

- 1. WHY CARE ABOUT THE MEDIA**
- 2. HOW DO JOURNALISTS WORK AND WHAT DO THEY WANT**
- 3. THE POWER OF NEWS AGENCIES**
- 4. WHEN A REPORTER CALLS**
- 5. GET THE UNHCR MESSAGE ACROSS**
- 6. WHAT LANGUAGE TO USE**
- 7. HOW TO WRITE A NEWS RELEASE**
- 8. RADIO INTERVIEWS**
- 9. TREADING THE MINEFIELD OF "BACKGROUND" AND "OFF THE RECORD"**
- 10. TO BLAST OR NOT TO BLAST**
- 11. DENIALS AND POLEMICS**
- 12. TV INTERVIEWS**
- 13. A SECURITY CRISIS AND THE MEDIA**
- 15. NEWS CONFERENCE**
- 16. VISIBILITY**
- 17. TIPS FOR TRAINERS**
- 17. SLIDES pp --**
- 18. CASE STUDIES pp --**

1. WHY CARE ABOUT THE MEDIA

By Soren Jessen-Petersen, Assistant High Commissioner

The media are a bit like cars or airplanes. Some like them, others do not. Also, like cars or planes, the news media can be very useful when handled with expertise, or lethal when handled badly. One thing is certain: they will always be there.

We gain the respect of the media by being open, truthful and clear in what we say.

The UNHCR is right in the middle of some of the biggest news stories of our day. Refugees, ethnic strife, political turmoil, massive movements of people and other dramatic events make headlines daily around the world. We can use the media to attract the world's attention to the plight of the people we serve, and to win donor support in a world where competition for funds is becoming tougher and tougher.

Knowing how to deal with the media is useful to everyone—from senior managers down to the lowest rungs of UNHCR's ladder.

The media are our most direct and, perhaps, most powerful tool in getting our message across to donors, but also to the man-in-the-street, and, quite often, to our own UNHCR colleagues.

We often hear our colleagues say: "Have you seen that report on CNN? Good God! I had no idea it was so bad...."

Few people read official UNHCR documents but virtually everyone watches television, listens to the radio, or reads newspapers.

Favorable coverage of UNHCR reinforces the morale of our staff on the ground. We all want to be part of a "winning team."

Journalists are not "out to get us." They are simply doing their job. By helping them we can also help ourselves. They need us as their sources. We need them as free-of-cost carriers of our message, in times when a few seconds on prime time TV cost a fortune. In a nutshell: the media and humanitarian aid workers are very often in one boat, forming a symbiotic relationship.

Do not forget that journalists are often very well informed. Sometimes, we can find out about what is going on from them.

Journalists are unlikely to get us into trouble. We are much more likely to get ourselves into trouble if we fail to understand how the media work.

2. HOW DO JOURNALISTS WORK AND WHAT DO THEY WANT FROM US?

The media never sleep. When newspaper editions go to print in East Asia, the newsrooms open in Europe. When they close in Europe, they open in the Americas. The newsrooms of television networks and radio stations work 24 hours a day. Their hunger for news never subsides. Call them a "hungry lion" or a "bottomless pit", their appetite for stories is insatiable.

The modern, round-the-clock news cycle has dramatically shortened the required response time. If UNHCR is under attack for whatever reason we can ill afford a delay before putting our position on record.

Journalists want factual information such as numbers, dates, names of places, organizations, people and countries involved. They want a truthful and clear message from us.

The media love human-interest stories. Give them one. In your message, try to speak about real people and tell their stories. Do not deliver wooden statements full of acronyms and UN jargon. These turn people off.

Most journalists work on deadlines and therefore they often require information very quickly. When they persistently call you and come to your office you should not see it as being aggressive. They simply try to get their, and ultimately your story out.

*UNHCR in the News -
Public Information Section 1998*

3. The power of news agencies (wires)

Virtually every major newspaper and broadcast station subscribes to wire services, which have correspondents and bureaus worldwide. The wires are extremely influential in determining which international stories get coverage. Since many publications and broadcasters cannot afford to assign their own correspondents abroad, they depend on wire services like Agence France Presse, Reuters, Associated Press, Deutsche Presse Agentur and the Spanish news agency, EFE, for international news.

It is essential to have good relations with wire service correspondents to ensure the broadest possible international coverage of UNHCR's issues and concerns. This is particularly true in urgent situations where publicity can serve an immediate advocacy/protection role. The first journalists to be called in such circumstances should be wire service and broadcast network correspondents whose reports move almost instantaneously and are seen worldwide.

