

Continued from last week.

*Defying Human Boundaries to Bring You...*

# MO STORIES

In part two of his interview, Mo defocuses on the painful memories of the Ethiopian famine, as he speaks about his knighthood, the current media situation in Kenya as well as looking to the future

of investigative journalism. And yet again, over to Mo. This interview was possible courtesy of Budhi Shah  
By Hussein Jiva



*Mother Theresa once told you that you were "a gift from God." What was she referring to?*

Mother Teresa had an art making everyone feel great. She told me that God had chosen me to film "African Calvary" and blessed the production. I was the co-producer of the documentary. It attracted the interest of Harry Belafonte, the King of Calypso and a great humanitarian, who ended up assisting in the raising of funds as well as producing the song "We are the world," as a result of my Ethiopian famine coverage of 1984.

*What is it like to put your life on the line to do your job?*

I look at it this way. Every time you leave the house, you are putting your life at risk. It is not very different to compare your chances covering war and driving on the road to Nakuru, believe me. You take precautions, and live the rest to God.

*Your courage in the face of war earned you the nickname "Death-wish Dhillon." What does that mean for you now?*

Nobody wishes to die, and I am not happy about that name at all. What you have to do is calculate your risk, and have faith in your Creator. I want to stay alive, as I can still contribute a lot towards Kenya.

*You were knighted with the "Order of Saint Mary of Zion" in 2005, for your coverage of the 1984 Ethiopian famine...*

In fact, when I was receiving my knighthood, I asked myself; "Have I exploited poverty?" I was feeling guilty- if anyone deserved the award, it was the people of Ethiopia. They suffered with dignity. Therefore, I dedicated my honour to people of Ethiopia.

*What do you mean by "suffered with dignity?"*

There were mountains of food in countries like India and Pakistan, and the hungry would loot to fill their stomachs. However, when the victims of famine did not receive food, they never ran and ripped into the food- they were very well mannered. The victims of the famine were very family-oriented, so they would pray together and help each other live through their trauma. They deserved it more.

*Did that title ever change who you were, what you did and how you were treated?*

No it didn't. The only change was that I put the title on my business cards. When I came home the next day, my aides started teasing me about my title. What is in a title? In fact, I hated it when people would refer to me as sir. Thankfully, no one in Africa pays too much attention to the title 'sir.'

*Your coverage gave you international fame, but whatever happened to the victims of the famine after \$100 million were raised?*

The plea by BBC garnered \$15 million, while images surpassed the \$100 million mark. I must make it clear that Ethiopian charity workers were very devoted; they did not steal. All ration and other products

purchased were well documented in books. They kept records and made sure everything was accounted for- from the smallest to the largest of items.

*In Aden, you scooped a fellow journalist who was from BBC by filming military brutality against a Yemeni man. Why did it receive so much global attention?*

I saw the military mistreating a mad man; it is a basic human rights violation. They could have let the mad man pass, but they opted not to. All this was being captured on my film camera. The BBC journalist beside me did not cover the army's brutality. I am sure he must have landed in hot water for not having recorded it! However, covering a sensitive matter in a volatile region can be a double-edged sword...

The presence of cameras can sometimes cost innocent lives, as was the case in East Pakistan in 1972. I watched guerrillas prodding Urdu-speaking Bihari prisoners with bayonets and burning them with cigarettes when the camera was on them. I told my reporter, Richard Lindley, that these people would kill them if we stayed longer. We left, and their provocation stopped.

The other reporters came in and did not take that precaution. And as a result, bunch of prisoners were bayoneted to death. The reporter that did capture the killing through still pictures went on to win the Pulitzer Prize; the most prestigious prize in USA. He got the award, but we did the honourable thing and our conscience is

clear. In my opinion they had blood on their hands.

