

JOURNALISTS UNDER PRESSURE: EXPERIENCES FROM THE FRONT LINE

WORLD PRESS FREEDOM DAY REPORT

BY NIGEL BRENNAN

It's extremely confronting to stand in front of such a large audience considering just over 5 months ago I was released after being held hostage for 462 days in Somalia. It is still difficult at times to talk about my experience, as my memories are still very raw.

My passion for photographing began after many years of travelling and working overseas, especially in 3rd world countries. After my travels, I enrolled at Griffith University to study photography. I choose photojournalism after reading several books including "One crowded hour", "Frontline" and "The bang bang club". I was inspired by these journalists who repeatedly flirted with death to record the true nature of conflict all over the world in some of the most dangerous places on earth. Some people may think that it's strange that a person would want to photograph war and conflict zones, my reasons for it was not because i am some sort of adrenaline junky or as my mother would say because i have a death wish. But for the simple fact that these stories need to be told to the world to show the futility of war and the mayhem that it creates on the innocent that get caught in these conflicts.

In August 2008, I travelled to Africa with my friend and colleague Amanda Lindhout. My intentions were to photograph a number of issues in Kenya and Somalia. I went to Somalia, in particular, to photograph the humanitarian and food crisis, the drought and the war between Islamic groups and African Union forces that occupy parts of Mogadishu. I knew Somalia was an incredibly dangerous country and that its capital Mogadishu is one of the most dangerous in the world. There has been no real government since 1991, which has caused anarchy and has seen Somalia be ravaged by war for nearly twenty years.

On our fourth day in Somalia, the 24th August 2008, we had organized to travel outside of Mogadishu to photograph one of the five IDP camps on the road to Afgooye. We had arranged with our fixer for extra security that day, as we would be going into a militia run area. 5km outside of the Mogadishu we stopped for what we thought was our extra security details, unfortunately it was an ambush that had been waiting for us. The realization of what was happening hit home very quickly. I was able to speak with my sister in the second week of being kidnapped, then this most basic of human rights to talk with ones family would be denied to me for the next 11 months. My family during this time had no idea if I was alive or dead. Its hard to descried how I felt in those first few weeks as my life was snatched away from me. Depression, anger and stress bore down on me, I went through a myriad of emotions fear, helplessness, hopelessness and powerlessness. I found myself in an extremely dark place but the human spirit is an amazing thing. I learnt very quickly that if I was going to survive I would have to adapt to my new circumstances, survival skills that I didn't even now I had kicked in.

After 2 months Amanda and I were separated, our conditions from that point started to deteriorate to a place that I would not wish on another human being. Over the next three months I was held in a room that was about 8 foot by 12 foot. The only time I was allowed to leave my room was to go to the bathroom or to wash clothes.

After 5 months, believing the three Somali's that were kidnapped with us had been killed, Amanda and I devised a plan to escape. Our plan was extremely simple, we basically did the only thing that we thought was safe considering our circumstances, we went to a mosque for only one reason, that we thought we would be safe in a house of worship. The 20 or 30 minutes that we had of freedom was the most liberating experience I think I will ever have in my life but at the same time it was the most intense and terrifying time I think I will ever go through. After being recaptured we were interrogated and shackled with chains around our ankles, these chains would remain on our legs until the day of our eventual release. Over the next 10 months our conditions got to a point where I considered suicide on several occasions. I was completely isolated and only able to talk when my captors came into my room. There is nothing more dehumanizing than the absence of human companionship. It was during these 10 months that both Amanda and I would be tortured both mentally and physically, I guess my belief in humanity was sorely tested and I would be pushed to limits that I thought I would never have to go ever in my life. But even in some of my darkest hours I saw a flicker of humanity in my captors that gave me hope to go on.

I stand here before you today not because my captors didn't kill me, but because of two reasons. Firstly I choose to survive and never gave up hope, and secondly because of my family. Unfortunately my family paid the ultimate price, it was up to them to pay the ransom for my life. By doing this they risked their own freedom, several of my family members were informed by the Australian government that they could face prison terms for paying a ransom. They were told that they would be breaking three major international laws, one of which carried a twenty-five years to life sentence.

The other person whose freedom has been taken away and has often been forgotten is the Somali journalist Abdi Elmi who was kidnapped with us. After his release he was threatened and had to flee to Kenya where he still remains. He is currently living in Nairobi under refugee status, unable to work and separated from his wife and three children who are still living in an IDP camp in Mogadishu. Unfortunately groups like Al-Shabbaab are targeting journalists, which limit their ability to report on Somalia's dire circumstances. According to the 2009 annual report of the National Union of Somali Journalists, 9 journalists were killed, 12 injured and 15 arrested, and nearly 100 journalists received death threats. On top of this, 4 media houses were closed down and seven radio stations were directly censured, due to this intimidation media houses have moved away from broadcasting news and current affairs.

The story that I went to tell in Somalia is still very much untold. Unfortunately

Somalia does not receive enough of the world's media attention. The IDP camps outside of Mogadishu, according to UN reports contain somewhere between 300-400,000 people, unofficially the figure is somewhere between 600-700,000 people, it accounts for the one of the largest groups of Internally displaced people anywhere in the world. These people live in makeshift houses constructed from sticks and plastic bags, there is no electricity, limited running water and very poor sanitary conditions. There is no opportunity for children to go to school or for parents to work due to the ongoing conflict, which makes family's dependant on aid organizations. The situation in these camps or Somalia is not set to improve anytime in the near future. The war is still going on in Mogadishu and other areas of the country. It is unlikely that either the government or Al-Shabbaab will get full control of the country, but one thing is for certain that the humanitarian situation will continue to deteriorate. More people will be displaced, more innocent people will be killed and the food shortage will intensify. There is a greater potential catastrophe that could occur due to many International Humanitarian Agencies either avoiding or are denied access to certain regions controlled by Al-Shabbaab.

Every day thousands of Journalist risk there lives in hot spots around the world because they are passionate about what they do and the stories that they tell. People will criticize me for going to Somalia because of the dangers involved, I will take all of that criticism on board but I went because I am passionate about what I do and it's a story that deserves more coverage. My experience in Somalia does not make me want to change career, I still intend to be a storyteller through the use of photography. Journalists by their very nature are storytellers, they do not own the stories they tell, nor do they belong to those about whom the story is told. I used to believe that photographs could change the world, its not the photograph that changes the world but the story that it tells. These stories when voiced become communal property and by extension a political tool to create change. Storytelling changes people's perceptions, it is then people that have the ability to act and change the world.