At the same time, we must remember that stories which run on the wire are not always used by print or broadcast media.

4. WHEN A REPORTER CALLS

Sooner or later all of us will get a call from a reporter. When it happens, do not panic. Ask the reporter's name, who he or she works for and what they want to know. Be polite and helpful.

Never say:

"No comment"

"I cannot talk to you"

"Call PI Geneva"

A response like this generates hostility and makes you sound like you have something to hide or are ignorant.

You do not have to talk to the reporter straight away. You can always ask them to call back later so that you have enough time to prepare your answers and to determine what your message is.

When you think that a response to a question could jeopardize the delicate nature of your work, say so. Explain to a journalist why you would prefer not to speak about a certain issue. If your reasons are valid, most journalists will understand.

Some UNHCR offices have the luxury of having public information officers who can handle media inquiries for them. But 'most do not. Also, the media often want to speak to officials directly involved in field work.

Be prepared for simple questions. Many of us are so caught up in the intricacies of UNHCR's internal debates that we become overly anxious about the media. We often end up preparing answers to tricky questions while the reporters ask us something trivial like: "How many refugees are there?"

UNHCR in the News -Public Information Section 1998

5. GET THE UNHCR MESSAGE ACROSS

Make sure you have a message. Try to organize your thoughts before speaking to the media. If possible, make sure you know what the focus of the media attention is in your area at the moment. Try to add something significant to a current running news story. By doing so, you are much more likely to get UNHCR's name in the news.

We often devote much more attention to written communications than to oral communications. We write and re-write our office memos. We often look at them several times, before sending them off. But we seldom prepare so well before speaking. And yet it is equally important.

Your message should rest on three pillars:

Knowledge: We know what is going on

Caring: We are not a bunch of heartless bureaucrats, we feel for the people we serve, we care.

Action: We are doing something to help them

*UNHCR in the News -
Public Information Section 1998*

6. WHAT LANGUAGE TO USE

The rules for written and oral communication with the media are very similar. Keep it short and simple. Use every-day language. When talking to the media always assume that you are talking to someone totally unfamiliar with UNHCR's work, let alone our jargon and acronyms.

Imagine that you are trying to explain your work to a friend or a relative who has no clue what UNHCR is all about.

FORGET ABOUT Durable Solutions Officer, Protection Officer, Program Officer, implementing partner, shelter, caseload, refoulement, resettlement, coordinator, procurement, assistance, gender mainstreaming, capacity building, modalities, inter-alia etc.

Nobody really knows what these words mean. To an outside audience they sound like gibberish.

IT IS BETTER TO SAY: UNHCR field worker, sending refugees back, agency working with UNHCR etc. Say "food, water and blankets" rather than **assistance**. Say "tents and plastic sheeting" rather than **shelter**. Say **"help refugee women and girls"** rather than **"mainstream gender."**

FORGET ABOUT NGO, EVI, COM, LOI, OCHA, ICRC, MSF, and all other acronyms so dear to our hearts. When mentioning UNHCR, always spell it out at least once. There are a lot of people in the world who have no idea what UNHCR stands for.

BAD:

UNHCR, in close co-ordination with NGOs and other implementing partners has been actively involved in providing assistance and shelter to the Goma caseload situated in a number of unsuitable locations. Following an assessment mission to the area the UNHCR Medical Co-ordinator estimates that the sanitary conditions jeopardize the health situation of the caseload.

GOOD:

We have one million people camping out in volcanic lava fields. We are giving them water, food, tents and plastic sheeting. Our medical doctor, who just came back from the camps, says the danger of an epidemic is huge.

7. HOW TO WRITE A NEWS RELEASE

The United Nations has produced enough badly written news releases to wallpaper the Empire State Building on the outside and on the inside. UNHCR offices have produced a handsome portion of these.

Before writing a news release, make sure you have a point, something newsworthy to tell. Keep it short, sharp and simple. Make sure your main point is on top while background information is at the bottom.

Use eye-catching, powerful quotes, preferably from people whose word carries weight and authority or from refugees themselves.

Many news releases issued at the UNHCR headquarters contain quotes from the High Commissioner, or a senior official whose work is related to the news release's subject matter.

In the field, you can use a quote from the regional representative or someone in charge of the operation on the ground. When you use quotes, make sure they are cleared with the person you quote.

