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THE NATION

Keeping an Eye on the World's Tragedies

■ Fledgling News Corps International focuses on issues such as famine and refugees that it says are ignored by mainstream media.

By David Kelly, Times Staff Writer

GOLDEN, Colo. — While much of the national media was focusing on the Michael Jackson trial or Georgia's runaway bride, Mark Amann sat in a coffee shop here recently, trying to explain why the civil war in Uganda mattered.

"It's a story about children — 1.6 million people are being held hostage by a child army," he said. "You have women with their ears and noses cut off. These stories are compelling, and someday they will affect us all."

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In a time when many major media companies are cutting back on foreign news coverage, pitching stories about Africa seems a long shot. But then, News Corps International is a long shot.

The fledgling organization, based here and made up of a dozen or so writers, photographers and videographers, is dedicated to covering stories it sees as being ignored by much of the mainstream media: stories about famine, civil war, refugees and other human tragedies around the globe.

Amann, vice president of News Corps, recently spent a month in Uganda chronicling the brutal war there — talking with mass murderers and victims alike.

He said he had had some luck selling video footage and interviews to various media outlets, including the BBC and CNN, but it wasn't easy. Many news executives ask why their viewers should care about such distant events, he

said.

"If people in the U.S. realize the interconnectedness of the world, there might be more of an appetite for this kind of thing," said Amann, 27. "The more we care about Sudan, Mali or northern Uganda, the less likely extremism will grow there."

In more than four years in operation, News Corps has yet to turn a profit, although it broke even this year.

The organization spends \$75,000 annually. Prices for stories are negotiated separately with each news outlet and range from a few hundred to several thousand dollars.

Not that anyone is getting rich.

"We are not averse to making a profit, we just aren't very good at it," said Jim Chesnutt, president of News Corps. "We make whatever we can negotiate at the moment. Right now it's about exposure."

Chesnutt, a former television journalist in Minnesota, came up with the idea shortly after the Sept. 11 attacks. At the time, he was working for the Federal Emergency Management Agency in the ruins of the World Trade Center.

"I came back very inspired by the media's role in shaping knowledge of current events," said Chesnutt, 39, who remains a media specialist with FEMA. "I began self-financed trips. My first trip was in Egypt to cover efforts on how Christian and Muslim groups were working together on rural projects. I was captivated by this, thinking it was surely a path to peace."

As time went on, News Corps tightened its focus. It asked aid agencies to pinpoint the most underreported human disasters around the world.

"War already gets plenty of ink," Chesnutt said. "I personally think humanitarian crises get a lot less attention."

Chesnutt and Amann traveled to Ethiopia two years ago and learned that millions were again on the brink of starvation. But there was little media coverage — unlike in the early 1980s, when much of the world united to help that country.

"We have seen the immediate aftermath of humanitarian tragedies, but what happens 20 years later?" Amann asked. "We know people get worn out and fatigued by what is happening in Africa. We cover things in a way where we also try to show hope and humanity, but we don't sugarcoat it. We are not pushing an agenda."

Chesnutt said his work often gets a better reception in Europe, where there is more focus on foreign news than in this country.

"I don't spend a lot of time kicking the media," he said. "It's a business, so I have to make stories compelling. Most organizations don't have the time or energy to send people to these places, so we find the time and energy."

After Sept. 11, many people expected to see more coverage of foreign news, and were disappointed.

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