

**Is Humanitarianism Part of the Problem?  
Nine Theses**

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The word “humanitarianism” describes the worldview, aspirations, professional vocabularies, and actions affirming the common dignity of humankind regardless of differences in race, gender, religion, national belonging, political creed, or any other accident of birth or contextual circumstance. The growing influence of human rights norms in international politics explains why humanitarianism has affirmed itself as a global ideology. While up to the end of the Cold War states, international organizations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) had to go to great lengths to justify their interference in the domestic affairs of other states, today the opposite is the case. States are under a great deal of pressure to explain why they do *not* want to intervene, either militarily, politically, or economically to promote and protect human rights. The assumption has turned in favor of such intervention, not against it. Humanitarianism seems on its way to radically changing the Westphalian international order.

Humanitarianism has five main components: states, the United Nations system, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and the media. Humanitarianism has supporters, critics, and enemies. Supporters highlight how humanitarianism is a sign of progress towards human freedom and emancipation—something axiomatically worth striving for.<sup>1</sup> Critics denounce what they perceive as vicious effects of humanitarianism, notably the misuse of humanitarian aid,<sup>2</sup> or highlight more subtle consequences of humanitarianism—in particular the conceptual and practical limits of framing human emancipation in human rights terms.<sup>3</sup> Finally, enemies criticize humanitarianism for being a moral cover for the interests of the most powerful states, especially the United States.<sup>4</sup>

This paper aims to add to the debate the consideration of lesser-known and often neglected unintended consequences of humanitarianism. Humanitarianism can take many forms, ranging from military intervention to the delivery of aid and the imposition of sanctions. I define humanitarianism as a web of international interferences into the domestic affairs of another state justified by a nascent trans-national morality. While my first two theses address issues related to

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Ignatieff, *Human Rights as Politics and Idolatry* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001); and Geoffrey Robertson, *Crimes Against Humanity: The Struggle for Global Justice* (London: Penguin, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Fiona Terry, *Condemned to Repeat? The Paradox of Humanitarian Action* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2002); and Mary Anderson, *Do No Harm: Supporting Local Capacities for Peace through Aid* (Cambridge, Mass.: Collaborative for Development Action, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> David Kennedy, *The Dark Sides of Virtue: Reassessing International Humanitarianism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004); and David Rieff, *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Noam Chomski, *The New Military Humanism: Lessons from Kosovo* (London: Pluto, 1999); and David Chandler, *From Kosovo to Kabul: Human Rights and International Intervention* (London: Pluto, 2002).

military interference, the remaining seven discuss non-coercive issues such as the motivations, unintended consequences, and dysfunctional character of humanitarianism. As a whole, this paper argues that humanitarianism can increase the likelihood of war and prolong conflict after it breaks out; it misinterprets the underlying motivations of conflict; it focuses too narrowly on short-term, ad-hoc solutions at the expense of long-term political action; and it reproduces the same social, political, and ethnic divisions it seeks to address. Most empirical illustrations are drawn from four prominent cases: Bosnia, Kosovo, Rwanda, and the current crisis in the Western Sudanese region of Darfur. These are all cases with a significant ethno-national dimension. They provide enough variation to make a compelling argument that the flaws of humanitarianism extend beyond the limits of a single unfortunate set of circumstances. To be sure, humanitarians have at least some familiarity with these flaws, but they are often too quick to set their doubts aside and endorse the humanitarian enterprise.

My goal is mainly analytical and descriptive rather than prescriptive. I do not put forward specific suggestions on how to improve upon past practices, nor do I consider the many instances where humanitarianism has improved the lives of individuals and groups. A paper of this kind would require a different approach, and is not attempted here. But my choice of focus does not imply outright rejection of humanitarianism. I do believe that humanitarianism is not a failure but an opportunity to improve upon past practices in world politics. To state this otherwise, there is nothing inherently wrong in elevating the status of human rights in international politics. I have written this paper hoping that well-meaning humanitarians will find always better and more effective ways of improving the human condition.

