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April 28, 2006

Docu festival puts focus on untold stories

By Etan Vlessing
 TORONTO – The Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival, which kicks off today, could well have critics' tongues wagging with the latest work on display from directors who have risked injury and ar-rest to make films in global war zones.

Festival programming director Sean Farnel said Thursday that documentary filmmakers are bringing festivals stories of global conflict that the TV newscasts miss.

"Documentary filmmakers are an itinerant group of people, and at the core of their mission is going out and bringing back stories that aren't being told in the mainstream media," he said.

The 13th installment of North America's largest documentary festival, which runs through May 7, will unspool 99 films from 25 countries.

Among them is Canadian director Nick Bicanic's "Shadow Company," a portrait of "private security contractors," or soldiers-for-hire, operating in Iraq and elsewhere worldwide as part of an entrepreneurial Wild West where armed mercenaries operate be-yond the law.

Also bound for Toronto is U.S. director James Longley's "Iraq in Fragments," which bowed at the Sundance film festival.

"What James Longley has done is really bring us a very powerful and nuanced view of the effect of the war on Iraq and the incredible challenges faced by those who want to democratize Iraq," Farnel said.

Also on tap for Toronto is "American Fugitive: The Truth About Hassan," a world premiere from Canadian director and Quebec separatist Jean-Daniel Lafond that profiles a U.S.-born Muslim on the run from the FBI for the 1980 killing of an Iranian diplomat.

Farnel also programmed "Voices of Bam," a look at survivors of a devastating earthquake in Iran from Dutch directors Aliona van der Horst and Maasja Ooms.

Other Hot Docs titles include the world premiere of "Uganda Rising," Canadian directors Jesse James Miller and Pete McCormack's film about a two-decade-long civil war in northern Uganda where children are kidnapped to become soldiers and sex slaves. Uganda also is featured in "In a Soldier's Footsteps" from Danish filmmaker Mette Zeruneith.

Additionally, the Toronto Documentary Forum, the festival's film financing bazaar, will present 30 projects seeking broadcast outlets worldwide.

TDF director Michaelle McLean said a record number of submissions were received this year, with a notable rise in submissions from Canadian documentary filmmakers.

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