Every news release must have a date line (the place and date of issue) at the top.

Do not issue too many news releases. They become small change.

Defensive or self-serving news releases ruin the organization's reputation.

NEVER start with ancient history.

NEVER use acronyms and UNHCR jargon.

NEVER assume that the entire text is going to be used by the media

8. RADIO INTERVIEWS

Always remember that everything you say in a radio interview can be used in the story.

Never assume that they will use the entire interview, unless you do it "live." There is no use complaining afterwards and saying "but I also said this or that." They can use whatever they want.

Remember that what you say is only a small part of the story which will go on the air.

Speak in short, clipped, sentences which can be edited out of the interview and used as "sound bites."

Do not use phrases like "first of all", "as I said before" or anything which makes it difficult to use parts of your message.

Put your main message on top. You never know when you may get cut off.

Use normal everyday language without UNHCR jargon or acronyms. Keep it conversational, do not try to address the world. It usually sounds pompous and unconvincing.

Speak in a vivid, descriptive language. Try to paint pictures on the radio.

Adjust to the style of the interview. If they address you by your first name, do the same. If they call you Mrs. Smith, call them Mr. Brown.

In both radio and TV interviews, it is better to go "live", since live interviews cannot be edited.

9. TREADING THE MINEFIELD OF "BACKGROUND" AND "OFF THE RECORD"

Speaking to journalist as an anonymous source is a highly risky venture. But it can sometimes be a vehicle to carry a message which you cannot convey officially. It is a powerful tool but one which must be used with great caution.

Before speaking "on background" or "off the record" make sure the reporter and you agree on what these terms mean.

Determine with precision how you want to be identified. It could be "a UN official", "a relief official", "an aid worker", or "a diplomat." When you are quoted as a "UN official", make sure that you are not the only UN official in town.

Never speak "off the record"

With a group of reporters;

With someone you do not know very well;

In radio and TV interviews;

With a group of reporters immediately after a press conference;

Never answer questions about your "personal opinion." As a UNHCR official speaking to the media, you have none. Once you have been quoted, your "personal opinion" is regarded as UNHCR's official position.

10. TO BLAST OR NOT TO BLAST

The general rule is not to criticize our partners, be it the governments we work with or other aid agencies.

Public bickering among organizations which are supposed to work together creates the impression that the aid community is divided and incapable of handling its job.

Whenever government policies put the life of refugees or asylum seekers at risk, we have to say it, but it is much better to focus on describing the suffering caused by such policies than on pronouncing general public judgments on government behavior.

For example, it is better to say: "We are extremely concerned about conditions in detention centers in Rurithania where asylum seekers are locked up for years together with common criminals" than "We are appalled by the Rurithanian government's detention policy."

Caring, knowledge and action rather than judgment should be the core of our message.

UNHCR in the News -Public Information Section 1998

11. DENIALS AND POLEMICS

When we are misquoted or criticized, sometimes but not always it makes sense to respond.

Answering criticism in a public forum or a public denial in a news conference is risky since it may actually give wider publicity to something insignificant that is likely to go unnoticed. Responding to a critical article in a local newspaper in an international news conference would be a perfect example.

When repeatedly misquoted by a particular journalist or a particular news service, one can directly contact the reporter or the editor and complain. It sometimes works. Often it does not.

A letter to the editor is another way of straightening out untrue or unfair stories. Letters to the editor should be brief, polite and factual. One should avoid being sarcastic, aggressive or argumentative.

One should generally avoid being defensive in answering criticism.

12. TELEVISION INTERVIEWS

Remember that television is mostly vision and the visual impact is crucial. Often, people who see you on television do not remember what you said but they do remember whether you make a good or a bad impression.

With cameras around, always remember that you may be filmed and shown all over the world.

Prepare your TV interviews. Ask what questions to expect, at least try to find out what the first question will be. Ask who will be talking to you.

Check what is behind you. Wear clothes which are appropriate for the situation. UNHCR vest is perfectly fine in the middle of a camp but a three piece suit isn't. Be calm and polite.

You can move your upper body and gesture a little but do not overdo it. Do not try to stand there as a piece of wood, but your feet should be firmly parked on the ground. When seated, do not slouch in the chair. Look alert and interested.

Speak in short, simple sentences without UNHCR jargon or acronyms.

NEVER SMOKE OR DRINK ON CAMERA!

There are basically two types of TV interviews: with a person or persons talking to you and when you face a naked camera connected to an interviewer in a faraway studio.

