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Debate turns lively over 'fireman' news reports

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A DISCUSSION on a journalist's role in highlighting human rights abuses yesterday generated a lively debate on the need for fair reporting.

Delegates to the Commonwealth Press Union biennial conference tripped over one another to reach the microphone to add their comments, and made a beeline for BBC News special correspondent Sue Lloyd Roberts after the session ended.

Roberts had presented an account of her work as a "fireman" reporter who slips in and out of countries, often illegally, to write on the human rights situation.

She opened her speech by stressing that she did not intend to preach on human rights from a position of "smug, BBC-instilled morality or a sense of superior British values".

"For one thing, I am aware of the sensitivity over the question of Asian and European values, not least from the statements of Prime Minister (Datuk Seri Dr) Mahathir (Mohamad) himself. And I agree with the Prime Minister. Such a stand would be impertinent and hypocritical," she said.

She noted that while many Asian Governments were blamed for human rights problems and environmental degradation, it was the London- or New York-based companies which put up the cash.

She took pains to put across her awareness of the less-than-inspiring human rights record of the West, saying the Amnesty International report this year castigated the United States for its human rights record.

She also spoke of the dangers of "fireman" reporting, recalling from her own report on Pakistani children stitching footballs for Western companies.

The report brought swift results, the companies quickly upgraded their factories and got rid of child labour. The children, however, moved onto more dangerous jobs in tanneries and making filing tools.

She also spoke of the difficulties caused by "fireman" reporting to foreign journalists based in that country, recounting how BBC reporters in Beijing faced problems after her report on Chinese prison camps.

Speaking of Asian values, she said they had been described as "the right of a man to get on with life and to enrich himself and his family, in a disciplined environment, in a climate in which the national economy thrived".

"But what happens when the economy no longer thrives, political restrictions appear irksome and people wish to vent their frustrations? Freedom of peaceful assembly, protest and expression are fundamental human rights which serve as an essential outlet for political and economic tensions within society," she said.

Touching on the demonstrations in Malaysia which had turned violent, she said, "Surely there's a lesson here - unless discontent is allowed free expression, there is a risk that public anger will turn to violence."

During question time, several delegates pointed out the dangers of "fireman" reports. Claire Clarke-Grant, Jamaica's editor of The Star, said she sometimes did not recognise her country from British Press reports as the broader picture was not presented.

New Straits Times group editor-in-chief Datuk A. Kadir Jasin said the question to ask was not the right to write such stories, but the consequences of such reports. Mamen Mathew, editor of Malayala Manorama of India, said such reports must consider the country's cultural context.

Nigeria's The Guardian editor Eluem Emeka Izeze noted how the war in Sierra Leone and Liberia often worsened after BBC journalists entered the country.

However, there were delegates who defended such reports, including Patsy Robertson, media adviser to the Commission on Global Governance, who said there was a need to expose wrongs like slavery.

In reply, Roberts said she believed there were some stories which could only be told by "firemen" and they had to be told.

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