### **1. HUMANITARIANISM INDUCES MINORITIES TO RAISE THE LEVEL OF VIOLENCE.**

The prospects for international intervention to protect human rights can increase internal violence. The victims of human rights abuses—ethnic groups in particular—can be tempted to confront their oppressors to attract international sympathy. They can attempt to win international support for their cause by instigating violence against an oppressive power. Alan Kuperman confirms this possibility, arguing that in Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq (during the first gulf war), and, to a lesser extent, in Rwanda, subordinate-group leaders escalated the conflict with the central

authorities to provoke a crackdown and attract international support.<sup>5</sup> Bosnia and Kosovo are particularly interesting cases, since some of the dynamics from these conflicts are currently repeating themselves in Darfur.

The Bosnian Muslims are the ethnic group who suffered the most in the process of Yugoslav dissolution; they were nearly obliterated by the vicious campaign waged against them by the Croats and especially the Serbs. Aware of their military inferiority, the Bosnian Muslims tried to avoid direct confrontation with their more powerful neighbors. After the 1991 secession of Slovenia and Croatia, however, they could not prevent war from breaking out in Bosnia. Placed under an arms embargo that effectively guaranteed military superiority to the Serbs (who controlled Yugoslav army supplies), the Bosnian Muslims could only hope to be rescued by international intervention. Initially, the absence of such intervention motivated them to fight. When the war seemed to draw out indefinitely, they reasoned that escalation could serve their cause. At times they pursued offensives with the intent of provoking Serb retaliation, inducing NATO's intervention against Serb positions, and validating their claim that they were the victims of external aggression and deserved international help.

The public claims of prominent western politicians justified the Bosnian Muslims' hope that intervention would eventually save them. U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher, for example, declared in February 1993 that "[b]old tyrants and fearful minorities are watching to see whether 'ethnic cleansing' is a policy the world will tolerate...[Our] answer must be a resounding 'no.'"<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately for the Bosnian Muslims, intervention did not occur until the late summer of 1995, when NATO bombed Bosnian Serb positions around Sarajevo paving the way for the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement and the end of the war in Bosnia. By then, however, ethnic cleansing was nearly complete, and tens of thousand were killed. Many more had become refugees or international displaced persons (DPs).

Provoking confrontation with their oppressors was also a rational choice for the Kosovo Albanians in the second half of the 1990s. For years Kosovo Albanians under the leadership of Ibrahim Rugova expressed their opposition to Serb rule through peaceful and nonviolent means. Despite generic claims of support, their plight never reached the top of the international agenda.

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<sup>5</sup> Alan J. Kuperman, "Transnational Causes of Genocide, or How the West Exacerbates Ethnic Conflict," in Raju G. C. Thomas, ed., *Yugoslavia Unraveled: Sovereignty, Self-Determination, Intervention* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2003), pp. 55–85.

<sup>6</sup> Cited in Ivo H. Daalder, *Getting to Dayton: The Making of America's Bosnia Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2000), p. 10.

Instead, for fear of opening the Pandora's box, at Dayton the status of Kosovo was not even discussed. As a result, a number of Kosovo Albanians concluded that the policy of nonviolent resistance they had observed up to that time was not working. According to Tim Judah, "Dayton was an extraordinary trauma for the Kosovo Albanians...it confirmed to them in the most dramatic and humiliating way that Rugova's policy of passive resistance had failed. And not only that, but that his idea that they would be rewarded for their 'good behaviour' by Western countries had been just plain wrong."<sup>7</sup>

The political/military radicalization of their struggle was almost immediate. In 1996, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) appeared on the scene and claimed responsibility for a series of attacks on Serb military installations. Serb crackdown provoked even more Albanian resistance and brought about international condemnation. The KLA calculated that a massive humanitarian crisis would compel NATO to intervene. In the one year leading up to NATO's bombing, Serb military forces "cooperated" with the KLA strategy. More than 2,000 Kosovo Albanians were killed, most of whom were civilians, and another 300,000 were forced to leave their homes. The KLA's increased confrontation with Serb authorities and the violent Serb response made it increasingly difficult for Western powers to ignore Kosovo. NATO intervened militarily in spring of 1999 entirely and officially justifying its actions in human rights terms.

