Challenges in Photojournalism: Award winners speak out

By Alex A. Chamwada

Photojournalism requires a lot of flexibility, skill, stamina, sacrifice, patience and interest. The final product depends on ingenuity and talent not theoretical training. Not all can make good journalists. It can be an exciting or painful adventure.

Rebecca Nduku and Antony Kamiru had some of the best photographs exhibited at the French Cultural and Cooperation Centre from 12th to 18th February, on the theme "Reflections of our past."

The two photojournalists working with The Daily Nation were among 35 photographers who submitted their photos out of which 22 photographers' works were selected and a total of 50 photographs chosen. Only two lady photographers; Rebecca Nduku and Winnie Ogana featured in the exhibition.

Nduku laments that ladies tend to go for easier jobs and careers, leaving photojournalism male-dominated. "It's taxing and demanding...but women have more job opportunities in this field given that very few of them have ventured into it," she notes.

Kamiru observes that women photographers can sometimes be better placed to get pictures in riot situations as people are quick to clobber and harass men than women. He adds that women photographers have the knack for cajoling people to give them stories. "Look at the use of Catherine Bond who works with CNN. She has been odds to come up with exclusive pictures and news on rebels like Kabila. Were it a man, Kabila may not have disclosed the news on she has managed to scoop," he narrates. "A policeman will hesitate beating a lady, but on a man, he takes no time to act."

However, Nduku has tasted the 'pill' of harassment severally. She was not spared in the skirmishes that engulfed the demolition of Soweto slums, Akasha's High Court case, demolition of shanties in Dandora and riots at Kasarani by Gor Mahia fans. "There are incidents where my camera and films were confiscated," she says.

Flexibility and tact come in at hand in precarious situations: taking photographs during a bank robbery, such was Nduku's fate, and she managed to take good photographs during the Standard Chartered bank robbery. She warns that assignments depend on the people you are covering. "A very humble assignment could turn out to be something else," she quips.

During the clamour for reforms last year, Kamiru took some of the best photos of the riots due to his flexibility. "When policemen embarked on reformists at the All Saints Cathedral, I was the only photographer who dared to enter the church and capture photos of people bleeding and writhing in pain," he observes.

He never takes a photo while standing upright. "I look for vantage points where I can kneel to avoid blows and whips," he says.

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For him, "this job is unpredictable. You can never tell. He undertook a course in design at the Kenya Polytechnic and photojournalism was one of his most interesting subject, though hard. Amidst problems of lack of facilities like films and bromides, Kamiru was always ahead of his colleagues for he used to buy his own materials and spent most of his time in the dark room. "In fact my friends nicknamed me professor," he recalls.

Before joining Nation, Kamiru had a lot of hands-on experience at the United Nations Environment Programme's Graphics department, "My sixth sense, that is, the nose for news and my ability to think in three dimensions are qualities that have enabled me excel," adds Kamiru. He advises photographers, like any other journalist to keep be alert and make proper use of their eyes, ears, noses, skin... when covering events. His greatest career ambition is to become an art director in an advertising firm.

On professional ethics, Nduku and Kamiru are quick to advise photographers to be open-minded, avoid bias, credit other photographers where necessary, avoid bribes from sources and avoid disclosing sources who seek anonymity.

No escape: A scene at the All Saints Cathedral during one of the pro-reformists rallies last year.

Antony Kamiru's award winning photograph