

Lauren Gardner
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A foreign correspondent for nearly 20 years, Douglas Farah covered the drug wars in Latin America and later the end of the brutal civil war in Sierra Leone in which over 1.2 million people were maimed, raped or killed. He even discovered a link between al-Qaeda and the Liberian government formerly led by Charles Taylor, who is being tried for his connection to the Sierra Leonean war, and al-Qaeda. He broke the news in The Washington Post.

During the war, rebels hacked off the limbs, lips and ears of civilians and raped women and girls. Children were conscripted into rebel armies – fighters would get the boy soldiers high on cocaine and mold them into killers. Taylor, president of Liberia during much of Sierra Leone's civil war, is accused of orchestrating and funding the conflict.

But a story Farah wrote about a man in Sierra Leone who saved a group of chimpanzees generated more mail and donations than he had ever received for his reporting on child soldiers and rape, he said.

“And when you see things like the rebels in the Congo going into the gorilla reserve and killing gorillas, I'm sure that generates much more emotional impact and interest than the stories about human beings doing stuff to human beings now,” he said. “It's just the way it is.”

Among the topics Farah covered for The Washington Post while working at its West Africa bureau, which has since closed, is the Special Court for Sierra Leone, a hybrid war crimes tribunal set up by the government of Sierra Leone and the United

Nations in January 2002 to try those who bear the greatest responsibility for crimes committed during Sierra Leone's 1990s civil war.

A media content analysis of The Washington Post and The New York Times from June 12, 2000, to Oct. 10, 2007, shows that both papers covered the Special Court for Sierra Leone similarly in that time period, reporting on the court and issues linked to it heavily when Taylor went into exile in 2003 and then when he was captured in Nigeria in 2006. Less than half of the stories in the sample were about the court itself.

Former Sierra Leonean President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah wrote to then-U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan on June 12, 2000, asking for the international community's help in setting up a court to try senior officials of the Revolutionary United Front, a guerrilla group that tried to lead an insurrection in Sierra Leone for 11 years. A LexisNexis search using the key words "Sierra Leone" yielded nearly 1,000 articles in that time period. Each article was skimmed for descriptions of the Special Court.

While the specific term "Special Court" did not have to be used in the articles for them to be analyzed, the purpose of the court as a war crimes tribunal had to be clearly stated in the article. Articles also did not have to be exclusively about the court. Articles about Taylor leading up to his capture were included in the analysis if the court was mentioned because the situation was pertinent to the court and its mandate.

In the time period specified, The Washington Post published 136 articles related to the Special Court. Of these, 27 were briefs. The New York Times published 126 stories on the Special Court in that same period. Twenty-eight of these were briefs.

'Not a compelling narrative'

Prosecutors say Taylor joined forces with RUF guerrillas in Sierra Leone in the early 1990s and directed them as they looted diamonds to fund the simultaneous war in Liberia as well as Taylor's lavish lifestyle. Taylor sold diamonds on behalf of the RUF and gave them military equipment in return, according to the indictment. Taylor was president of Liberia from 1997 until he went into exile in Nigeria in 2003 at the end of Liberia's civil war.

Taylor was educated in the United States – and was even arrested there. He escaped from a Massachusetts jail in 1985 to evade extradition on embezzlement charges in Liberia by using a hacksaw to bust out of a cell with four other inmates. They then climbed out of the two-story facility and down sheets they had knotted together.

While Taylor may be a name that means something to Americans, the names of Foday Sankoh, who formed the RUF, and Sam Hinga Norman, who founded the Civil Defense Forces, do not resonate with the American public, Farah said. The CDF supported the elected government that the RUF wanted to overthrow.

“There's not a compelling narrative for most people in the United States about this story,” he said.

The United States waged a war against former Yugoslav and Serbian president Slobodon Milosevic, so Americans knew his name and were familiar with the Balkans and, therefore, his war crimes trial at The Hague, Farah said.

“There's nothing like that in this,” he said.

There was decent coverage of the mid-1990s West African wars in the American media, but the stories didn't stick in the minds of Americans, Farah said. The stories were also buried in the backs of newspapers.

