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The Latest Issues and Trends in International Development and Humanitarian Assistance

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1717 Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Suite 701
Washington, DC 20036
Phone: (202) 667-8227
Fax: (202) 667-8236
www.interaction.org

Emergency Response: Internews Enables Local Media to Provide Essential Information

By Annette Makino, Senior Vice-President for Communications and Corporate Affairs

From a 20-foot cargo container perched on cinderblocks in the middle of a frontier town in Chad, Radio Absoun is making a difference in the lives of tens of thousands of refugees who have fled the genocide in neighboring Darfur, and the lives of Chadians affected by their arrival.

The radio station broadcasts a mixture of news, information and music for six hours everyday. The result is that for the first time, refugees hear reports that directly affect their survival, including information on security, how to get water and firewood, where to get health and immunization services, or what is happening in their home area. Radio Absoun also airs social and educational programs, especially those dealing with violence against women and domestic abuse.

The station also serves as a critical bridge between the refugees and the Chadians who have welcomed the Sudanese, but now face intense competition for limited local resources.

Radio Absoun reaches the camps of Iridimi, Touloum, Am Nabak, Mile and Kounoungo, and the Chadian communities in and around Iriba. The staff includes Chadians and Sudanese refugees, who produce their programs in three languages: Arabic, French and Zaghawa.

Radio Absoun is one of three community radio stations being established in eastern Chad by Internews Network, a non-profit organization that supports access to information worldwide, and its Chadian partner organization, l'Association de Développement des Médias Communautaires (ADMC).

Internews, which has worked in 70 countries in its 24-year history, enables local media to provide essential communications during and after emergencies such as the Indian Ocean tsunami, the Pakistani earthquake, the recent Indonesian earthquakes, and the ongoing Darfur refugee crisis.

Internews' "emergency response" work is based on the reality that when disaster strikes a community, timely and accurate information is essential to survival. In 2005 the Red Cross World Disasters Report focused on the role of information in disasters, and found, "people need information as much as water, food, medicine or shelter. Information can save lives, livelihoods, and resources."

Mark Frohardt, who directs Internews' humanitarian media programs, explains, "We always try to work with existing stations, as they are known in the community and are already operational. If no station exists, or existing stations are damaged, we can set up a suitcase radio station in a matter of hours."

Immediately after the Indian Ocean tsunami in December 2004, Internews flew into the Indonesian province of Aceh. Within two weeks, the only radio station back on the air, Suara Aceh (Voice of Aceh), was set up with a "suitcase radio" transmitter from Internews that extended its range beyond the regional capital of Banda Aceh. In Sri Lanka, also hard-hit by the tsunami, Internews set up mobile radio production units and trained local journalists, who then produced the only in-depth coverage that was available on national media on the needs of tsunami-affected communities.

In the aftermath of the Pakistan earthquake of October 2005, which killed some 80,000 people and left 3.5 million homeless, Internews began producing a daily hour-long radio program providing humanitarian information for those affected by the quake. Jazba A Tameer (The Desire to Rebuild) was broadcast on seven emergency FM frequencies that cover much of the affected region, and over a dozen stations all over Pakistan. The program team consisted of a dozen Pakistani radio journalists whom Internews had trained over the past three years in field reporting and radio production.

Soon after the quake, there was confusion about seismic reports in the red zone areas. The program helped dispel rumors about possible mass evacuations, and gave people vital information on check distribution and other humanitarian relief plans.

Internews is also responding to the May 2006 earthquake in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, which took nearly 6,000 lives and left up to 1.2 million homeless. Together with the Indonesian Press and Broadcast Society, Internews is establishing an emergency radio station to provide urgent aid and safety information. Internews has also set up an innovative text messaging service connecting journalists covering the earthquake to share, verify, and disseminate news and developments about the recovery.

According to Frohardt, "Emergency response work can dramatically improve the quality of assistance by eliminating barriers to communication. By increasing the flow and accuracy of information we can reduce anxiety and help people make decisions about how best to protect themselves. Ultimately this work creates a local forum for the discussion of humanitarian assistance and the reconstruction process, informing people about the process and facilitating their involvement in their own recovery."