*With all the work you had done, people must have used you as a gauge of success- whatever you covered, they wanted to do so too...*

It is interesting that you say that. There is always competition between rival news networks. I remember there was a story in Somalia; a lot of fighting was going on. The media was allowed to cover the story, after signing some documents absolving them off our responsibility. During the media briefing, we were asked how many of us were ready to go. My colleague John Snow turned to me, awaiting an approval. I nodded yes, and his hand went up. Soon the BBC fellows said, "Oh sh\*t. I suppose we will have to go to now."

*Your son is now in the media, do you think he will take after you?*

Yes, he will. However, the media has changed from what it was. The level of appreciation has dissolved. Today, it is all about crunching numbers by the heartless accountants. Thus, there is zero appreciation or understanding of hardships we experience in the field.

*In today's age, everything is digital and lighter to carry around, unlike in the past. How hard was it to get your clips, knowing you always needed your eye over the viewfinder, or lose the film?*

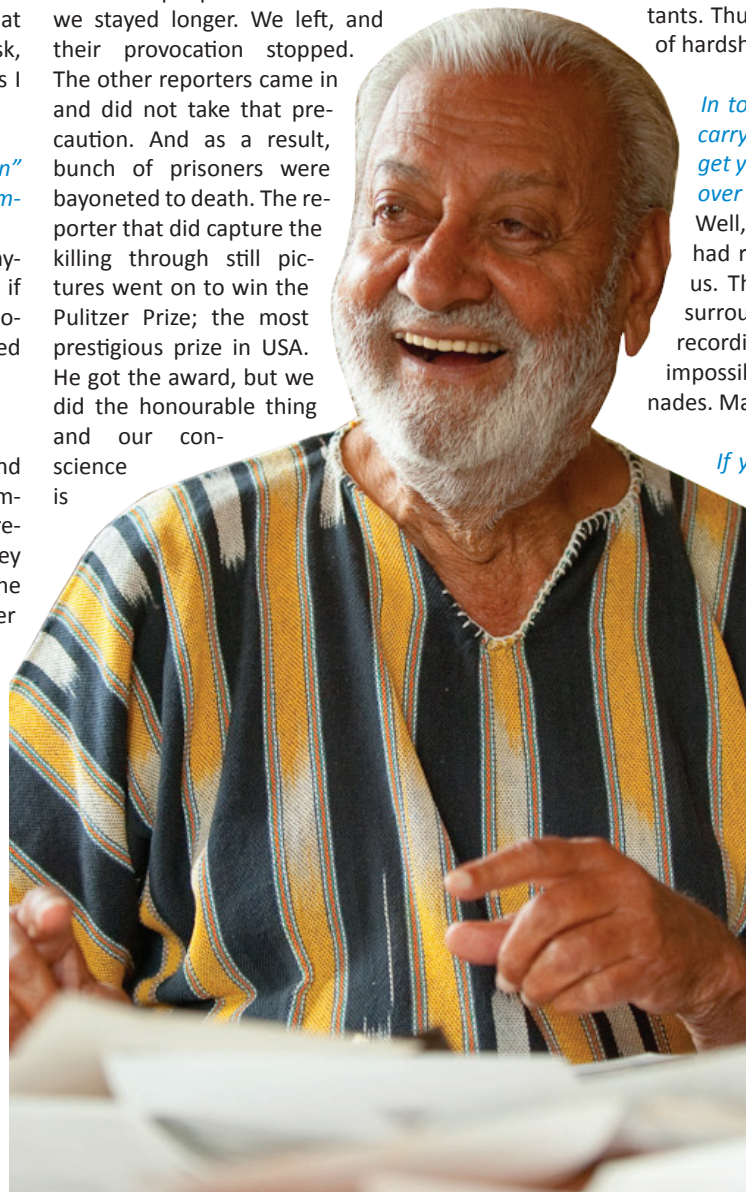
Well, cameramen were never alone. We always had reporters, sound technicians or directors with us. They would guide us, making us aware of our surroundings. That way, we were governed in our recording. But the weight of the camera did make it impossible to dive to ground to avoid exploding grenades. Many a times, the camera got damaged.