Many observers have disputed the "real" motivations for intervening. Adam Roberts, for example, argues that NATO's war was in part motivated by their poor performance in Bosnia.<sup>8</sup> This is an important point about intervention on humanitarian grounds: no such intervention is completely *sui generis*, but each builds on previous cases, and creates expectations for future ones. A history of intervention plays an obvious role in fostering the belief that the West will come to rescue an endangered group. The situation in the Western Sudanese region of Darfur illustrates the danger that a repressed minority might learn the lesson that escalating confrontation might pay back in the long-term. The *janjaweed*, or "devils on horse back," supported by the Sudanese government, have been terrorizing the civilian population. While numbers are difficult to come by, it is estimated that around 70,000 Darfuris have died at the hands of the terrorist organization in 2003–2004, some 1.5 million people have become DPs inside Darfur, and an increasing number have been trying to cross the border and enter

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<sup>7</sup> Tim Judah, *Kosovo: War and Revenge*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 124–125.

<sup>8</sup> Adam Roberts, "Nato's 'Humanitarian War Over Kosovo,'" *Survival*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (Autumn 1999), pp. 102–123.

neighboring Chad. In mid-September 2004, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell condemned the situation in Darfur as a case of “genocide.”<sup>9</sup>

What is most bizarre about this conflict is the response of the armed revolutionary movement that the Sudanese government has been trying to crush by letting the *janjaweed* loose on the civilian population. According to a state department official working in Sudan, the rebels “have been very content to sit back, let the village burnings go on, let the killing go on, because the more international pressure that’s brought to bear on Khartoum, the stronger their position grows.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, the rebels in Darfur have adopted the same propaganda strategy that proved successful for Kosovo Albanians (and, in part, for the Bosnian Muslims). They hope to attract international sympathy and thus trigger intervention against the government in Khartoum. Whether such intervention will come and in what form remains to be seen. But the expectation that humanitarian reasons will prompt international involvement so far has instigated further conflict, instead of limiting it.

## **2. HUMANITARIANISM PROLONGS AND WORSENS WAR AND MISERY.**

Since Thucydides’ times, wars have regularly ended with the military victory of one of the parties who forced its own vision of reconciliation on the enemy. Victory has come often at the cost of massive human rights violations. The firebombings of Dresden and Tokyo during World War II, in addition to the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, killed an enormous number of civilians. The allies justified these actions on the grounds that the war would end sooner and thus ultimately save even enemies’ lives.

Post–Cold War humanitarianism has changed the dynamics of waging war. Instead of allowing a war to be fought to the bitter end, humanitarianism defends the dignified idea that letting the stronger power prevail is to endorse the law of the jungle. By so doing, humanitarianism can perversely prolong the war and, therefore, human suffering. Part of the reason for this outcome has already been mentioned. In Bosnia, humanitarian politics gave the Bosnian Muslims an incentive to prolong the fighting to either take advantage of the possibility

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<sup>9</sup> He further added that “no action is dictated by this determination.” Thus, Powell managed to dissatisfy both the Sudanese government and human rights groups demanding intervention. See Testimony before the Foreign Relations Committee of the U.S. Senate, “The Crisis in Darfur,” available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/36032.htm>. In February 2005, the report of a UN commission on Darfur found no clear evidence of genocide, but claimed that “no less serious and heinous” crimes were committed. Report of the International Commission of Inquiry on Darfur to the United Nations Secretary-General, Geneva, January 25, 2005.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Scott Anderson, “How Did Darfur Happen?” *New York Times Magazine*, October 17, 2004.

that the international community would intervene on their defense, or even to obtain better peace terms under international sponsorship—a pattern that seems to repeat itself in Darfur. In addition, humanitarianism can also prolong and worsen the war in other ways.

