

Starvation pornography: How many skinny babies can you show me? - AlertNet

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A woman holds her malnourished child inside a ward at Wajir's district hospital, 800km (500 miles) north of Kenya's capital Nairobi, July 13, 2011. REUTERS/Flora Bagenal

By Katy Migiro

NAIROBI (AlertNet) – The British producer's voice was clearly audible in the background: "Lift up his arm so we can see how thin it is."

The starving Somali baby's arm was duly lifted for the camera.

In the Reuters newsroom, the Kenyan film editor tutted with annoyance as he edited footage sent by an aid agency for the launch of their drought appeal for the Horn of Africa.

"They've only filmed this one baby," he complained. "Is it really bad or do they just need a new four by four?"

Jokes are one way that journalists cope with these heart-rending stories.

"This one's not even skinny," someone exclaimed as a group of us trooped round a paediatric ward in northern Kenya last week to stare at a toddler swollen with kwashiorkor protein-deficiency.

The cynicism is also partly out of frustration at how this crisis has suddenly hit the media – and how we know it will disappear equally rapidly.

'ANIMAL FARM' NEWS VALUES

Since the beginning of the year, the Kenyan media has been peppered with [reports of people dying of starvation](#) in its northern arid lands.

The region is home to the world's biggest refugee camp, Dadaab, which was officially [declared full three years ago](#), although Somali refugees continued to stream over the border into Kenya.

The spat between the Kenyan government and the United Nations over the need to [extend the camp](#), so that the refugees have somewhere to stay, also dates back to December.

Yet it hasn't been a story until now, except for specialised media outlets like AlertNet.

What's changed all of a sudden?

Journalists in Kenya complain of the international media's 'Animal Farm' news values. We're equal, but some are more equal than others.

Killings in Burundi amid rumours of a return to war is not a story – because it's Burundi – but the release of a British couple kidnapped by Somali pirates triggered a media circus last year.

Similarly, coverage of this crisis is largely driven by events far away.

Media interest started to gain momentum a couple of weeks ago, when the United Nations declared it the [worst drought in 60 years](#) and half a dozen aid agencies appealed for funds in Britain's *The Guardian* newspaper.

"I hadn't heard of Dadaab until last week," confessed a young aid worker who'd flown out to show the media how his agency is responding to the crisis.

Last week, the BBC had three journalists from London staying in Dadaab for a week, doing live broadcasts for television and radio.

This followed an agreement made in London to launch a Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) [appeal](#) for the Horn of Africa.

DEC is a grouping of Britain's largest aid agencies, such as Oxfam, Christian Aid and Save the Children, who come together to fundraise for a massive disaster.

The BBC is the lynchpin of the deal. Its regular reports ensure that donations keep coming in. If the BBC doesn't think the crisis is big enough and won't commit to send its journalists to cover the story, a DEC appeal can't be launched.

ETHICS OUT THE WINDOW

And so the circus begins...

All journalistic ethics went out the window as we raced around Dadaab, chasing after the head of the United Nations' refugee agency, Antonio Guterres.

"I had six children but three died on the way," one new arrival told him through a Somali translator.

He commiserated with her. Then he was off.

The journalists left behind tried to get a bit more detail out of the woman. What was her name?

There wasn't time for sensitivity. Within seconds, we too were off. Guterres was going to give a mini-press conference.

It was excruciating watching two TV journalists shouting at an exhausted woman who had just arrived at the camp.

"Tell her to look at me, not you," the producer barked at the translator.

"Get her to say what the arm tag means to her."

The poor woman – who had probably walked across the desert with her children for days to reach the camp – clearly had no idea what the piece of paper around her wrist meant.

THE REAL STORY

I'm happy that the drought has finally become a story.

But it's also frustrating, knowing that this is their five minutes of fame on the global news agenda.

"I want to visit a hospital next Wednesday and see lots of skinny babies. Can you set that up for me?" a television producer in London told a British aid worker who has been working here for years.

The real untold story is that the skinny babies are always there. It's just that there are a few less of them.

In Wajir Hospital, 32 malnourished children were admitted in May, the highest number so far this year.

Yet a chart on the wall shows that 40 children were admitted for malnutrition in December 2008.

No wonder people look bewildered when we constantly ask: "Is this the worst drought in 60 years?"

"Last year, the average was 15. But it never drops below 10," said the nutritionist.

Shouldn't that story be told too?