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Empowering Voices in Conflict: ICRC Trains Journalists to Navigate Humanitarian Crises



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The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is one of the world's oldest and largest humanitarian organizations, with a strong presence in Pakistan since 1947. With its core principle of humanity, the ICRC has been instrumental in delivering humanitarian aid, ensuring basic healthcare, providing physical rehabilitation services, promoting International Humanitarian Law, and assisting vulnerable communities in conflict zones. Three times Nobel Prize laureate, the ICRC works to help people affected by armed conflicts and other situations of violence.

In the face of on-going humanitarian crises, the need for accurate and responsible reporting has never been more critical. In conflicts and humanitarian crises, accurate and timely information is as important as food, shelter, medicines and water for the affected community. The right and timely information plays a crucial role not only for the affected community but it is also for the general audience and can save lives, livelihoods and resources and can lead to a deeper understanding of needs and ways to respond. The wrong and delayed information, on the other hand, can lead to inappropriate even dangerous interventions. Humanitarian assistance plays a pivotal role during conflict, and dependence on humanitarian assistance has increased immensely. According to the United Nations'

recent global humanitarian overview, over 305 million people globally will require humanitarian assistance in 2025, driven largely by conflict and climate change. In this context, Pakistan, with its history of both man-made and natural disasters, have seen millions displaced due to conflict and natural calamities, including devastating floods, earthquakes, and climate-induced disasters.

The journalists have an integral role to play in a humanitarian situation, one that goes beyond the simple documentation of a crisis at hand, and not considering the most expansive scenario. The best reporting on a major incident includes a variety of accurate information including data, analysis, compassion, human voices, and outreach and first hand accounts. The information must come from different sources, i.e. government, stakeholders, NGOs, INGOs, UN Agencies, local aid organizations, affected communities and more.

Humanitarian reporting is not restricted to reporting on humanitarian aid efforts—it is about telling the full story of a crisis, along a timeline that includes pre-crisis vulnerabilities and preparedness of communities at risk from conflict and natural disaster, through slow or rapid onset of the actual humanitarian crisis, the immediate needs and coping mechanism of the community, the mounting of humanitarian response, unfolding of aid efforts, and to

stabilization and finally to the stage where the affected community begins to develop again.

Many situations take years to move through this cycle from disaster to development,

humanitarian reporting remains important throughout the cycle.

However, while Pakistan's humanitarian emergencies have been covered by the local,

national and international media, there is a critical gap in training for journalists on how to

report effectively during these crises. The ICRC has recognized this need and, to address it,

has recently organized two workshops in Islamabad, for the journalists of Khyber

Pukhtunkhawa aimed at building and enhancing the capacity of journalists in humanitarian

reporting.

These workshops brought together over 40 journalists from different beats, including

females, from print and electronic media across the province. The first workshop was

attended by journalists from the merged areas and Kashmir, while the second focused on

Peshawar and other districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The workshops were designed to

enhance journalists' understanding of humanitarian reporting, focusing on the importance

of communicating accurate and timely information to affected communities and the general

audience.

During two-day workshops, the sessions covered a wide range of topics, including the

complex nature of humanitarian crises, the challenges journalists face in conflict zones, and the ethical considerations when reporting on conflict, disasters, and emergencies. Resource persons shared first-hand experiences from past crises, providing valuable insights into the humanitarian context and the role of journalists during such events.

A key part of the training was dedicated to disaster reporting, complex emergencies, and violence—topics that require a nuanced and ethical approach. Journalists learned how to report on ongoing conflicts, natural and climate-induced disasters, and the impact of violence on vulnerable communities. The workshops also addressed the challenges journalists face when covering these topics, especially in high-risk environments. Resource persons shared their experiences and offered insights into the best practices for sensitive and balanced reporting.

One of the core aspects of the workshops was the discussion of the laws and frameworks that govern journalism in crises. Journalists were briefed on the laws relating to access to information, freedom of expression, and the regulatory roles of institutions such as PEMRA. The training also highlighted laws concerning defamation, contempt of court, and the Official Secrets Act, among others, providing a comprehensive overview of legal and ethical boundaries journalists must navigate.

Journalists play a crucial role in shaping public understanding, raising awareness of urgent needs, and ensuring that the affected communities receive the right information at the right time. This can ultimately lead to better responses and outcomes for those in crises. A major focus was also placed on how journalists can effectively build trust with affected communities and other sources, stressing the importance of verifying information through multiple channels. The workshop encouraged journalists to avoid sensationalism and stereotypes, respect the dignity and privacy of individuals, and provide context and analysis to help audiences understand the complexities of humanitarian crises.

One of the standout sessions focused on social media, its importance, and its use during humanitarian crises, conflicts, and emergencies. The journalists also explored how social media platforms can serve as critical tools for real-time information dissemination, public awareness, and advocacy. The session emphasized the need for journalists to verify content, combat misinformation, and responsibly use social media to amplify credible voices.

Journalists were encouraged to leverage social media not just as a reporting tool but as a means to connect with affected communities, humanitarian organizations, and global audiences. The session also highlighted how social media can facilitate two-way communication, enabling journalists to gather insights from the ground while providing

timely, life-saving information to those in crisis.

The ICRC's workshops emphasized the importance of journalists in providing accurate information that could save lives, preserve livelihoods, and help community's access vital resources. By equipping reporters with the necessary tools and understanding, the ICRC aims to ensure that the media continues to serve as a vital bridge between affected communities humanitarian organizations, governments, and the general public.

As Pakistan continues to face both natural and man-made disasters, the role of responsible and well-trained journalists becomes even more critical. Through these workshops, the ICRC is helping to equip journalists with the knowledge and skills they need to report on humanitarian crises effectively and responsibly. By fostering accurate, empathetic, and ethical reporting, journalists can play a pivotal role in ensuring that the right information reaches those who need it most during times of crisis.

(The Writer is the Communication Officer at Pakistan Red Crescent Society AJK)