Critics of humanitarianism argue that the expectation that respect for human rights must be part of a peace settlement complicates the work of international mediators who cannot endorse, or be seen to endorse, political solutions which cannot be justified in human rights terms. In the former Yugoslavia, successive peace plans were often judged on the basis of whether they “rewarded aggression.” According to Saadia Touval, who best expresses the critical view on this issue, the human rights community (academics, journalists, NGOs, in addition to several policymakers) proved to be insensitive to the fact that the war continued with its heavy toll in human lives. The priority of the world community should have been to end the fighting as soon as possible and to physically separate the different factions, instead of attempting to reach some version of peace with justice. As Touval concludes, “the insistence on respect for international norms, the insistence that the three national communities [in Bosnia] should live together side by side in peace and that ethnic partitioning will violate this principle, served to extend the war, at the terrible cost of human life and suffering.”<sup>11</sup>

Critics such as Touval, however, only grasp half of the picture. The main mechanism worsening and prolonging war is the great powers’ cynical use of humanitarianism to avoid more intrusive engagement. To the extent that humanitarianism and human rights rhetoric are a substitute for political action (and possibly military intervention), they embodied the Western choice of relief over rescue, a point not fully appreciated by Touval who prefers to blame the “human rights community” instead of those policymakers who used humanitarianism to buy time and avoid finding a solution. It is not so much that human rights norms extended the war, as Touval argues, but that the influence of human rights norms *combined with* low international willingness to act consistently with those norms produced the worst outcome. Despite their humanitarian interests, all great powers did not want to put their political capital and militaries at risk to stop an alien and apparently intractable war.

As a result, humanitarian claims with no enforcement produced the worst outcome. The presence in Bosnia of both peacekeepers and humanitarian workers and the creation of lightly

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<sup>11</sup> Saadia Touval, *Mediation in the Yugoslav Wars: The Critical Years, 1990–1995* (London: Palgrave, 2002), p. 182.

protected “safe zones” allowed Western governments to claim they were constructively engaged in the conflict—saving lives while working to find a solution. But in fact humanitarianism had the opposite effect. In the most infamous case, in July 1995 the Bosnian Serb army overran the town of Srebrenica in Eastern Bosnia, one of the UN-declared “safe zones,” and killed more than 7,000 men and boys in the worst single massacre on European territory after the end of World War II. In Srebrenica as in the other “safe zones,” the presence of peacekeepers created an illusion of safety among desperate DPs. Susan Woodward concludes that “the creation of safe zones, motivated largely by the humanitarian objective...made possible an escalation of the war and further exposure of civilians to bombardments.”<sup>12</sup> Instead of saving lives, humanitarianism’s main role was to provide an appearance of engagement while avoiding intervention. In the process, those Bosnians initially kept alive and fed by Western aid, were killed.

The experience in Bosnia, unfortunately, seems destined to be repeated. Currently, the main unfolding humanitarian crisis is in the Sudanese region of Darfur, where government (Arab) forces have killed thousands of (African) Sudanese citizens. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, Colin Powell, and British foreign minister Jack Straw are only a few of those high profile individuals who travelled to Darfur demanding that the Sudanese government stop the killings. A Bosnia-like scenario is taking place. The rebels in Darfur, like Bosnian Muslims before them, believe they have the support of the international community, in particular that of the United States. A journalist has described the rebels’ message to the victims of government’s repression in these terms: “Hey, don’t give up. The U.S. and England will come here and occupy this country and they will give you everything and take off the Arabs from Sudan.”<sup>13</sup>

Because the killing in Darfur does not harm the national interest of major and minor powers alike, intervention remains unlikely. Instead, in much the same way the great powers operated in Bosnia, they are now engaged in providing humanitarian relief to the refugees, trying to contain the confrontation between the government and the rebels. International diplomacy claims it is constructively engaged in the crisis, while avoiding taking dramatic and more costly steps. At the same time such international involvement on humanitarian grounds emboldens the rebels to continue their fight, provides refugees and DPs with the perception they can rely on

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<sup>12</sup> Susan L. Woodward, *Balkan Tragedy: Chaos and Dissolution After the Cold War* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press), p. 321.

<sup>13</sup> Anderson, “How Did Darfur Happen?”

international humanitarians for their safety, and delays reaching a compromise among the parties. This might be the recipe for another humanitarian catastrophe.

