

**Jake Wood: When an armed conflict, such as the siege of Marawi, begins, what is your initial angle at the story and what is your process of finding sources?**

Jamela Alindogan: There's a difference between those who are coming from another country to do coverage and those who are really covering Mindanao as their patch. I've been covering Mindanao for the past 10 years, and I've traveled extensively to Marawi and its surrounding areas. The thing about what makes Mindanao specifically critical for coverage in the Philippines, and even southeast Asia, is that almost all of the issues -- from Communist rebellion, to the Moro Rebellion, the issue of terrorism, environmental issues, kidnapping, cross regional crimes such as smuggling -- Mindanao is almost at the center of all of these.

I have been going there for about a decade now. There's a bad term for foreign journalists who travel in different patches of the region: they're called "parachute journalists" because they come in and cover a particular issue for the first time, then they leave. I've done that for Vietnam and Indonesia. As a journalist, your perspective on those stories is very different from those who have been in that region the whole time. Marawi was a result of what happened over the last three years in Mindanao, and I see that as particularly complex. It is not simply between the military and the Maute group and it's not black and white. I get to see it from very complex angles that I probably wouldn't recognize as a foreign correspondent.

I heard from sources as early as February that something was going to erupt in Marawi. Whether that was going to happen sooner or later, we had no idea. But we knew that there was a mass movement. When it happened, things were quite sketchy. Even the military had zero -- well, they claimed they had no idea that this was going to happen, and the majority of the leadership was not in Marawi. President Duterte and all of the top police and military leaders were in Russia, so basically no one was in charge when it happened. When I found out about it, it was about four or five o'clock in the afternoon, and I received a call from a local source. I often get the first info from my contacts on the ground before the military releases official statements. I've gotten the initial information from local contacts, and then I flew down the next day.

**JW: So most of your sources come out of your time traveling through the region and talking to regular people?**

JA: I've cultivated several sources from the years I've spent on the ground there, and when people introduce me, I ask them if they can connect me to more people. I also run an organization: Sinagtala Center for Women and Children in Conflict, and we open safe spaces for women and children in conflict zones.

For example, in Marawi, we opened seven toy libraries and two weaving centers in evacuation centers. That work of mine on the side has also helped me speak to people easily as a journalist. I go get my boots on the ground there and I spend a lot of time talking to them. Even now, when there's not much coverage in Marawi, I still go every month to monitor how the toy libraries and the weaving centers are doing. A lot of the work that we do as journalists who report on conflict

is really investing in personal relationships. In an area such as Mindanao, where almost everyone knows betrayal, trust is really important.

When I travel, for example, and I go see a rebel leader who has not been seen in many many years, my life, and the life of my team, is basically in the hands of these armed rebels. So a lot of it is trust. That's a lot of risk, but then you build that confidence by actually spending a lot of time building relationships on the ground and earning their trust.

**JW: You've covered brutal armed conflict for a good portion of your career. After covering so much violence, do you ever feel as if you're getting used to the bloodshed?**

JA: It's very different when you are covering as a mere observer in another country. Personally, I don't know how other people can say they get used to the violence. You learn how to numb yourself when it comes to your exposure to violence, but I'll never get used to the suffering. The suffering of civilians is a whole different matter. Maybe some people get used to the bombing, to the F-15s, to the checkpoints, to the bodies that you see in the morgues or in the streets. But I think, the ongoing impact of the war is a lot more difficult to handle. When you see displacements, children in the evacuation centers, people who are hungry, those who've left their homes, those who are looking for their loved ones -- that's what you don't get used to.