“Because there were no strategic U.S. interests and Americans weren’t being killed and it was Africa, which was far away and didn’t bother us much, it was not a great deal – it didn’t stay in people’s minds,” Farah said.

David Crane, the founding prosecutor of the Special Court for Sierra Leone, said his greatest problem while working at the court was figuring out how to get the world’s attention on West Africa and the atrocities that happened there.

“Certainly, it was a challenge for me to, in this very politically cynical world, this war crimes-weary world, to get them to pause long enough to consider what actually took place there and to provide us political as well as moral and financial support,” he said. “So indifference is a challenge, particularly in places where the world is not that interested.”

The key to getting people to care is the media, Crane said. The court had a vigorous outreach program that worked locally, regionally and internationally to interact with the press and civil society to discuss what was going on at the court.

“I tried to reach out to the media all the time,” Crane said.

CNN International covered the Special Court well, according to Crane. The international channel is fundamentally different from the CNN Americans watch, which Crane called “CNN-lite.”

Domestic CNN is “short nibbles” of news. The average American will click it off and move on after processing short sound bites of news, Crane said.

“Americans could care less about tragedies going on in West Africa, for example,” Crane said. “They like it light, upbeat, 10 seconds or less.”

CNN International, however, plays to a different audience.

“Europeans, Africans, Asians are a little bit more interested in the story behind the story,” Crane said. “Their coverage is much more in-depth, much better written, and they’re interested in stories like Darfur, Uganda, West Africa – so they cover it.”

Within the U.S. print media, The New York Times and the Christian Science Monitor were “of help” in reporting on what was happening at the court and the tragedies that had occurred, Crane said. He expressed surprise after learning that both The New York Times and The Washington Post were comparable in their Special Court coverage, saying before learning that that The Washington Post prints very little on Africa and rarely was helpful.

The Post was helpful at times editorially, though, Crane said. Editorials were printed about Taylor when the court was pressuring Nigeria to turn him over. Taylor was turned over within a week of the Post printing an editorial encouraging Taylor’s being handed over during Liberian President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf’s first visit to Washington in the spring of 2006.

The Post published 23 op-eds and editorials relating to the Special Court from June 2000 to October 2007. The Times has run 16.

Most readers of the Post and the Times reside in the northeastern United States, so the number of readers exposed to news about the court is limited, Crane said. If people are not hearing about the situation in West Africa and what has happened there, they cannot react, he said. In his experience, people express shock at what occurred once they find out, whether they are politicians or ordinary people.

“It’s not that they don’t care – it’s that it’s just not covered,” Crane said.

Foreign news will not make the front page of The Washington Post, and probably The New York Times, unless it is an issue in Washington or if there is a compelling human element to a story, according to Farah. In the case of the Special Court, the Bush administration was not talking about Africa when stories were breaking out of Sierra Leone.

“It wasn’t something that the editors woke up hearing on NPR,” Farah said. “There was no debate about anything – it was just sort of sitting out there.”

While the paper was happy to run stories on Africa, they usually would not make page one, he said.

“There was no driving force on this end to make it happen,” Farah said.

When Farah was covering wars in Central America, there was always a policy debate about the U.S. financing of those wars, so those stories were on the front page because Americans were talking about the issue.

“Africa didn’t have any of those things going for it,” he said.

What makes the front page does affect what the public absorbs in news, but because so many people get their news online, the front page does not have the same effect as in previous years, Farah said.

The percentage of people who read daily newspapers fell in 2003 to 54.1, down from 55.4 in 2002 and from 62.4 in 1990, according to the 2007 New York Times Almanac. Readership is highest among those with the most education, the highest income and the greatest job responsibilities.

Lawmakers and other news organizations, though, pay much more attention to what The Washington Post puts on the front page than to what is inside, Farah said.

“In fairness, the Post was better than most in putting ... some of the stories out front,” Farah said.

The Washington Post and The New York Times have fairly sophisticated foreign editors and bureaus and an integral process of deciding what does and does not go on the front page and what goes in the paper at all, he said.

Eight articles related to the Special Court were featured on the front page of the Post during the sample period. All but one of them appeared in 2003, the year Taylor went into exile in Nigeria. The Times published 11 stories related to the court on the front page, the bulk of them also in 2003.