Whenever you talk to a person, ignore the camera, trying at all times to maintain eye contact with the person you talk to.

When interviewed by someone in a distant studio, look straight in the lens of the camera. To make it a bit easier, imagine that you are talking to someone you know. Do not look down or around.

In all TV interviews, control your facial expression. Do not laugh or smile, unless you tell jokes. On camera, people often smile involuntarily because of sheer nervousness, even while speaking about very sad things.

13. A SECURITY CRISIS AND THE MEDIA

Telling the media about the death, injury, or kidnapping of a UNHCR staff member or someone working for a partner agency requires a lot of caution and tact.

Usually, the media must not be told until the family of the person has been notified.

If the story is partially out, try not to release the name and the nationality of the person until the family has been told.

In such situations, your message should also rest on the three pillars of KNOWLEDGE, CARING and ACTION.

In case of abduction or kidnapping, be it of a refugee or an aid worker, you do not have to tell the media about the details of release negotiations. Tell them openly that you are trying to protect the victim and they will most probably understand.

UNHCR in the News -Public Information Section 1998

14. NEWS CONFERENCE

Make sure you have something new and significant to say before calling a news conference.

Introduce the speaker or speakers, if possible make name plates for them with lettering big enough for everyone to read, even from the far end of the room.

Make sure reporters are informed on time. Try to give them as much notice as possible.

If possible, schedule news conferences early in the day, so that reporters have ample time to write their stories and file (send) them. Give reporters some hand-outs with brief info on UNHCR.

Keep the number of speakers to the absolute minimum. Big panels of speakers usually make bad news conferences. One speaker is best, two acceptable, three is already too many.

Keep your opening remarks short. Ask your speaker to be brief in answering questions. Decide in advance who will say what.

Establish a clear time frame. Do not let a news conference go on forever and ever.

Ask reporters to identify themselves before they ask a question.

Make sure the news conference is not monopolized by one vocal reporter. Give as many journalists as possible a chance to ask a question.

Remember that everything you say in the press conference or immediately after, during what may seem to be a "friendly chat" with reporters, may be quoted.

If you do not know an answer to a question, say so.

NEVER say "no comment." If you do not want to answer a question, explain why.

Stay cool, do not get into verbal skirmishes with the media.

News conferences are a useful way of handling a large media corps in an emergency situation when you are too busy to talk to each reporter individually.

UNHCR in the News -Public Information Section 1998 8.

15. Visibility in the field

There has been a dramatic increase in the media-consciousness of humanitarian organizations in recent years, at times creating a very crowded humanitarian environment. Most organizations want visibility, in part to demonstrate that they are on the ground doing what they are supposed to be doing with the support provided by their donors. Television or photographic coverage showing staff, equipment and activities, preferably under the UNHCR logo, can go a long way toward educating the public about the organization, its concerns and its mission. All staff in the field should make an effort to promote visibility under the proper circumstances.

There are numerous methods of gaining visibility, ranging from media appearances and the display of UNHCR decals and flags, to the staging of special events or activities. But in today's crowded humanitarian environment, there is also a very real danger that visibility efforts can be overdone, creating the possibility of a serious media and public backlash as agencies are seen to be competing with one another for exposure.

Fortunately, there is no real need for us to succumb to a "mob mentality" in seeking visibility because UNHCR can distinguish itself by providing useful public information as quickly and accurately as possible. UNHCR has serious protection concerns, newsworthy programs, issues and operations, and real information that the media and public should know about. As long as UNHCR can provide real news, there is no need for gimmicks and unseemly competition with other humanitarian actors.

16. TIPS FOR TRAINERS

Make sure the people you train know who you are and what you are trying to give them. Let the participants introduce themselves briefly but do not let them hold long speeches.

Explain the purpose of the training and the skills the participants are supposed to acquire.

Explain briefly what you are going to do during the training and in what order.

Encourage participants to ask questions and make suggestions. Always acknowledge every question or suggestion the participants make. Never assume you know best. Work in a team. Some of the participant may have valuable experience in media work. You can also learn from them.

Make sure the training room is clean, well aired and well lit.

Make sure break times are observed and refreshments are served during breaks. Long sessions without a break tire the audience down and lower its level of alertness.

Use anecdotes to illustrate your points. Be relaxed, friendly, patient and humorous.

16.1 The size of the group

The smaller the better. A small group of trainees, 10 people or so, usually gives everyone ample time to practice, ask questions etc.

