

Dear Sir/Madame,

I am forced to write you this email as I was very much disappointed by the quality of reporting that I witnessed on Aljazeera TV when I watched the program “People and Power” on Sunday December 5, 2009. The particular program was on Eritrea and entitled “The Mystery Behind Eritrea” and was presented by one Sinéad O’Shea.

Over the last few years myself and millions around the world – mostly in developing countries – have come to trust Al-Jazeera for being a reliable and credible source of information in a world that was dominated by the likes of the BBC and CNN. In fact, I myself have cancelled my subscription to the latter two networks and have relied on Al-Jazeera and Singapore’s Channel News Asia to provide me with a reliable, impartial (in as far as that is possible) recount of the events around the world.

This faith I had in Al-Jazeera was severely tested when I watched the above mentioned program.

The so-called reporter’s presentation was from the very beginning fraught with grossly incorrect generalizations in a bid to add a bit of melodrama to her otherwise very banal and poor quality journalism. She starts off by claiming that “..*these are the first independent images out of Eritrea in the last eight years*”! Doesn’t the lady know that in the last eight years, thousands of foreigners have come and gone out of Eritrea – there was a 5000 strong UN mission in the country – and many of them have made and taken out and published whatever images they have of the country? Doesn’t she know – or at least the moderators at Al-Jazeera know – that even networks like Al-Jazeera have been to Eritrea several times and made documentaries and taken “independent images” and distributed them world-wide? How then can her amateur home movie be classified in such a manner?

She then states that “..over 150,000 Eritreans died in the border war with Ethiopia”. This is a number she must have plucked out of nowhere because not even our erstwhile enemies – the Ethiopians – have claimed such a high figure. In fact, that number is even higher than the total number of people who died on both sides. Official numbers for Eritrean casualties is 19,000. That’s 19,000 too many. But coming up with the figure of 150,000 (which would have been 50% of the Eritrean army) shows a distinct ignorance on the part of the so-called reporter on Eritrea as a whole.

Then there was the so-called “Expert on Eritrea” – I think his name was Brian Knowles – who sitting in his office somewhere in England, has promoted himself to the rank of expert. What exactly makes one an “expert on Eritrea” by the way? He claimed that “tens of thousands of Eritreans leave the country every month”! He didn’t even bother to check his figures because that would mean that in just one year over 1.2 million Eritreans have left. Seeing that this has been going on for the last 10 years, we shouldn’t have any Eritreans left in the country. Not even the Eritrean government denies that there are people leaving the country for a better life or to avoid military service. But to exaggerate

it like this from an “expert on Eritrea” shows the level of his “expertise” not to mention the poor quality of reporting.

It was also further alleged that “... *Eritrea was the largest source of refugees in the world.*” I have made an effort to check on the UNHCR website and it was not surprising that Iraq, Afghanistan, Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, Sri Lanka are all listed way above Eritrea. A simple check like the one I did would have alerted the so-called “expert on Eritrea” to this fact but instead they chose to air such exaggerations.

The so-called “interviews” with “voices disguised” were of very poor quality. In some cases it was difficult to even hear what the questions were asked and what the answers were so one had to rely entirely on the subtitles provided by the producers. Again – to use Sinéad O'Shea own words – *a very well choreographed interview.*

Moreover, some of the footage – which was supposed to have been “the first independent images out of Eritrea in eight years” were actually plagiarized from EriTv. Take for example the clip showing a wounded Eritrean soldier being treated in the hospital. This was picked up from EriTv which by the way is aired all over the world via Satellite. The presenters would have us believe that they sneaked this out for the first time.

I could go on and list other incongruous and inconsistencies. The point, however, is that I am deeply disappointed that Al-Jazeera whom I used to regard with respect for impartiality and accuracy was not able to spot these gross errors before airing the program. The so-called journalist is clearly not experienced enough and is trying to reach via a short-cut the level of reporting that others on Al-Jazeera have reached (such as Mohammed Ado) by making herself out to be the “brave frontline reporter that slipped into Eritrea and came out with independent images”. Sadly for her, nothing she has filmed is new nor is it hidden from both the Eritrean or International public – it is her conclusions of what she saw that are wrong and disturbing.

I have had to write this email because the “Send Us Your Feed Back” option on your website does not allow more than 500 words.

I would appreciate if you could refrain from airing such factually incorrect programs in the future as they are not only damaging to your credibility but makes us lose faith in the free press which we were beginning to nurture after Al-Jazeera came onto the scene and we were “liberated” from the BBC and CNN conglomerate.

Sincerely
T. S. Zarou
Eritrean