The newspapers that are not part of the small group of elite papers like the Post and the Times, however, do not have broad worldviews to begin with, so coverage of Africa is more limited, Farah said. But The Washington Post was not particularly hungry for Africa stories when Farah wrote for the paper.

“They weren’t anxiously awaiting every Africa story I could write,” he said.

If there was a good story coming out of the continent, the Post would run it, Farah said. News about child soldiers and the use of rape as a weapon of terror ended up on the front page, he added.

Some of the front-page Post articles related to the Special Court included sentences about the use of child soldiers and the rapes committed by rebels, but none of them were solely about those two issues. In a LexisNexis search of Washington Post articles using the keywords “Sierra Leone,” “child” and “rape” from Jan. 1, 2000, to Nov. 30, 2007, three out of 42 were front-page stories. Farah wrote all of those articles. A

longer time period than that used in the media content analysis was searched to yield more articles that may have been written during the civil war.

Money talks

Farah said he had not planned to cover the court extensively in its early stages because he was not convinced the court would “get its act together.” Crane and Alan White, former chief of investigations of the court, were not familiar with the players in the conflict or the regional context when they first signed on to their jobs, he said.

“Their lack of knowledge was pretty staggering,” he said.

However, they ultimately did great work in trying those most responsible for the crimes in Sierra Leone, Farah said. Farah said he engaged with the court immediately – he provided them one of their main witnesses. But the court was “shortchanged” by the media in the initial stages, he said.

When Farah was a correspondent, only two papers of the major American press – The Washington Post and The New York Times – had bureaus in West Africa. Other journalists would come in from bureaus in Nairobi or South Africa, but the U.S. press was limited, Farah said.

“The cutback in coverage is astounding,” he said.

This is another inherent problem of the court – it is based in an area with little U.S. media present. If a journalist is based in Nairobi covering East Africa and only makes one or two trips a year to West Africa, the journalist may not even cover Sierra Leone in a given year, Farah said.

“It’s just a tragedy,” he said. “The cutback on coverage of those areas is criminal, in my mind.”

American newspapers are not the only form of media that have covered the Special Court and Africa limitedly. The three major television networks have particularly faltered in covering the Special Court since 2000. The Special Court was covered or mentioned in reports on morning or evening network broadcasts on ABC, NBC and CBS 10 times since the fall of 2000. One of the broadcasts contained 33 words about Taylor’s transfer to Sierra Leone from Nigeria, which is approximately 20 seconds.

“The networks have completely abandoned Africa,” Farah said.

Almost all networks cover Africa out of London or Paris, not from the continent. It is scary the court has been covered so infrequently because so many more people get their information from TV rather than from newspapers, he said.

“When there is a huge crisis, they’ll drop people into it, but ... even Sudan, with its multiple, ongoing years of tragedy, has generated relatively little coverage here,” Farah said.

Reporter Chris Hansen of “Dateline” on NBC and a film crew went to Sierra Leone in December 2004 to follow prosecutor Crane around for a week when he was still working for the court and shoot film for a segment of the show.

“It was a day in the life of an American chief prosecutor in the middle of hell on earth,” he said.

Crane showed Hansen where massacres had occurred along the country’s beaches and took him to visit an amputee camp. Hansen was astonished when he saw women with

arms cut off purposely so they could never hug their children again, as well as children who had one arm and one leg cut off so they were off-balance for life, Crane said.

Instead, “Dateline” aired a 15-minute piece on al-Qaeda’s links to West Africa based on the footage the crew shot in Sierra Leone.

“I was told afterwards that it was too brutal to show the American people,” Crane said.

An editorial decision was made at the senior level in NBC News to not air much of the footage taken, he said.

“Commercial television looks at it, ‘Are we going to make any money off this?’” Crane said. “Americans don’t like to watch this kind of stuff.”

The more people are overwhelmed with a sense that they cannot understand the world, they feel they must withdraw from it, Farah said. People want to be left alone and deal with things they can comprehend, and Africa is not one of them, he said.

“I don’t think there’s a mass desire to understand the outside world anymore,” Farah said.

