RELENTLESS HUMANITARIANISM

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This Global Insights article by Gerald Martone appears following a piece by Kofi A. Annan, Secretary-General of the United Nations, titled Democracy as an International Issue.

Among the morass of complicated situations in which humanitarian agencies operate there have been, at times, circumstances of injustice, cruelty, and manipulation that have been so unacceptable that relief organizations are forced to make the difficult decision to discontinue their critical services. There are even situations where the deliberate withholding of humanitarian assistance has been part of a strategy used to protest human rights violation.

When a humanitarian agency is outraged at a particular situation, abandonment of these victims is a particularly cruel and uncreative way to register protest. To withdraw lifesaving services from the very people that are supposed to be defended is ironic and thoughtless.

What is needed instead is a relentless and tenacious engagement by agencies forcing negligent governments and ruthless demagogues to reckon with them.

HUMANITARIAN BLACKOUT

The decision to withdraw or withhold aid is one that is made with much consternation and soul searching. It is more often a choice of the lesser of two evils: continuing aid at the expense of strengthening the perpetrators, or withholding aid to defy the aggressors while risking the demise of an innocent population. In 1994, Médecins Sans Frontières and the International Rescue Committee made the extremely difficult decision to withdraw from the refugee camps in Goma, Zaire when it became evident that Hutu extremists were manipulating relief assistance to fortify their military advantage.

The dilemma of withdrawing humanitarian assistance from a distressed population—what the former director of the European Community Humanitarian Office called a "humanitarian blackout"—is still debated in a variety of fora. Some argue that "certain compromises of conscience" and the prospects of unwittingly feeding war criminals might be an acceptable price in order to simultaneously save innocent lives.

There is also a popular, yet uncritically accepted, assumption that humanitarian assistance can prolong war. Implied in this critique is a direct causal relationship between humanitarian assistance and prolonged suffering. In fact, the opposite is true. Humanitarian relief efforts save tens of thousands of lives every year and relieve the suffering of countless more. Aid itself does not fuel war; rather it is the abuse of aid that can become destructive.

In the face of atrocious and unforgiving situations, as had happened in Zaire, some aid agencies have reacted with highly publicized departures. Beyond the immediate novelty of such a protest, the "shame and blame" gesture is time limited. Once removed from the scene, the agency's voice is no longer heard or influential. Arguably more progress might be gained by staying the course through the insidious entreaties with local authorities to contend with their presence.

A case in point is the "clash of civilizations" with the terrorist breeders of Afghanistan and the coalition countries led by the United States. The narrow interpretation of this crisis poses terrorism as the enemy. The enemy is not terrorism; the enemy is ignorance and poverty. Terrorism is a profound cultural and ideological misunderstanding. It is fear of the unknown, contempt for foreign ideas, and paranoia born of ignorance.

When the Taliban came to power in 1997, relief agencies made a deliberate decision to remain engaged with this oppressive regime. There was a latent
agenda in this decision that presumed continued exchange and contact, as opposed to isolation and withdrawal, would be more persuasive in changing attitudes and opening the country to mutual understanding and tolerance. It was hoped that over time the active engagement by foreign agencies would broaden a worldview by their example and by the subtle infiltration of pluralistic ideas.

Consider the simultaneously contradictory policies of the Clinton administration toward countries that violate human rights. In the case of China, a decision was made to engage in active relations with this state despite its consistent violations of the rights of its citizens. It was argued that more leverage in modifying China's policy would be gained through engagement rather than isolation. Yet at the very same time, the United States ostracized the Democratic Republic of Congo in reaction to its outrageous human rights record, which served to isolate the Congo as a pariah. The lack of a robust diplomatic presence actually detracted from the Washington's influence in the region. Rather than politicizing the humanitarian agenda, one must instead humanize the political agenda.

Adding to the skepticism of humanitarian action is the media's portrayal of complicated political events. It is unfortunate that many pundits, in the zeal of charity bashing, depict violent ethnic conflict with the intention of evoking doubts about humanitarian intervention rather than appealing for human compassion. Confused readers are given a convenient way out of a moral obligation to respond to people in extremis. Instead of anger, sympathy, and outrage, this portrayal nourishes cynicism—a morally seductive rationalization not to care. Doing no harm does not mean doing nothing at all.4

**GIVE WAR A CHANCE**

To imply that humanitarian assistance can be harmful to the resolution of a conflict is simplistic. This position presumes that aid should be rationed, withheld, or withdrawn in order to alter the political morphology of a crisis.

This "Give War a Chance" position is a glib and perfunctory simplification of an enormously complicated dilemma.5 Under this construction, lifesaving assistance would be deliberately withheld while the natural course of annihilation was dispassionately observed.

The exhaustion hypothesis of war is flawed. Wars do not simply "burn themselves out." Afghanistan, Angola, Sudan, Sierra Leone, and many others conflicts are evidence against this "forest fire" approach to conflict. The fuel of these conflicts is rarely a struggling political ideology but rather war-profiteering and a fight for control of natural resources and mineral wealth.6 The miniscule resources of aid agencies are a relatively inconsequential contribution to this "war economy" and thus a poor excuse to withhold assistance.7

In addition, contemporary armed conflicts are characterized by pervasive and flagrant violations of human rights. Torture, rape, mutilation, and starvation have become a normal part of the arsenal of undisciplined and ruthless armies and rebel groups. Masses of civilians are used as shields, strategic resources, targets of ethnicide, and attention-getters. The detached and dispassionate decision to withhold critical services from affected populations is heartless.