In a larger group, divide it into several smaller groups of 3, 4 or even 5 and have them work in little teams while practicing different types of interviews, writing news releases etc.

16.2 The length of the training

Ideally, a good media training should take two days to allow enough time for everybody to practice news releases and various radio and TV interview techniques. You may have to squeeze it into a day, sometimes even a couple of hours.

Even in a short training with a large group, try not to lecture the entire time. Use at least one practical exercise and repeat it to show the participants that they are improving.

16.3 Camera practice

You can either interview the participants yourself or with the help of your training partner if you have one. You can also get participants to play the roles of interviewees and reporters.

Use several interview types:

Speaking to a journalist on camera (look at the journalist, ignore the camera!) speaking to a naked camera (look in the lens!) a scam, or speaking on camera to several reporters at a time simulated news conference "on camera" with participants playing journalists

Make sure the lighting is good enough and the camera is facing away from the window during daytime.

After each exercise, play it back to the participants, ask them to review their own performance and, if possible, repeat the exercise.

Always praise the participants when they do well and stress improvement in successive performances. Tell them what they do wrong.

16.4 The equipment

White board and board markers in different colors;
Flip chart and markers;
Overhead projector;
Slides/transparencies;
VHS portable multi-system video camera with at least two cassettes;
Camera light;
Tripod;
Multi-system television set;
Leads to connect the camera to the TV;

Microphone with a lead long enough to do stand-up interviews;

Microphone stand;
Clip-up microphone with an at least 2 meter long lead;
Cassette recorder with a speaker;
Several audio cassettes;
Transformers;

Various types of electric plugs and converter plugs so that your equipment works in different parts of the world which use different sockets and different types of electric current

Sufficient number of copies of your training module/manual
Name plates for participants

Caution:

Always test every piece of equipment before the training and make sure you can operate it.
Remember that what can go wrong, inevitably will.

When traveling by air, bring the essential equipment (camera, tripod, mikes, transformers, leads, plugs etc.) with you on the plane as cabin luggage since other luggage tends to get lost or get misplaced.

UNHCR in the News -Public Information Section 1998

UNHCR IN THE NEWS

SCENARIO 1

Gun Law in Goma

The Story

It is September 1994. You are Heidi Steffens, a young German UNHCR worker based in Goma, Zaire.

You have just returned from leading a convoy taking food and clean water to the refugee camps outside Goma. Some 1.3 million Rwandan Hutu refugees have fled there from the civil war in their country.

It has been a dangerous mission. The camps are in effect being run by former Rwandan officials who are strongly suspected of being involved in massacres of the country's Tutsi population. Gun law reigns in the camps. You know that some of the supplies from your convoy will probably be siphoned off by Hutu gangsters and never reach those genuinely in need.

While you were away, the news media started taking an interest in the situation inside the camps, Particularly in the fact that they may be harboring murderers.

The New York Times correspondent has already filed a story headlined 'Goma sanctuary for Rwandan killers'.

Representatives of the Tutsi community are making the most of it, briefing foreign journalists in Kigali, the Rwandan capital, to the effect that Hutu killers are now running the camps -- and that food supplied by western agencies is going straight to those guilty of genocide.

This morning the story has taken a dangerous new twist for the UNHCR. A French journalist working for Le Monde and a Reuters correspondent, each citing Rwandan army sources, report that western aid agencies are in effect negotiating with mass murderers to ensure their convoys get through.

Several foreign correspondents have been asked by their news desks to check out the story. Geneva wants you to field all media inquiries and to mount a stout defense of the UNHCR operation in Goma.

Write a press release that will put the UNHCR's position on record as soon as possible.

UNHCR News

(Gun Law in Goma)

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

UNHCR UPDATE

UN Refugee Agency says it faces hard choices to help Goma refugees

Goma, Zaire, September

Cases of gun law in Goma's overcrowded refugee camps are making increasingly hard to ensure that food is fairly distributed among the 1.3 million Rwandan Hutus who have fled there, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) said today.

Heidi Steffens, the UNHCR's chief field officer in Goma, said: "Every moment of every day our field workers are risking their lives getting the convoys through and distributing relief supplies.

"Having been inside Goma myself during the past few days, I've witnessed with my own eyes the anarchy and misery the refugees are enduring. "In such conditions, our field workers cannot avoid coming into contact with armed groups in the camps. Our job is to try to ensure that aid reaches the needy. This in no way means the UNHCR is lending legitimacy to the gunmen".