AIDS is an old story, and news about the rise in militant Islam and the global war on terror bombards the public, he said.

As a result, “Africa is pushed even further down the food chain than it was before,” Farah said.

The release of films such as “Blood Diamond” and “Lord of War” has piqued Americans’ interest in issues such as war crimes, Crane said.

“When it comes to movies, that’s when Americans get turned on,” he said. “And frankly, in my mind, that’s the only way the average American gets emotional about something.”

When the American public is not interested in an issue, politicians may not be that interested, either. The problem with issues surrounding international law is that they do not get votes because politics is so locally based in the United States, Crane said.

It does not matter, at least in some parts of the United States, if a particular politician does something for international law because it does not help or hurt votes. But toward the center of the country, more people are against the United Nations and look negatively on other international issues, he said.

“And unfortunately, the international criminal law gets looped up into that,” Crane said.

Reaching out to Sierra Leone

Media coverage of the Special Court has been sparse in the United States, but the Sierra Leonean media has done a great job reporting on the court to the citizens affected by its decisions, according to Rodmire Taylor-Smith, a Sierra Leonean citizen who worked as an information media assistant at the U.S. Embassy in Freetown.

Taylor-Smith read through newspapers and listened to radio reports every day and sent articles to the State Department that were of interest to both nations. While she said she thought the press covered the court well, there were some embellishments in articles. As part of her job, Taylor-Smith would call attachés at the Special Court to confirm the validity of stories when clarification was needed.

“But the facts are always there,” Taylor-Smith said.

There are inherent problems in the Sierra Leonean press, according to Crane.

“The problem with the local media is that you can buy your story,” he said. “It is corrupt; it is unethical.”

While there are some good journalists there, all one has to do is pay about \$12 to get the word out in the Sierra Leonean press that an enemy has AIDS in order to ruin his reputation, Crane said. It is not possible to sue someone for libel in Sierra Leone, he added.

The men Crane indicted tried to start a media campaign against him, but Crane countered the false information by holding press conferences monthly in Sierra Leone about the court’s work.

Anywhere from six to 12 papers would come out every day in Sierra Leone, Crane said. The only one that was consistent and “not that bad” was The Concord, he said.

“Most of them were the quality of a high school newspaper,” he said.

Cyndee Pelt, a graduate student at American University who monitored elections in Sierra Leone last summer, said the newspapers in the country are skewed, and political parties own some of them.

“Basically, a political campaign ad is the entire newspaper, so anything that you read in the newspapers you have to take with a huge grain of salt,” she said.

Some papers would publish the text of someone’s speech without an actual story about what the public figure said, Pelt said.

“It was really sad because you could tell the lack of investigative journalism that went into it,” she said.

Taylor-Smith said she thinks the Sierra Leonean media could improve its coverage of the court by following up on decisions made at hearings rather than merely reporting what people had to say about them.

If Sierra Leonean reporters are treated with respect, they will try harder to report the truth, Crane said. Crane said he would sit down and talk to reporters honestly, which helped some see they were doing themselves a disservice if they did not report stories about the court honestly.

But newspapers are not the most effective media form to reach Sierra Leoneans. Most Sierra Leoneans are illiterate and must either have the papers read to them or listen to the radio, Crane said.

“Without the radio, they would be totally cut off,” Crane said.

Pelt, who sat in on the sentencings of rebels last summer, said the radio stations covered the court proceedings well.

“And that’s probably the best medium for Sierra Leoneans,” she said.

Sierra Leoneans’ main information source is BBC’s “Focus on Africa” program, Crane said.

“I saw West Africans with hand-cranked radios listening to BBC,” Crane said. “Many of them could not read or write, had never seen a battery and were living in places that, frankly, had no running water or electricity, but yet they would crank up that hand radio and never miss ‘Focus on Africa.’”

Oral history is another way Sierra Leoneans receive news throughout the country. The “talking drum” can spread news – and rumors – from Freetown to the other end of the country in half a day.

“Word gets out – correctly, incorrectly, inaccurately, accurately and everything in between,” Crane said.

Crane said he does not see the literacy rate improving any time soon, as well as basic living conditions.

