, only taught to be so," believes Tharoor who suggested that any solution addressing the problem of "hate speech" without imposing censorship is the best one.

When questioned about the dominance of the American news agenda and how the UN counters attacks on its image, Tharoor said that some people are fundamentally hostile to the UN and remain out of reach of the institution's message, but there is also large sections of the population that has not made up its mind to be hostile to the UN. It is this audience that the UN directs its attention to convey its central message.

And the message seems to have been understood at least by the housewife next door, who complains each day that the only ones to benefit from the thriving media industry are publishers and advertisers. This is a refreshing thought at a time when editors would like the world to believe that they put into print only what readers want? ■

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