

Philippe Dahinden, Hironnelle Foundation, which operates media services in crisis areas

General Dallaire: Well done. Thank you very much, and now from the Hironnelle Foundation, Philippe Dahinden, a foundation that I have found exceptionally useful in my involvement with the International Tribunal.

Philippe Dahinden: Thank you. Hello. I am a journalist, and I am very pleased to be able to speak to you today, to speak to so many future young colleagues. In an interview one day, a musician, an African artist said to me, “the words can save people just as they can kill people.” That was stated by Baba Maal, the singer from Senegal. Why is that? Well, in May 1994, I spent two weeks in Rwanda as a reporter for Swiss Television like my colleagues earlier. Where as you know, at the time the genocide was taking place. I already knew the country. I knew also the media of hate. It was after the evacuation of foreigners, we were the first, with my cameraman to go as far as Kigali from the south through Butare. We saw a lot, a lot of corpses, too many. That’s not what I want to talk to you about today. In fact, when I was there, I was able to realize how information, or rather disinformation, propaganda, how they could actually kill, in a sense, civilians. At every roadblock set up by the militia, the Interehamwe, I could hear the radio, the radio RTLM which was designating the targets to be hit. I could also see that hundreds of thousands of civilians were fleeing, or waiting for the violence to stop. But these civilians had no information at all. All they could rely on were rumors, or the orders of the extremists. And when I sent back to Europe, together with other journalists, I thought that we journalists, we couldn’t just remain impotent looking at this. We did our job as well as we could informing the rest of the world, but these people, the victims of the events, who didn’t see our reports, they also deserved information. That’s a right, which is as vital as the right to food, or the medical care. They have a right to know. They have the right not to just receive rumors, propaganda, incitement to violence. In other words, they deserve not to be treated as sub-humans. It’s really a question of human dignity. So this fundamental right to be informed is what justified our profession, as journalists and the press this is what we demand. So the Rwandan journalists really couldn’t do that. The few professionals, who survived such as Thomas, who were themselves in the massacres, they couldn’t do their work. Therefore we decided without the journalists from Europe to actually go there to help our colleagues in Rwanda in order to meet this urgent need for information by creating an independent media.

In fact, by putting up a radio station, because there was no radio station there, we thought we would be able to reach out to many people. This radio was Radio Agatashya. Initially, it was designed to counter the hate media, but also to address the population in distress, people escaping genocide, people who were displaced refugees. From the beginning, the mission of the radio station was to give independent audited news. Despite the end of the war and the genocides, the aim was to try and calm hatred, to reduce tension when all this went on, the area you know was still inflamed, and when there was such strong enmity between the groups. So we were able to discover in a zone of conflict how important it was to disseminate information on the spot, to have a media close by in local languages, offered by local journalists. Some time later, we set up the Hironnelle Foundation. This

lead to other radio stations around the world: Liberia, Kosovo, Central Africa, Timor, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. You know, information is a weapon, which can kill people when it's manipulated. It's a major issue in conflict, and totalitarian regimes, such as the belligerents themselves try to control information as much as possible. We're sure they can also be an instrument of peace in order to counter propaganda, in order to counter the incitement of violence, and therefore to help to resolve or prevent conflict.

So I'd like to talk a little bit more about Radio Agatashya. It was set up Bukavu, and could be picked up by millions of listeners. It quickly became a regional station in Burundi and Rwanda, but it had to stop two years later because of the war, which was to lead to the overthrow of Mobutu. At that time, they had a correspondent's office, where the international criminal court set up in Arusha. They were able to continue their work to begin the independent agency for Rwandan press, which covered the trial everyday.

Now, as regards the impact of such a radio, I'd just like to give you one specific example. When the war, conducted by Kabila and his allies reached Bukavu, where our radio station was, we described as clearly as possible how the fighting was going. This information was really a bull walk against rumor and panic, particularly when rebel propaganda and falsely or inaccurately announced the presence of soldiers at the gates of the city. The local appeals for calm were sent out by people who were respected, such as the Bishop, the Arch Bishop, and they contributed to reduce tension within the population, and the hostility towards certain groups, who were considered scapegoats, and this didn't stop the conflict going on, but the radio nevertheless did spare lives, and did avoid further suffering.

