

AFRICA: Up close in the Congo

Karen MacGregor

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Researcher Stephanie Wolters and a couple of journalists were driving along a road in the conflict-torn eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) last year when they came upon a roadblock. "The block turned out to be a dead Congolese soldier," she recalled. The rag-tag rebels manning the roadblock were persuaded to let them through, but it was a scary moment. "People stop you when you're on the frontline. There are no guarantees. You can be careful but you also have to take risks," she said. Armed rebels, threatening officials, dodgy airlines and corruption are just some of the dangers researchers face in some parts of Africa.

Wolters - an independent analyst for the Institute for Security Studies, or ISS, in Pretoria and head of the political analysis and media company Okapi Consulting - said the Central African country made infamous by Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is not as dangerous a place to work as 'extreme' countries such as Somalia.

"I am more scared of the air travel than of armed rebels," she said. "The easy part about the Congo is that people are accessible, including people in government, especially now that I've gotten to know some of them. People are willing to speak to researchers and there's no heavy protocol involved."

With preparation in the hot-spot town of Goma in the east, a rebel stronghold, it is possible in a day to interview government and military officials as well as NGOs: "Whether people tell the truth is another story."

But many people are also suspicious of researchers and journalists - those who ask questions.

"If you don't know the system, you can spend a lot of time being messed around. Another huge obstacle to research in the DRC is the difficulty in getting around. There are virtually no roads and there are areas that are inaccessible. This is changing a little, but it can take days to get somewhere - it's either slow-going or outright impossible."

Dr Jakkie Cilliers, Executive Director of the ISS, added Guinea Bissau to the list of countries that are scary for researchers because of the drugs trade. North Africa is also problematic because civil society organisations in countries such as Libya, Algeria and Egypt lack freedom to engage.

"Asking questions about corruption or tracking arms or working on organised crime has led to our researchers feeling extremely compromised and under attack. Fortunately, we've not had anybody harmed in the process," Cilliers said.

"The institute looks at longer-term trends, so our researchers are not exposed to as much risk as journalists, who look at the here and now."

On a more mundane level, ISS researchers frequently experience problems being granted visas and have been turned away from countries they have visited to do research.

The Pretoria-based ISS also has offices in Kenya and Ethiopia, and conducts research across Africa with researchers from 17 African countries.

In Ethiopia the problem is state oppression, and in Kenya there is massive corruption: "Payment is always the issue, but it is indirect." Getting a journalist to attend a research seminar, said Cilliers, can require paying a "sitting fee".

"Even in South Africa, the space for civil society and a diversity of voices has shrunk in recent years. The government is becoming increasingly hostile to the media and independent researchers, especially around issues of service delivery," he said

The ISS researches human security which covers everything from crime to food security. But in many countries, security is seen exclusively as the domain of the state. Cilliers found that in North African nations there was little opportunity for NGOs to engage with the state.

Using Egypt as an example, he said: "If you are, say, researching the extent of the terrorism threat, you have to look at oppression of the Muslim Brotherhood and inevitably this leads to heated debate."

Dr Paul Simon-Hendy, a Cameroonian and Central African expert who heads the African Security Analysis Project at the Institute for Security Studies, outlined different challenges. Simon-Hendy said there was severe under-funding of research as well as lack of infrastructure for that research.

As a result, African countries remained dependent on work done outside the continent - "A real problem" - while most Central African states were non-democratic or still trying to become so and regarded researchers as spies.

"You are seen as someone whose activities can harm a government. So there is reluctance on the part of bureaucracies to talk to researchers. They are non-supportive across the board of research - from social science to agriculture.

"So researchers are always having to justify themselves. Worse, their work sometimes leads to arrests and threats. Africa is a very research-adverse environment."

So why did Stephanie Wolters - born in Germany and brought up there and in the US, where she obtained a masters from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies - move from a cushy job as an editor on the Africa desk of the Economist Intelligence Unit in London to the Congo?

"I'd always wanted to be a journalist in Africa," she said, explaining that she had jumped at the chance when a Reuters post became available in the DRC capital, Kinshasa, in 1998, just a year after her graduation.

"When I took the job there was no war in the DRC and I was expecting to write about a country picking up the pieces after years of conflict." Instead, she flew straight into another civil war.

It was a baptism of fire. It may have been that early crucible that allowed everything that followed to be manageable. Wolters worked as a journalist and analyst in the DRC for five years and then moved to South Africa where she is now based.

She returns three or four times a year - with a small break this year, while having a baby - and she'll be back again soon, for a month.

The Congo she finds fascinating and, looking at the type of assignments she has had, that is hard to dispute. Recent projects included a report for the World Bank on political obstacles to economic growth in the DRC, and a journalistic programme for the Institute for War and Peace Reporting on the prosecution of Congolese war criminals by the International Criminal Court in The Hague. That is being disseminated locally, in several languages.

Wolters takes calculated risks and believes that being able to operate effectively in the Congo is about control: "You need to go there with as much information as you can and, at the same time, do your job. The United Nations helps by issuing security alerts. But they err on the side of caution and, if you listen to them, you would never go anywhere.

"I've been going to the DRC for 10 years. I know where to go and who to talk to. There are security issues. And there are always risks. You just have to be careful."

karen.macgregor@uw-news.com