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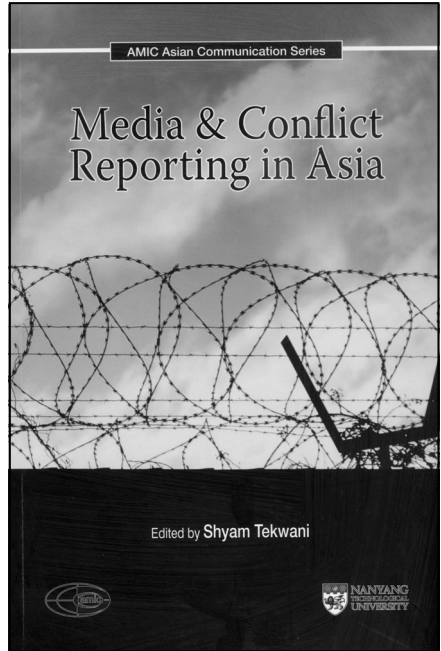
Conflicts challenge the Asian news media

Media and Conflict Reporting in Asia, edited by Shyam Tekwani. Singapore: Asian Media Information and Communication Centre (AMIC) and Nanyang Technological University, 2008, 203 pp. ISBN 978-981-4136-05-1

Blood on their Hands: Infanticide in India and other stories, edited by Violet Valdez and others. Manila: Konrad Adenauer Asian Centre for Journalism, Ateneo de Manila University, 2006, 155 pp. ISBN 978-971-550-518-5

DURING the 1980s, I reported extensively on the indigenous Kanak struggle for political and social justice and independence in New Caledonia. Twice I was arrested by French troops in the course of my conflict reporting – once at gunpoint. (This saga was covered at length in my 1989 book *Blood on their Banner*).

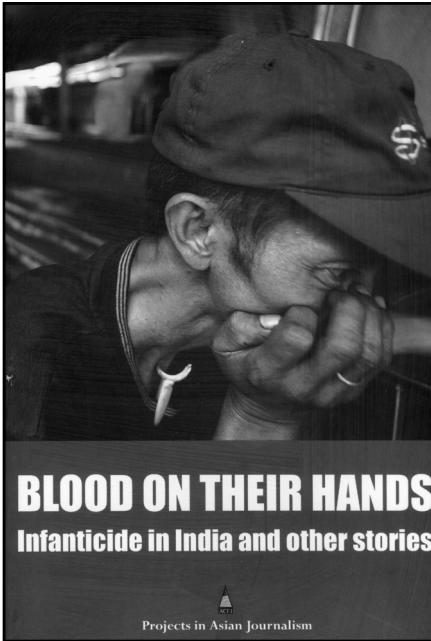
Also, over this period I reported on social justice, human rights and conflict in the Philippines, coediting a special edition of the journalists’



union magazine *Diarista*. It is against this background – and also running a postgraduate course in Asia-Pacific Journalism – that I am reviewing these two books.

Both are the result of special projects in Asian journalism. Both are packed with case studies (13 in *Media and Conflict* and eight in *Blood on their Hands*).

Shyam Tekwani is a former photojournalist and now media academic at Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information at Singapore’s Nanyang Technological University. His doctoral research has focused on political communication, terrorism,



media and conflict and the use of digital media technologies by non-state actors. He has written widely on the Tamil diaspora and militancy, and on terrorism and transnational violence. He has introduced *Media and Conflict* with an overview of issues confronting the region.

While examining globalisation and an ‘unstoppable tidal wave of change’ which has forced different Asian nations to adapt to the challenges, Tekwani stresses the ‘disturbing parallel development’ of many ongoing conflicts in the political landscape. Several conflicts, such as in Sri Lanka and Kashmir in northwestern India flare at various times. Others, such

as the Maoist insurgency in Nepal (which ousted the feudal monarchy in 2008) and the insurgencies in southern Philippines and southern Thailand have also been critical at times.