**JW: What compels you to focus your work on the civilians affected by these conflicts rather than the actions of the military or the Maute?**

JA: Marawi was a five-month long siege, and I covered it from the second day to the last day. The government seemed to have a shift from previous conflicts in their policy toward embedding journalists. It was the first conflict in the southern Philippines in decades where journalists were not allowed to embed with soldiers or with police forces. Fortunately, it gave me the opportunity to look at Marawi from a peripheral perspective. I saw that there was not much access to the front line, so I traveled around the Lanao province. I traveled around the outskirts to areas that are difficult to go to, but not impossible. It is in those places where I found a lot of my most important stories. Often the mistake when we cover conflict is that we only see it from a military point of view. Our mistakes come when we only cover the violence.

The story of soldiers coming in and fighting men in black shirts -- that's sexy. That's something that resonates with everyone. It appeals to this false sense of nationalism all across the country and all across the world. When people are basically consumed by fears of the next terror attack it's easy to side with state forces. In a way, that's good, but I also think it oversimplifies the conflict. I think, as journalists, we have to be very careful that we do not contribute to this glorification of war. Often, our coverage of war is oversimplified. Essentially, the idea has to be that you give a voice to the voiceless. Make sure that the narratives of those who are most vulnerable are heard.

**JW: Has the military, or the government, tried to censor any of your stories?**

JA: Yes they have. There was one story where we were joining a rescue and we came across civilians who'd escaped and said they were the only ones left out of the 16 or 18 people who were fired at by the military and jumped in the river to survive. Basically, they were saying they were escaping from the Maute, only to be fired at by the army, and a lot of them had died. After several hours of being under military custody, the civilians recanted their statement, which is fine, but the military was delaying its response.

I needed the military's side of the story, so my story was a day late because I told them, "Look, I'm going to air it whether you like it or not. Whether you respond or not, but it's better you respond because it's not going to make you look good." They might not blatantly censor outright, but they do threaten to confiscate gear. They don't censor me as much as other journalists, though. They've done it to other journalists, but they know that I'm not going to put up with it and I'm going to oust them for threatening me.

**JW: I'd like to switch focus to some of your blog posts. I found them really interesting because they were so personal and emotional, which you don't often see from journalists. Did Al Jazeera encourage you to write those pieces, or was it a personal decision?**

JA: Not all journalists can blog. I've been a journalist at Al Jazeera for 10 years and I've only blogged around eight times. I find it hard to just blog for the sake of blogging, and I feel that when an incident is quite emotional, then I have something to write about. Unfortunately, I'm not with long-form and I don't do documentaries. I only produce three-minute news reports, which is already quite long in terms of TV standard time for one story.

When I feel that coverage is quite critical, I feel that I need to write a blog about it. There are two reasons I write these blogs: one is to give it the story context and to give the subjects the dignity that they deserve. Secondly, it gives me an outlet for my own emotions. One of my blogs was about the body of a little girl I came across in Marawi. There's actually two stories there: the first when I came across her body and the body of her mom together with others, and the second about a month later when I found their bodies again in a morgue. I did those two stories, and I pieced together their lives and I managed to find out who they were, although I never published their names.

The blog, I felt, was a way to give the initial stories the weight that I felt they deserved. There are incidents when I feel very emotionally connected to a story and then I try to blog to give the story more traction. Blogging allows me to share my own emotions, and Al Jazeera doesn't really stop me.

**JW: Did the idea for your organization come out of your experiences as a reporter on conflict?**

JA: I started it in 2015, shortly after I became a mom. My first assignment after coming out of maternity leave was in late 2014 when I did a story about child soldiers in the Basilan region of the southern Philippines. My story was about how children were recruited, and I became friends

with this man in the army – he’s dead now – who, at the time, was helping organize football clinics for children. We just started doing it clandestinely, secretly bringing in more toys together with some of our stuff. They started to collect, and that small, core group of friends of mine became much more organized. It was only early last year that I started to formalize it, but we’ve been opening toy libraries in Mindanao, specifically in areas where children don’t really have toys, for a couple of years.

