Myanmar officials introduced to the benefits of independent media

During a recent role-playing exercise at Myanmar's Ministry of Information in Naypyitaw, the participants acting as government information officers did not speak with those acting as the independent media. They thus demonstrated the necessity of this type of workshop. It's not that they consciously avoided each other - it's just that it never occurred to either side to approach the other one until it was too late. Meanwhile, those playing the role of government ministers and the public continued with the game.

The exercise occurred mid-way through a UNESCO-sponsored five-day training project for 45 government information officials and department heads in November. The need for better communication between government and the public through exchanges between information officials and the media was a lesson quickly learned.

The hypothetical setting for the exercise was a chemical spill from a factory into a river which had the potential to lead to a panic in the local community and possible damage to the country's reputation among investors and environmental groups.

The workshop facilitators, Graham Watts and Sandra Barron, said that before they did the role-playing exercise they had doubted whether it would work.

"But once the participants got into it, they really enjoyed it and came away with many lessons," said Watts, a communications consultant and journalism trainer. "Opening up transparent information channels between government and private media was still a very new idea – but participants were very willing to have a go," added Barron, an editor-writer and media specialist.

The workshop combined an introduction to theories of the role of freedom of expression and information in a democratic society with hands-on skills, such as writing a press releases and giving effective media briefings.

The event was organised by UNESCO's Myanmar and Bangkok Offices in consultation with the Ministry of Information, whose Minister, Aung Kyi, in a message to the participants from over 30 ministries and departments, said that providing quality information to the public "guarantees transparency, a part of good governance".

This was the first in a series of workshops aimed at equipping information officers with an understanding of the role of the media in a democratic society and the responsibility of government to inform and respond to the information needs of the public.

The Myanmar government has been immersed in a protracted programme of reforming its information functions as well as freeing the media from its long-standing curbs of pre-publication censorship and rigidly controlled state media. Censorship was lifted in August 2012 and there are plans to convert the government's broadcasting and print mouthpieces into public service media.

This activity was organized within the framework of UNESCO's project "Creation of an enabling environment for freedom of expression by promoting activities which foster policies and regulatory partnerships conducive to freedom of expression in regards to all types of media and social communication platforms". Supported by Canal France International, this project aims at backing effectively the current media reforms in Myanmar and at providing the necessary expertise to the Myanmar government, in order to ensure that the reforms are in line with international standards and best practices and contribute to the democratization of the country. It responds to a specific request made by the Ministry of Information to UNESCO in order to support its current efforts in reforming the communication and information field.

CONTACTS
Rosa Maria Gonzalez
Since 1996, ReliefWeb has been the main source for reliable humanitarian information on global crises and disasters. Learn more about ReliefWeb.

Static to Dynamic - and how you can help

One of the most popular products we carry is the OCHA humanitarian snapshot - a full-page map focusing on several themes that combine geo-referenced information, graphics and textual summaries of...

TOOLS

- **Location Maps** - Country maps for your reports and presentations.
- **Humanitarian Icons** - Ready-to-use symbols and icons. Free download.
- **Briefing Kit** - Download collections of important content.
- **RSS** - Subscribe to information finely tuned to your needs.
- **Support & Feedback Forum** - Get answers and help us improve ReliefWeb.