### **3. HUMANITARIANISM IS ONLY PARTLY ALTRUISTIC.**

Humanitarianism's main function is not so much to improve the human condition, as humanitarian arguments claim, but to sedate political crises, preventing their escalation into wars with cross-national and cross-border consequences, and limiting their impact on Western countries. Under the guise of human rights norms, western states can legitimately get involved in foreign crises to soften the cross-border implications of political instability. Thus, not only is humanitarianism an indication of idealism, but also it is an expression of hard-hedged realism suggesting concern and involvement for selfish security reasons.

Perhaps the best illustration of this function of humanitarianism comes from Europe. The process of European expansion and integration has been accompanied by the creation of "Fortress Europe"—the building of a European architecture impermeable to the waves of refugees escaping war, devastation, and persecution, and simultaneous weakening of legal principles and norms of refugee protection. European integration is centered on the capacity of the international community to keep civilians within war-ridden zones.<sup>14</sup> To this end, diplomatic involvement in peacemaking and post-settlement peacebuilding, the delivery of humanitarian aid, and in general the vigilant attention to political changes in the periphery are all needed to avoid the worst consequences of war. Western peacemakers can claim they are "doing something," while victims of war are kept as far away as possible so that they do not disrupt the lives of the Western public. In this way, humanitarianism reinforces the cautious prophylactic Western control of war-torn, poor, and peripheral countries.

Unsurprisingly, in most crises the main humanitarian agency tasked with coordinating relief operations and providing support to the victims is the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Since the outbreak of war in the early 1990s in the former Yugoslavia, UNHCR's main task in that region was to alleviate the suffering of the local population. Sometimes reluctantly, UNHCR has accepted the assignment of helping victims on the ground instead of bringing them to safety or ending the conditions keeping individuals on the run.

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<sup>14</sup> Mark Duffield, "Lunching with Killers: Aid, Security, and the Balkan Crisis," in Carl-Ulrik Schierup, ed., *Scramble for the Balkans: Nationalism, Globalism and the Political Economy of Reconstruction* (London: Macmillan, 1999), p. 124.

Sadako Ogata, UN High Commissioner for Refugees during the 1990s, compared UNHCR work to that of a “fire brigade.”<sup>15</sup> In the Middle East, this placebo humanitarian function has assumed the most grotesque form. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) has acted as a humanitarian bandage to the Palestinian refugee problem created in the aftermath of Israel’s birth in May 1948. Since then, however, the refugee problem has only increased both in size and importance. Palestinian refugees grew from about 700,000 in 1948 to 4,186,711 in mid-2004.<sup>16</sup> Their displacement and political radicalization remains a main stumbling block to peace in the Middle East. UNRWA’s humanitarian work has done much to help the Palestinian population, but nothing to end their displacement. It is no surprise that the Israeli government is one of UNRWA’s major donors.

Like the Israeli government, Western governments have important reasons to finance and possibly expand their humanitarian aid systems. They can stand idle and let catastrophes unfold when their interest is only marginally affected by a humanitarian crisis, and when involvement is judged to be too risky. When they do intervene, they do so in the form of providing humanitarian aid instead of political solutions. They prefer preventing negative side effects (such as massive refugee flows) that could spark repercussions in their own societies. International humanitarian organizations like UNHCR and UNRWA are financed and staffed by Western governments to fulfil this role.

The humanitarian crisis in Darfur confirms the limits of band-aid humanitarianism. Human rights groups have documented widespread human rights violations. Western states and organizations have gotten involved to address the crisis, yet their humanitarian activity has stopped short of ending the emergency. Instead, “the advocacy has stimulated government responses that have had the perverse effect of defusing the political pressure to stop the killings and return the refugees home.”<sup>17</sup> Western governments can pinpoint their engagement to limit damage and save lives. But that type of involvement justified in humanitarian terms perpetuates a low-level crisis that keeps people dying slowly instead of ending suffering. From the Western vantage point, slow death is much preferable to quick, violent annihilation. The lack of a

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<sup>15</sup> Ogata even decided to suspend UNHCR relief activities in order to pressure the UN Security Council into action. Her decision, however, was overtaken by the then Secretary General Boutros Boutros Ghali. Sadako Ogata, *The Turbulent Decade: Confronting the Refugee Crises of the 1990s* (New York: Norton, 2005).