Also, there is a repressive militant regime in Burma and political crises in Indonesia and the Philippines. (Surprisingly, for Pacific and New Zealand readers, the independence struggle in Indonesian-colonised Papua is barely acknowledged while the Maluku struggle is covered in depth.) As Tekwani notes:

Over all this hangs the spectre of terrorism, whose centre of gravity, many experts opine, has shifted to Asia, with the recent bombings in Indonesia, the evidence of Al Qaeda networks in the region and the rise of Jemaah Islamiyah. (p. 1)

This book is a timely analysis of challenges in the region. The task of even identifying the issues in covering conflict in such a complex regional media landscape is formidable indeed. At the opposite end of the spectrum of the free press traditions of India and the Philippines exists the state-controlled media environments of China and Sri Lanka and the ‘voiceless media’ of Burma, much of it operating across the border in Thailand.

Some countries see the media as partners in the process of national development. Reportage of conflict also has international implications, mainly related to foreign aid and investment. Digital media is also a crucial factor through the spread of the internet and cable television in the region, producing a range of alternative indigenous news sources and plurality of viewpoints.

In this volume, the project on Media Conflict in Asia has addressed five main thematic categories: media culture, media bias, identity, working conditions and new media.

Tekwani argues media culture has had a significant impact on the way conflict is covered. Sunanda Deshapariya, for example, argues for a paradigm shift in Sri Lankan media culture with 'responsible press freedom'. Marites Vitug writes about the Muslim minority in the Philippines (about 9 percent of the predominantly Catholic country of 88 million people) and coverage of the struggle of the Moro National Liberation Front (MLNF) on Mindanao island.

In perhaps a controversial contribution, a chapter by Felix Soh calls for an end to 'objective' reporting on terrorism acts and for the media to cut off 'the oxygen of publicity'.

The book makes the point that media bias among journalists in the

region is often influenced by demands of disparate ethnic, religious and political groups in competition with increasing globalisation. Ati Nurbaiti contributes a chapter on the media coverage of the Maluku conflict in Indonesia, arguing that the 'absence and distortion of information' by the media were major factors contributing to spiralling violence.

Subir Bhaumik writes of the 'identity barrier' in reporting conflicts involving failure to recognise a minority by the majority such as in northeastern India. This theme is echoed in an analysis by Harinder Baweja of the Kashmir conflict. Addressing working conditions, Tekwani notes:

Across Asia, journalists are [often] poorly paid, poorly trained and work in conditions that are often dangerous, with little physical or financial security. In developing countries battling grave issues of poverty, underdevelopment and political and social unrest, journalism is often a low priority, often perceived as a non-essential profession. (p. 5)

The author could just as easily have been discussing the Pacific's micro nations, with the possible exception of 'dangerous' although Fiji seems rapidly heading in that direction. Dai Lian's chapter on authoritarian media control in China puts the

spotlight on the need for media professionalism for young journalists. Françoise Zambellini and Marçal Izard also contribute a practical paper on the International Commission of the Red Cross perspective on dangerous assignments and the need for a stronger commitment to international humanitarian law.

Blood on their Hands takes a different approach to conflict reporting. Rather than analysing issues, it provides accomplished, powerful and insightful examples of Asian journalism. Part of the KAS media programme's Projects in Asian Journalism, it is an inspirational showcase of a free, responsible and ethical press in the region.

The first chapter, *Seeing in the Dark*, by Arlene Bongon-Burgos, is an account of the kidnapping of Angelo de la Cruz by Iraqi insurgents – a story that had an enormous impact on the Philippines, a nation with millions of overseas workers, including large diasporic communities in Australia, New Zealand and Micronesia.

Other chapters include Shita Laksmi's *A Frequency for the Voiceless* about community radiop in Indonesia, Maria Dioasa Labiste's *In the Line of Duty*, *In the Line of Fire* about the killings of journalists in the Philippines, Jofelle Tesorio's *Oil and Water*, *Hope and Despair* about the collision

between the environment and energy development in Palawan.

The final chapter, giving this book its title, is a harrowing investigation into female infanticide in India by Dibajyoti Chatterjee. Her conclusion is that the unwritten social code of dowry, expected from the parents of the bride, and greed are the major causes of murder of young girls on a chilling scale:

The dowry system is so heinous that some people even torture their daughter-in-law physically and mentally if she fails to bring in enough money and gifts or if her parents fail to comply with the wishes of the groom's family. (p. 138)

The chapters in *Blood* are a celebration of the KAF masters in journalism programme and a tribute journalism education in the Philippines in particular. Both books deserve to be in any quality journalism and communication studies library.

Reference

Robie, D. (1989). *Blood on their banner: Nationalist struggles in the South Pacific*. London: Zed Books.