Only from an aloof and elitist vantage point could it seem justifiable to turn one’s back on human misery. This kind of fickle and calculating humanitarian triage is an unforgivable act of feigned moral purity. An NGO humanitarian aid worker once sarcastically observed, “the modern relief agency has replaced the principle of neutrality with arrogance.”

**DO NO HARM**

An uncritically accepted justification for abstinence concludes that if refugees are fed then their perpetrators will thrive. Relief distributions are just not that imprecise. Humanitarian workers are not, as one writer

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cynically intoned, "logisticians of the warlords." There are new technologies in the delivery of relief assistance. Many modern relief interventions are focused on the participation of refugees in public health programs, self-reliance projects, and educational opportunities that in no way fortifies the position of belligerent parties. Giving milk to motherless infants and polio vaccines to young children does not arm insurgent militias.

What is needed is innovation, not abandonment. The field of humanitarian assistance has evolved methodologies that permit a decrease in the diversion and abuse of aid. "Do No Harm", "Smart-Aid", and "Africa-lite" approaches advocate for a reduction of divertible assets, tighter monitoring of distributions, and precise targeting of recipients. Simple commodity substitutions have demonstrably reduced theft and diversion. The replacement of maize with sorghum, bulgur for rice, or even better, the substitution of pesticide-coated seeds rather than bulk foods are less prone to extortion or manipulation. Field workers are notorious for their ability to defy theft through simple innovations: poking occasional holes in plastic sheeting, painting radios pink, monetizing commodities, repacking bulk foods to family ration sizes, labeling protein rations as "women's biscuits", etc. has denied the appeal and resale of stolen commodities from relief inventories. Negative impacts of humanitarian assistance are not inevitable.

A zealous critique of the unintended negative effects of aid over the last few years has documented the potential for harm. To date, however, there has been too little effort to identify unintended positive effects of assistance.

The mere presence of international relief workers in the field is considered by some to have a deterrent effect on abuses simply by the witnessing role that that presence connotes. Distressed populations have implored international staff not to leave--and in some cases have even physically barred their departure--fearing the loss of their protective presence regardless of whether or not direct services were provided.

Some agencies even employ a deliberate strategy of providing international volunteers to live within at-risk communities as a "protective accompaniment" tactic to deter attacks or expulsion.

**WOLVES AMONG THE SHEEP**

During the rebellion in eastern Zaire in 1997, there had been a peculiar debate around the rationing of relief assistance to the condemned Hutu refugees seeking asylum there. An occasional perspective arising from the relief community had begun to sound more like the judgment of a tribunal or truth commission rather than the impartial and committed voice of humanitarians. Ironically, the International Tribunals Statute stipulates that everyone is innocent until proven guilty, that no one can be tried in absentia, and that no one should be sentenced to death. By withholding or even withdrawing life-sustaining assistance to refugees of Hutu ethnicity on the basis of an untested generalization of culpability in the Rwandan genocide, were humanitarian agencies abandoning the principle of impartiality? Without a trial, a verdict had been rendered on the basis of ethnicity. Is this not precisely the sort of prejudice and ethnic generalization that had caused the conflict in the first place? If one were to follow that line of reasoning, anyone of German ancestry would automatically be a culpable party to the Holocaust.

Humanitarian agencies have expanded to fill the void in a foreign policy vacuum. Because of a dormant political will, relief organizations should not allow themselves to become judge, jury, and executioner. Yes, there are often wolves among the sheep in displaced populations. Impartial agencies cannot, however, put themselves in a position where they must distinguish refugees from fugitives, victims from villains, deserving from undeserving. Under the Geneva Conventions, even convicted war criminals are entitled to be fed.

**THE RATIONING OF AID**

The sanctity of human life should be the first, and non-negotiable, principle of humanitarian assistance. In reaction to ambiguous moral dilemmas that sustain the enterprise of humanitarian assistance, the opening Humanitarian Charter of the Sphere Project Minimum Standards declares and re-affirms

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the notion of the humanitarian imperative and its primacy. Implicit in this charter is the duty not to withhold or frustrate the provision of legitimate humanitarian assistance.

Although it is debatable whether any ethical or political consideration should outweigh the humanitarian imperative to deliver aid, there are inevitable situations where this ideal or imperative cannot be met. A hierarchy of ethical obligations and priorities has yet to be articulated—for example how should the dilemma of providing lifesaving aid be evaluated against the possible side effects of fortifying malicious elements among a target population?

The level of craftsmanship in humanitarian assistance designates only a relatively narrow interpretation and codification of professional obligations in these situations. There is no single covenant, code of conduct, or charter of humanitarian principles that can effectively provide guidance for the complicated decisions facing agencies.

As new dilemmas arise, as they most certainly will, one hopes that ultimately human compassion will tip the scale in favor of active engagement by relief agencies in trying to change situations rather than the stark choice of departure and resignation. In the face of infamy, a fickle or inconstant presence of human compassion is defeatist.

In order to be persuasive and affect change, humanitarian action must be decisive and stubborn. The presence of humanitarian agencies must embody a tenacious staying power that sinister governments and egregious profiteers will be forced to reckon with.

In the end, the moral weight of decision-making should lean heavily in favor of continuing to deliver aid, albeit smartly, even in the most confusing of situations. Humanitarian agencies must be resolute and unflinching in the performance of their duties. It is the right thing to do. It is the only right thing to do. 🌟

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