



ACTIVE WHERE CONFLICT IS ENDEMIC

The Swiss-based Hironnelle Foundation aims to create or support independent media in regions where there are open hostilities or in post-conflict areas. Its guiding principle is the belief in the universality of human values. **Morand Fachot** reports

Chilling calls to slaughter Tutsis, broadcast on Radio Television Libre des Mille Collines in Rwanda in 1994, were instrumental in the genocide which killed up to half a million people in this country. Philippe Dahinden, a Swiss journalist reporting from Rwanda in April 1994, recalls “at every roadblock set up by the militia, I could hear the radio, RTLM, designating the targets to be hit. We came to realize how information – or rather disinformation and propaganda – could actually kill.”

FIGHT AGAINST HATE MEDIA

On his return to Europe Dahinden addressed the UN Commission of Human Rights, on behalf of Reporters without Borders, proposing the creation of a “free radio station (...) that will allow Rwandans to receive honest and independent information”. RSF International mandated its Swiss section to set up a radio station that would fight against the damaging consequences of hate media in Rwanda.

The station, Radio Agatashya (‘little swallow’), broadcast for the first time in Kinyarwanda and French (later in Swahili and English) from the South-Kivu region of Zaire (now Democratic

Republic of Congo) in August 1994, reaching an estimated audience of 4m. Radio Agatashya's 60 local and three expatriate journalists had to follow a charter to ensure complete editorial independence in the content of broadcasts: only carefully checked facts could be broadcast and commentary was not allowed.

FOSTERING PEACE AND DIGNITY

In March 1995, Philippe Dahinden, Swiss journalist Jean-Marie Etter and RSF-Switzerland President Francois Gross set up the Fondation Hirondelle which took over the management of Radio Agatashya from RSF and the Hirondelle Association. The Lausanne-based foundation used its Agatashya experience as a blueprint for a number of international media projects aimed at fostering "peace and human dignity" around the world, particularly in conflict and post-conflict situations. These currently include three radio stations in Africa, a production studio in Sierra Leone and a press agency. Their output, which for the radio stations and the production studio, includes news, magazines, feature programmes and entertainment, is also available in text and live audio on the Internet.

Successful projects now completed include Blue Sky, a radio station set up in Kosovo in June 1999, which later became the second network of Kosovo's PSB RTK; and Moris Hamutuk (Living Together), a one-hour daily radio programme for refugees in East Timor broadcast under the authority of the UN Transitional Administration in East Timor.

More recently, Hirondelle was asked by the Nepalese authorities to help Radio Nepal create programming adapted to the electoral context in the run-up to the April 2008 elections. Each Hirondelle outlet has its own mandate and objectives, tailored to its audience and specific market, but has to abide by certain rules set out in the Hirondelle Charter outlining its role, the scope of its

activities and editorial guidelines.

Hirondelle's current sponsors, donors and partners include international organisations (EU, UN, UNDP); government development agencies or ministries of foreign affairs in Switzerland, Canada, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxemburg, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, the UK (DFID, the foundation's largest donor) and the USA; broadcasters and media organisations (including DW, Radio Suisse Romande, RFI, VOA and the Reuters Foundation) and corporations (such as Global Giving).

ONGOING PROJECTS

Radio Okapi is the radio of the UN mission in Congo, run in partnership with Fondation Hirondelle. It went on air in February 2002. Its round-the-clock programmes in four national languages plus French, produced in Kinshasa and eight regional studios, are available nationwide on FM via 20 relays, and also for three hours a day on SW from Meyerton, South Africa.

Miraya (Mirror) FM is a radio station based in Sudan, run in partnership between the UN Mission in Sudan and Hirondelle. On air since 30 June 2006, it broadcasts in Arabic and English on FM and SW, the latter allowing its programmes to be received in the whole of Sudan, as well as in neighbouring countries, like Chad.

In late March 2000, the Hirondelle Foundation and the Central African Republic government signed an agreement leading to the launch of Radio Ndeke Luka in Bangui. Broadcasting around the clock in French and Sango on FM from Bangui, the station reaches around 1m people in the CAR as well as listeners in the neighbouring DR Congo. One hour of programmes are broadcast daily on SW (from CAR itself), reaching the whole country. The station also rebroadcasts programmes from some international broadcasters.

Star Radio became a fully-

“In truth, all Tutsis will perish. They will vanish from this country (...) they are being killed like rats (...) Come and sing: Come, dear friends, let's congratulate one another!”

independent Liberian entity in January 2008. It was established in Monrovia in 1997 with funds from USAID. Broadcasting on FM and shortwave in 18 Liberian languages in addition to English, Liberian English, and French, Star was heard throughout Liberia and beyond. Forced off the air by the Charles Taylor government from March 2000 to May 2005, Star broadcasts in 14 languages. Its FM programmes are available to some 60% of Liberia's population and its daily 90min of SW broadcasts (from Ascension Island) to the whole country as well as to the sub region. Star is intended to be the hub of a regional radio network in West Africa that will also include stations in Sierra Leone, Guinea and the Ivory Coast.

BALANCE SHEET

In spite of its claim to be "a modestly-sized organization with no ambition to become bigger", the Hirondelle Foundation's achievements are remarkable. With its very modest budget of £4.9m and its relatively small staff of around 200 (at both its Lausanne seat and various media outlets), it has had a remarkable impact on millions of people living in zones of conflict or post-conflict situation, fostering democracy as well as understanding and dialogue between people often divided by prejudice and hatred.

Hirondelle conservatively estimates the current audience of its stations at 25m – other estimates give it an audience of some 40m. Whatever the real figure is, it is comparable to that of some not so small international broadcasters, no mean achievement.

The dedication of Hirondelle staff to keep on with what it started in 1995 is beyond doubt. One can only hope that international donors, who have so far underwritten its operations at a modest cost, will continue to share the same commitment. ■

◀ **Main Image:** Cotton Tree News reporter Edward Kargbo, on the Guinean border with Sierra Leone

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