Steffens said she and her colleagues rejected claims made in some news reports that UNHCR staff were now in league with alleged killers running the camps.

"If coming into contact with armed factions is necessary to save refugees' lives, then we see that as a regrettable but unavoidable part of the job. It certainly doesn't mean we're siding with the gunmen. Our first priority must be to help the thousands of men, women and children who will starve if supplies do not get through.

'We realize only too well that gunmen are pilfering some of the supplies. It is all sadly familiar in a disaster area where chaos on this scale prevails. But we're in no doubt that the bulk of relief supplies are getting through to those who are most in need. And we mean to keep it that way."

SCENARIO 2

Bosnian Exodus

The Story

You are Richard Clement, the UNHCR special envoy for Yugoslavia.

You are visiting Berlin, where your representative has alerted you to a UNHCR-related news story which is threatening to spin out of control.

The Germans have intensified deportations of Bosnian refugees. More have been sent home over the past week than during the previous five months. Many are returning to find that their homes are now in areas occupied by former enemies. Their safety cannot be guaranteed -- but they have nowhere else to live.

The UNHCR is caught in the middle. On the one hand Germany has hosted the largest number of Bosnian refugees. The Berlin government is a major donor. In addition, some 60,000 Bosnian refugees have returned voluntarily since the peace agreement was signed two years ago. You know the deportations have been carried out under a bilateral agreement between Germany and Bosnia.

On the other hand there are disturbing reports from your own protection officers that many of the refugees have been picked up by the German authorities in humiliating circumstances. Conservative governments in several of the German Under have ordered the deportations. Even the foreign ministry in Berlin seems embarrassed.

As you arrive in Berlin, things come to a head when the left-liberal Frankfurter Rundschau publishes a front-page report on "Nazi-style round-ups" of Bosnian refugees.

(Bosnian *Exodus*)

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

UNHCR UPDATE

Bosnian refugees in Germany deserve respect, says UN Special Envoy

Berlin date as issued.

The UNHCR Special Envoy for Yugoslavia, Richard Clement, paid tribute today to Germany's humanitarian role in the Bosnian crisis and urged local authorities to ensure refugees were treated with respect and understanding.

Richard Clement said: "Germany can feel proud of what it has achieved in offering sanctuary to thousands of people displaced by the Bosnian war. At the same time we are concerned by reports of increasing numbers of deportations and of some refugees being mistreated."

The UNHCR official said he appreciated that Germany has shouldered the main humanitarian burden in the Bosnian crisis by providing shelter to thousands of those displaced by the war.

The agency was monitoring closely the numbers of deportations being carried out by regional governments in a number of German Laender. Many of those being deported are returning to their homes in areas that are now controlled by their former enemies.

There is serious concern about the fate of many of those returning to the former war zones of Bosnia. Despite the peace agreement, revenge attacks have taken place. There are still many people in Bosnia who want to settle old scores," Mr. Clement said.

'The UNHCR expresses its gratitude to the German Foreign Ministry for investigating reports that some Bosnian refugees have been subjected to humiliating treatment when detained by police.

'The agency urges all the relevant authorities to handle with sympathy people who have endured many years of suffering and distress and whose lives are likely to be blighted for many years to come."

SCENARIO

Tamils in Trouble

The Story

You are Neil Sangster, a Canadian who heads the UNHCR mission in New Delhi

In recent days, there has been a sharp deterioration in the security situation in Sri Lanka. Government forces are on the offensive against the Tamils. It is a rout. Tens of thousands of Tamil refugees are fleeing to the coast and scrambling aboard any vessel they can find. Among them, it is believed, are Tamil soldiers.

Many have made it ashore in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu and are camped out in the open over a wide area. The UNHCR and other agencies are overwhelmed. To try to halt the influx the Indian government has imposed a naval blockade; many thousands of refugees are stranded offshore on sea unworthy vessels without food or water.

You have an assessment team in place and are now trying to dispatch tents, plastic sheeting, blankets and other supplies. So far, your efforts have been thwarted by the chaos on the ground and by local bureaucracy. You are urging the federal and state authorities to allow these new 'boat people' ashore.

But the officials will not budge.

Amid all this, the international news media start to arrive. Most journalists head straight for the coast region, leaving you a degree of breathing space. But still there are news demands to which you must respond.

Your position is sensitive: **as always, you need to help the refugees -- but the UNHCR does not** want to say or do anything to upset the Indian authorities.