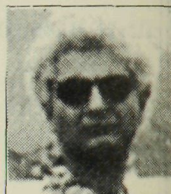


Now the negative news from paradise

Pacific countries are increasingly sensitive about media coverage. Singled out for special scrutiny and criticism are the Australian and New Zealand media, which specialise in the region. An Asian perspective.



By KUNDA DIXIT

FOR THE PAST three years, Papua New Guinea Ambassador to Seoul Lucy Bogari had told potential investors there that things were not so bad in her tropical homeland — it was safe and that they should bring their business here. Last month, Ms Bogari returned to Port Moresby. But just a day after her homecoming, the diplomat was attacked and robbed by a gang of teenagers on the outskirts of the PNG capital.

‘What a paradox,’ says Ms Bogari. ‘Here I am telling people overseas to visit Papua New Guinea and that the crime is not so bad. And then this happens to me.’

Indeed, the country’s rampant crime — usually robberies committed by bands of marauding youths (called raskols in Pidgin) — have given Papua New Guinea a rather bad reputation. Residents of the capital themselves live in fortified bungalows surrounded by high walls and barbed wire. But the PNG Government has become increasingly sensitive to the country’s reputation for crime and blames the messenger: the international media, which it says ‘exaggerates reports of isolated incidents’.

News of Ms Bogari’s robbery appeared in Port Moresby newspapers alongside a lengthy report on Prime Minister Sir Julius Chan’s speech at the Pacific Islands News Association conference in which he blasted foreign correspondents for reporting only on the negative views about his country. Said Sir Julius: ‘Our country and its problems have been the victim of shallow

journalists unable to look past the bad, and this has sullied Papua New Guinea's good name.'

Sir Julius told journalists at the conference that there was violence and crime everywhere. So why single out Papua New Guinea? 'Does no one want to hear the good news?' he asked.

The journalists, most of whom are from the South Pacific, were in PNG to discuss how the international media portrayed life in a part of the world that is often presented simplistically as a paradise where the French conduct nuclear tests. As countries in the region gain better access to the outside world via satellite television beamed from North America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand, South Pacific islanders are getting touchier about how they are being portrayed elsewhere. And in many cases these days, the foreign media are being taken to task for simply reporting crime or corruption that is freely reported by the local press.

Singled out for special scrutiny and criticism are the Australian and New Zealand media, which specialise in the region with coverage by reporters who are experts in the Pacific. Many governments in the region — including Papua New Guinea, which was once an Australian colony — are unimpressed with these credentials though and say the media in both countries have a 'Western' or 'European' outlook that is patronising and irresponsible.

Officials in Port Moresby were upset over a report on the Australian SBS channel about corruption in PNG. But authorities in the Cook Islands in May went as far as kicking out a New Zealand reporting team filming a documentary there. The Cook Islands' official stance for the action is that the media team had no journalist visas. But Immigration chief Tutai Toru was also quoted as saying: 'We can't allow just anyone to come into the country and write something nasty about the place.'

The South Pacific rhetoric is similar to protests in South-east Asian countries like Malaysia against the 'Western news values' as practised by the international media — especially Australia. 'Australian and New Zealand media routinely depict people from other, particularly Asian, countries as careless about the environment, ruthless exploiters and sources of corruption,' says PNG Foreign Affairs Secretary Gabriel Dusava.

Along with crime and corruption, coverage of logging has become a sensitive issue. Ironically, the Malaysian company Rimbunan Hijau that launched the new daily newspaper, *The National*, also controls three-fourths of the country's log exports. But Government officials in PNG bristle at what they say is the arrogance of Australian journalists who treat the South Pacific like their backyard and demand an interview with the head of state within a day of their arrival.

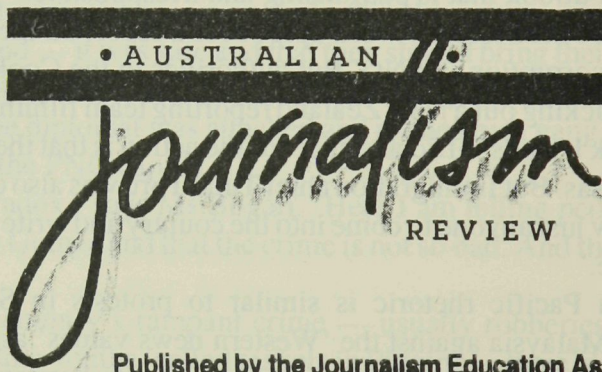
KUNDA DIXIT

'Why should the Prime Minister be at the beck and call of foreign journalists?' asks Evoa Lalatute of the PNG Department of Foreign Affairs. 'They should learn some manners. What access does the Pacific journalist have to the Australian or New Zealand prime ministers?'

Still, while it would help if foreign correspondents pick up some manners, media experts in the region say South Pacific governments have become too thin-skinned, especially in coverage of issues like the separatist war in Bougainville and the political polarisation in Fiji.

Says David Robie, New Zealand media critic now Lecturer in Journalism with the University of PNG's South Pacific Centre for Communication and Information in Development: 'Corruption, crime and environmental degradation will be reported as long as they remain unresolved. The challenge for the foreign reporter is to do it sensitively and look at the processes and trends and not just the events.'

□ *Kunda Dixit is Manila-based Regional Director of the Inter Press Service developing world news agency. He covered the Pacific Islands News Association convention in Port Moresby in June. This article was carried by the Inter Press Service wire and reprinted from Uni Tavar, 21 July 1995.*



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