Kids, in a lot of the regions, carry guns before toys. If you go to an area that’s impoverished and dangerous, you will see people plowing their fields with M16s on their shoulders. They’ll buy guns first before food, and they’ll buy toys last. The first toy library that we opened was at the center of the recruitment of the Abu Sayyaf in Basilan. Two weeks after we opened it, the Abu Sayyaf fighters raided the toy library and took the toys for themselves. That really affected me. These were fighters who never experienced childhood. I did not feel bad that they took the toys, I just realized that’s how we should be doing it. If we have to keep replenishing toys in these areas, then we should do it. So I did it because I felt connected to these children, and the boys, specifically, because I have a son.

**JW: Have you ever made direct contact with the Maute or Abu Sayyaf during the course of your reporting?**

JA: I have never spoken to a member of the Maute or Abu Sayyaf, personally. I’ve spoken to recruits, and I’ve only spoken to them over the phone. Some of it is just the situation -- you don’t meet Abu Sayyaf people in person. If you go there, it basically means going into their lair and getting kidnapped. In the case of the Maute, they live in neighborhoods and communities, so it’s possible to meet relatives whose sons and children joined the Maute.

A few months before Marawi, we were already receiving reports that a lot of university students had gone missing, but they had just decided to join the Maute. I’ve spoken to two sets of parents who said that they’re children, who were engineering students, had just gone missing, but had really just gone to the Maute. I’ve spoken to clerics, scholars, preachers – mostly Islam preachers – who basically denied that there was radicalization. But then you also have to speak to local leaders. You get the story by speaking to their relatives and to the people in the community because they have lived together and they’ve seen how the young people have changed over time. My focus always is to do a story that provides a different narrative, and I think that’s important as a journalist.

**JW: Do your reports follow a certain structure, or do you adapt to each story?**

JA: It depends on the particular story. When I have to explain a situation when we’re embedded, then I have to do a situational. A lot of it is deciding what we’re going to open with and what we’re going to close with. We usually don’t have the full elements of the story when we start. For example, in my second month in Marawi, we had a three-minute assignment and I did not know exactly what my story was. So we started with me saying, “We’re on our way to this,” and it serves as an introduction to what is going to happen next. That is usually done as a safety when

we don't have anything good to open with. A lot of it is basically me traveling and saying "This is the situation," because it was five-month coverage and I had to file a story every day. So it felt like a continuation, like "On this day, we're on this now. The next day, we're on this now." That's often how we do things for military stories.

**JW: You're clearly very conscious about the role you play in the Philippines. Can you describe what you think the role of journalists should be in covering armed conflicts?**

JA: I think people should know the amount of work that goes behind a story, and what it takes to put it all together. It's very easy to stereotype a particular conflict, and that's actually the easy way out. The easy way to do it is to always go for the narrative that is popular. The hardest part is to go against the popular narrative. The hardest thing to do is to report on something that people don't really want to see or hear. People don't want to see sick children on TV. They don't want to see bodies of dead children. But that's part of our jobs as journalists: to report the unpleasant. It's our job to ask piercing questions that shake viewers. We know that, in armed conflict, the military has the strongest force -- but the rebels have force, too, and we have to stay in between them. In the case of the military and the Maute -- they both deserve each other. The Maute wanted to be notorious. The military allowed them to grow, for some reason, due to faulty intelligence, and this is the result of a military failure.

We should not be afraid to say that this was a war that evolved out of the failure of the military to clamp it down on the rebels. So, I think you have to be able to report on the unpleasant. If you understand that you will be an outcast, or that you will be insinuated as an ISIS sympathizer because you're bringing a narrative some people don't understand, then you have to be able to be comfortable with that, and you have to be able to stand behind those stories. You have to be willing to stand alone. State forces have a tendency to play favorites, and they will play favorites to those that help them advance their propaganda.

You have to decide what sort of journalist you will be. Are you ready to be an outcast? Are you ready to be isolated? Are you ready to work alone? If you are, then you should be able to develop relationships with people as well, because then you get a different kind of story. You get honest-to-goodness raw stories. It's quite enriching. It's gut-wrenching, but it's also soul-enriching.