*If you could take one present day gadget to aid your work back then, what would it be and why?*

I would say a palm coder. They are small, are high in definition and also come with interchangeable lens, so it is ideal. It also allows one to capture various angles due to its small nature.

*Not many people know this, but you once fell from a chopper flying at a height of 8,000 feet in the Rift Valley. What happened there?*

It was mid-day, and we were to fly in windy conditions. The pilot first said it wasn't possible to fly, before re-evaluating his decision. So we flew up. I was hoping to a picture of the train along the railway for a documentary I was working on. Unfortunately, we hit an air pocket and spiralled into a death turn 8000 feet into the ground. We hit a tree and I jumped out, holding my camera- a silly cameraman intuition. I managed to get hold of a branch with one hand. It later snapped, and I fell onto a sharp, dried stem



which pierced my spine. It took me bolts, screws, metal plates and six months to recover. I still undergo therapy due to the injuries sustained.

*Where do you draw the line between job and life?*

You don't go next to the fire expecting not to sweat. While people sometimes take for granted the end result of productions, we risk our lives walking over unexploded mines, covering amidst crossfire and grenades and make several personal sacrifices among various others to bring them the story. However, we do take precautions, so we aren't irresponsible.

*Mo, what has been your highest and lowest point in the profession?*

I will never forget the Ethiopian story. It was a desperate situation; I had never seen anything like that before, and I wish I never have to film something like that again. As for my highest point; when Harry Belafonte put his hand on one shoulder, and Mwalimu Julius Nyerere put his hand on the other to sincerely thank me for my work.

*What a moment. Looking back at your career thus far, do you have any regrets?*

None. If ever I was born again, I would come back to repeat my life. I have never envied anyone's job, and thoroughly enjoyed my career.

*You retired in 1992, what have you been up to since?*

I retired after succumbing to various injuries. I have learnt painting on my own, and still take pictures, however just as a hobby. Now, I spend my life as an activist, and also occasionally write for local and international

publications. My work is considered controversial, as I openly speak out my mind.

*I must say, for a man who has overcome such difficulties, you look in shape.*

Thanks, I carry out regular exercises to keep fit after my injuries. I also have Peter to thank; Peter Malelo my house help keeps me alive.

He takes



care

of me very well. There has never been a day where he has missed giving me my medication, and if I am indulging in something unhealthy, he instantly sweeps my plate off of it!

He is a very good man, and I help him too- I cater for his children's education et cetera.

*The Asian presence in the media, bar a few prominent journalists, is minimal. Why do you think that is?*

I think not many are willing to take the risk that comes with the job. However, there was Salim Lone in the past.

He was controversial because he spoke his mind. Zarina Patel and Zahid Rajan are also active through the Awaaz magazine. And now the Vidyarthi family are in the media too. But overall, the Asian community is a little too careful.

*You blossomed in broadcast media. What do you feel is the current trend in that field today?*

These days, the new style being adopted in the media is that it is a one-man show. The camera man doubles up as the sound technician, and is also expected to edit his own news pieces. This however only applies to news, and not documentary productions. Although technology has aided the cause, in our time, the equipment we carried was horrendously heavy! We needed an extra person to help us carry out paraphernalia.

*What would you advise the current crop of journalists in the investigative field; the likes of John Allan Namu and Mohammed Ali among others?*

I admire them. We have come a long way in press freedom since the Kibaki regime took over, and I pray this trend continues. This is very important for the social and economic development of any country. I believe Kenyan media is self-regulated and fairly responsible.

*Can we learn from the past greats?*

Yes. I also believe we had good crop of journalists who knew how far to stick their necks without losing their necks; the likes of Hillary Ngweni, Joe Khadi and Joe Rodrigues among others. They can certainly inspire others.

*Mo Dhillon's autobiography, 'Death-Wish Dhillon' is eagerly awaited. It will be out soon*

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