As regards genocide and its consequences, this is the editorial line we took on information. We gave priority to the right against impunity, and we focused on the need for justice explaining, for example, in local languages what was the role of the International Tribunal, what in fact, was meant by legal concepts, because these weren't known in Rwanda when we talk about things like genocide, or crimes against humanity. As a result, we were able to counter the propaganda of extremists in the camps, who wanted to deny the genocide had taken place. We explained if somebody had been convicted of genocide, this means also that all his descendents would also be banished for life or forever and ever from society. So we explained to these people in simple terms in the local language that responsibility here was individual, not passed on to the descendants. Also we allowed people who escaped to speak also on the radio to explain their reality.

So in summary, this is how the Hironnelle Foundation saw its role in this crisis area, and the role which can be played by what I refer to as peace media, but on their own, of course, they could never stop a conflict. They could never bring a halt to violence. So there's two possible approaches: the one is to broadcast programs advocating peace, for example, theatrical plays on radio showing opposite groups, but actually revealing the differences between the various groups are not that great. The other approach is to offer listeners a credible medium, which reflects as faithfully as possible the reality so as to cut the feet out from propaganda. This is the approach we preferred despite the problems. So

we have to try and create a media in a crisis area as if it was in a stable area, with the same rules, the same techniques, and really the main point here, the leading point if you will, is the news, of course, has to be credible. This has to be professional, rigorous, independent, then radio becomes a wonderful instrument against hatred.

If you break this down, and I'll try and do this. If you look at the actual mechanism of incitement to violence, what they try and do is push people towards violence. Propaganda takes a real fact, an actual fact, then distorts it. People exaggerate it. They give it a different interpretation. So this will provoke an emotional reaction by the person who hears this, because they'll want vengeance. I'll give you an example in Burundi, and I learned this also, I mentioned this also in my report, *The Massacre of the False Innocents*. The information goes around in Burundi and the rebel attack within the city, a hundred Tutsi students were killed, and this represents a future generation. So in Bujumbura, this leads to enormous emotion. Everybody says this, the observers and the military, so therefore we went there. We conducted reports. People refused to talk, and one of our journalists there had somebody speak, and he told us the reality there is that, in fact, it was the students themselves, after a rebel attack, who went actually and massacred the peasants. So it was the exact opposite of what was reported.

So that's why we call it a massacre. There was a false innocence. So if anyone wants to have more information about that, there are as a matter of fact, other journalists here today who were present for that inquiry. So given the facts, all the facts, and nothing but the facts, then we could re-establish the real truth, and sometimes, hopefully, really stop propaganda from working.

So I'd like to add a few other points before I conclude. Most often our radio reports are joint, if you will. They're joint reports from opposite groups, from Hutus and Tutsis, or from Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo. It's hard, but good results come from this. It's not just a symbol. It's a way of restoring communication between opponents, and editorial line reflects our mission, dictating the hierarchy of information. We give a priority, for example, to the peace process, to security, to human rights. And one of our concerns in this symposium is local media. And our projects can open the way up for local media. We can use than they can broadcast, otherwise they'd expose themselves to risk. So we give them an opening. So as I said at the beginning, the populations or the victims of conflicts really have their dignity rejected. So they see a program, which is intended for them, dedicated to them as a mark of respect, of recognition. It's a way of restoring for them the only thing that they have, which they can't take from them, namely their personal dignity.

And in conclusion, I'd like to quote my colleague Jean-Marie Etter, president of the Hirondelle Foundation, he said, "information really is a way of restoring responsibility and the dignity of our listeners. A radio of peace is also a radio which tries to give to people, who have been victims of war, or abuse of power, to give them some control over their own destiny." Thank you.