“I frankly hold no hope for the country, in many ways,” he said. “There’s just not enough interest or money to fix it.”

The question remains whether or not Sierra Leoneans actually want the Special Court in their country. Controversy surrounds the indictment of CDF fighters because they are largely viewed as heroes in Sierra Leone for fighting against RUF rebels, Pelt said. The court convicted two former CDF leaders for war crimes, and one man was convicted of recruiting child soldiers.

“There’s a lot of people in Sierra Leone who kind of felt like, ‘These people are our heroes – why are they being made to be put on trial?’” she said.

Additionally, men like RUF founder Sankoh are those who Sierra Leoneans would like to see convicted for war crimes, but they are either dead or missing, Pelt said.

“I think that that part is missing, and so I think there’s a lot of people who are like, ‘Well, we don’t really need this court, then,’” Pelt said.

Crane maintains that Sierra Leoneans do want justice and, most importantly, the chance to tell the world their story. The only way that could happen was through the

media, the truth commission and the court, which is a narrow way to capture what took place factually and punish the people most responsible for those crimes, he said.

Pelt said that from talking to Sierra Leoneans in Freetown about the court, she thinks they want to forget and not be reminded of the atrocities anymore. The court is a constant reminder of the war to them, she said.

“People walk around on the streets, and they see people who killed their parents or raped their sisters – they see these people on the streets every day – and they just want to forget,” she said.

The cultural aspects of international justice must be respected and considered, because international justice can become “white man’s justice” to those experiencing a situation like the Special Court, Crane said. After traveling the country and getting to know Sierra Leoneans over a few years, Crane said he found that they do want justice.

However, the tribunal should not be expected to change society in Sierra Leone – it is only there to bring about justice, Crane said.

“We tend to put too much stock in a tribunal as to curing society ... and that’s not what it was there to do – it wasn’t my mandate,” Crane said.

The establishment of the court shows that their lives matter and that a head of state can be held accountable for destroying lives, he said.

The message of ending impunity

The court is one of greatest things to happen in recent years to end impunity internationally, Farah said. There is a constant desire, particularly in Africa, to trade

justice for stability, and a belief persists that not pardoning leaders who commit atrocities just leads to perpetual war.

“I think this was a huge milestone in showing you don’t have to do that,” Farah said. “You don’t have to pardon – you can actually bring people to trial.”

The reason why African elites have hated the court is because they realize that if a court can indict a head of state like Taylor, anyone could be next, Farah said.

“I think it’s really good that people start looking over their shoulders a little bit,” he said.

The message of what the court has accomplished has not been adequately described in the media, even in the specialized media on Africa or the academic world, Farah said.

“I didn’t start out thinking they were going to do a whole lot, and at the end of it, I think they did a hell of a lot,” Farah said. “And I think it’s something that should be noted much more broadly – to know that people in other countries are scared, and that’s a good thing.”

Farah said he thought the court tried very hard to keep attention on what it was doing. They were probably initially slow in reaching out to the media because they did not understand what they were doing in the beginning stages, but they were also fairly limited in getting coverage due to the nature of the judicial process, Farah said.

A reporter can only write about a sitting court so many times until a trial begins, especially in this case because the court did not want to disclose much information early, Farah said. The unsealing of the indictments, the arrests of the accused warlords and the actual trials were the only “media-friendly moments” in the process, he said.

“They weren’t dealt a great hand for getting publicity,” Farah said.

American media missed the establishment of the hybrid court and how it was the first of its kind, Crane said. There has been little media analysis of how this was the first time in history a court was created to make international justice more cost-effective and efficient. The decision that the conscription of child soldiers was a crime was another issue the media did not pick up on, he said.

“It’s got to be headline grabbing, causing people to stop, pause and read or listen,” Crane said.

Farah said he thinks the court understood the importance of Sierra Leoneans and Liberians hearing that the ongoing process at the court was significant.

“They feel so abandoned by the international community ... that when they’re on the BBC or when they see an article about their country in the paper, it’s tremendously heartening to them,” Farah said. “And it has this weird reaction that I think only happens in countries that are used to being ignored.”