



## 'Stories from the Field'

# The First United Nations Documentary Film Festival Broadens Fan-Base

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## Article



Top left: Refugee children from the documentary film "Refugees in Tanzania", hosted by Angelina Jolie, part of the "What's Going On?" television series (produced by UN Works). Top right: Abu Bakar Bangura, from "Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone", also of the What's Going On? series. Top bottom: "For Every Child" (UNICEF).

Myriad acronyms, diverse agencies and the sheer scope of responsibilities make the United Nations an organization worthy of exploring and understanding. Through the powerful medium of films, the First United Nations Documentary Film Festival was organized to look at the wide-ranging work of the United Nations system, as part of the activities and events being held to celebrate its sixtieth anniversary.

The festival, titled "Stories from the Field", was a joint undertaking between the UN Department of Public Information (DPI), the New School University and Media Communications Association-International, New York Chapter, showcasing films produced by the United Nations and its agencies. It was held on 21 and 22 May 2005 at the New School's Tishman Auditorium in New York City.



On location in Timor Leste, filming "Kbiit" (Courage) (UN Mission in Support of Timor-Leste).

Some 80 films were submitted, which was the culmination of a search that spanned United Nations agencies, field offices and peacekeeping missions worldwide. Screened during the festival were 30 dynamic documentaries, each tied in some ways to the themes of the Millennium Development Goals. These MDGs are a set of eight time-defined goals adopted by 189 Heads of State and Government at the 2000 Millennium Summit, detailing what must be done in the coming 15 years. They included eradication of extreme poverty and

hunger, universal primary education, gender equality, reduction of child mortality, better maternal health, combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, environmental sustainability and a global partnership for development.

The festival was also a rare opportunity to see films that tell tales on critical issues that do not often make the 24-hour news channels. For example, a hard-won peace in Sierra Leone did make the headlines, but the documentary picks up from where the headlines leave off, weaving a

compelling story about child soldiers once the fighting stops. The screened films showed how United Nations field offices and agencies, in response to the decisions of Member States, have empowered the poor, healed the sick and brought justice to the exploited.

The film on *"Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone"*, one of the *"What's Going On?"* ten-part television series co-produced by RCN Entertainment and the UN Works Programme of DPI, won the "Audience Award". It is about the children forced to fight and kill in Sierra Leone's savage civil war and features UN Messenger of Peace Michael Douglas, who travels with Abu, a 12-year-old former child soldier, trying to find his family (see UN Chronicle, Issue 2, 2003). The "Best Feature" award went to *"Our Bodies ... Their Battleground"*, produced by the Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN) of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). The film highlights the crisis facing women, girls and infants during conflict and in its aftermath. With a focus on the situations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Liberia, it gives voice to the victims of rape and gender-based violence, while



A young Krahn child soldier displays his machine gun, from *"Liberia, America's Stepchild"* (OCHA).

challenging the culture of impunity that allows these acts to continue. It also highlights the work of some courageous women who are healing the wounds and rebuilding the shattered lives of thousands of women affected by such unpunished crimes. *"Better Future"*, which won the "Best Short Film" award and was produced by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, is a public service announcement to warn potential victims about the dangers of human trafficking and raise public consciousness about it.



From *"In the Wake of War"* (International Fund for Agricultural Development).

In addition to screening films, the festival also played host to two panel discussions: one on the United Nations and its 60 years of humanitarian efforts, and another based on the experiences of writers, producers and directors while making the films.

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