

Africa should not be defined by single events

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OPINION: The World Cup may have briefly dispelled our misperceptions but the global force of Afropessimism is likely to reassert itself quickly, writes **JOE HUMPHREYS**

NEWSPAPERS DON'T really go in for apologies. But if they did they'd print a whopping big "sorry" to the continent of Africa for their pre-tournament coverage of the 2010 Fifa World Cup.

In the months and weeks leading up to South Africa's hosting of the tournament, media outlets worldwide (with some honourable exceptions, naturally) predicted the mass murder of football fans, along with widespread organisational chaos and incompetence.

They ran misleading stories comparing current land reforms in South Africa to Robert Mugabe's policy of farm confiscations in neighbouring Zimbabwe. And they generated no end of doom-laden copy about the state of race relations in the so-called Rainbow Nation, while running an enthusiastic sideline in lampooning the country's president, the polygamous native Zulu Jacob Zuma.

"Oops!" appears to be the general response of the British media, which quietly toned down its "death watch" coverage of the World Cup a mere few days into the event. By the time the final had come around, reportage of South Africa was universally positive – so much so that the BBC's showpiece broadcast on Sunday night, replete with upbeat interviews with the likes of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, could have been scripted by South Africa's tourism ministry itself.

None of which is to say the World Cup succeeded in transforming western attitudes towards the "dark" continent.

In reality, the event taught us little about Africa. It did, however, teach us something about our attitudes towards Africa.

Many of our perceptions of the continent are based on ill-informed stereotypes. Moreover, they tend to be centred on the fears of outsiders, or visitors to Africa, rather than on the experiences of Africans themselves.

International coverage of South Africa 2010 hammered this point home like a Carlos Puyol header. But it shouldn't have taken a R43 billion (€4.5 billion) sports event to teach us the lesson.

For those journalists feeling chastened by their World Cup experience I share your pain.

I still feel I owe the people of Tanzania an apology for an article I wrote several years ago about their country in which I made great play of the "sitting allowance", a controversial practice

whereby government employees receive a cash payment for turning up at meetings that are part of their job.

I labelled the payment corrupt but that was before I learned that Government Ministers in Ireland were paid “walking around money” – a tax-free allowance of about €240 a week that reimbursed Cabinet members, under Finance rules, for “the additional costs of being an officeholder . . . not already encompassed by the other allowances/expenses”.

Who indeed was I judge to Tanzania’s public spending, especially in the wake of more recent scandals in Fás, the Health Service Executive and the Oireachtas?

I am also conscious that when I went to South Africa a few years ago to work as a stringer for this newspaper, I set myself a target of covering one positive news story about Africa for every two negative ones. Soon, however, my quota of negative stories to positive rose from two to four to eight to ... well, I quickly stopped counting.

That has something to do with the universal nature of news. If it bleeds it leads; good news is no news. But it also reflects the uncomfortable reality that news tends to follow a fixed narrative, and the prevailing narrative about Africa in the western media is that it’s something of a basket case: always was and always will be.

The real impact of this storyline was brought home to me recently when I met a prominent Irish businessman who has financial interests in countries across the globe, including Africa.

He didn’t have much insight into the politics of South Africa but he had been hearing about the ANC’s controversial youth leader (albeit he didn’t know Julius Malema by name) and he said he didn’t like the general vibe he was getting.

“There is only one country I want to get out of right now, and that’s South Africa,” he told me. “If I could sell everything I have there tomorrow, I’d do so.”

How much was he influenced by the recent glut of salacious reports in the international media about Malema (regarded in South Africa more as a dangerous loudmouth than a serious political powerbroker) or indeed some of the apocalyptic, pre-World Cup coverage? It’s impossible to say. But one can’t help noting his pessimism about South Africa is depressingly common in international business circles.

In the end, the past month showed that Africa’s richest country was capable of staging the world’s biggest sports event after the Olympics. It was a great party. It was fun while it lasted. But it didn’t prove anything, and Afropessimists will regard Sunday’s bombings in Kampala, and the weekend xenophobic attacks on immigrants in Cape Town, as signs of Africa returning to “business as usual”.

Their perspective might be distorted but they have their counterpoint in Zuma, Fifa president Sepp Blatter and other cheerleaders for the World Cup who claim the event has radically

transformed Africa's image. As though such a vast continent can be defined by a single moment of either horror or joy.

The South African and Nigerian ambassadors are among speakers at a two-day seminar opening in Dublin Castle this evening on public perceptions of Africa. "The Use of Images and Messages: A Human Rights Issue" is organised by the Africa Centre with Dóchas.

Joe Humphreys formerly reported from South Africa for *The Irish Times*

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