<sup>16</sup> This number includes Palestinians expelled and their descendants. See “UNRWA in Figures,” at <http://www.un.org/unrwa/publications>. For a detailed discussion, see Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>17</sup> Morton Abramowitz and Samantha Power, “A Broken System,” *Washington Post*, September 13, 2004.

massive killing prevents the mobilization of media interest, and avoids facing the underlying political problems which caused the humanitarian crisis. This intervention is a case of damage control parading as humanitarianism. At the time of this writing, the crisis in Darfur continues to unfold without any apparent solution. Human rights groups predict it will only become worse.

#### **4. HUMANITARIANISM IS THE SHORT-TERM SUBSTITUTE FOR DEVELOPMENT.**

In many ways, great powers are attracted to humanitarianism because of the failure of development efforts. In the 1950s and 1960s, economists believed that chronic poverty resulted from a lack of capital and investment. Hence, development aid was born and endorsed by world leaders. United States President John F. Kennedy, for example, increased development aid by 25 percent. The results, however, have been disappointing. Over the last four decades, the gap between rich and poor has grown. When Kennedy was elected in 1960, the proportion of the income of the richest one-fifth of the world's population in relation to the poorest one-fifth was 30 to 1. In 1997, it was 74 to 1. Development policy was a failure.

Humanitarianism is the most prominent answer to this failure. Humanitarianism is the way through which the Western and developed world have thrown in the towel, supporting the argument that development aid does not work. Most Western donors and academic specialists tend to agree that corrupt governance in the less developed world wastes resources and does nothing to empower the poor. In theory, this reasoning does not eliminate the need for development aid, but simply warns against misuse of that aid. Accordingly, economic help should be given to countries with accountable and transparent governments—that are more likely to profit from it. This creates a double paradox in current development policy. First, countries more likely to receive aid are also the ones needing it the least, while countries with poor governance and in need of aid are not a priority. Thus, the allocation of international aid reinforces already existing disparities. Second, because the majority of poor and under-developed non-Western governments are thought to be unworthy of such aid, in practice it becomes very difficult to efficiently allocate money.

As a result, the Western attention to less developed areas is increasingly focused on the short-term management of politically, economically, and socially explosive situations instead of long-term development policy. Humanitarianism expresses the renunciation of the effort to address the root causes of poverty, anarchy, and recurring war. Intervention is increasingly

short-term and attempts to address the immediate needs of individuals and groups. As a practitioner-turned-scholar put it, humanitarians move quickly from one disaster to another, succumbing to the “tyranny of the emergency.”<sup>18</sup> They have little or no inclination to inquire about and address the underlying causes of misery. “There is, it seems, never an ideal time for reflection and follow-up action. The agencies are either putting out the latest fire or catching their breath from having done so.”<sup>19</sup> The result is counter-productive also from the point of view of donor countries. For example, as economist Jeffrey Sacks has pointed out, the United States has provided only \$4 million to Ethiopia in 2002 to increase its agricultural output. When famine predictably hit the country a year later, \$500 million in emergency food aid had to be disbursed.<sup>20</sup>

Changes in the allocation of monies reflect an attempt to address immediate needs rather than engender broader socioeconomic development. Between 1990 and 1995, for example, the European Union increased its humanitarian aid budget sevenfold. At the same time, short-term needs are not weighted the same way everywhere. The closer the source of instability to developed Western states, the more resources are needed for containment. In practice, humanitarian spending has little relation to actual needs. Kosovo, for example, received in 1999 five times more aid than Sudan and Angola, despite the lack of a compelling humanitarian need in Kosovo to justify such a dramatic difference in aid allocation. At the same time, aid budgets have been adjusted as a result of the different post-Cold War circumstances in which international agencies and donors found themselves. To the extent that there remains any money for structural development projects, it has been redirected from underdeveloped areas to East Europe and the former Soviet Union.

Developed countries have rhetorically advanced their goal of eliminating poverty and underdevelopment. When the world governments met in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 for the Earth Summit, they adopted a program of action which included, among other things, an aid target of 0.7% of the gross national product (GNP) for rich nations. Since then, almost all wealthy countries have failed to reach their agreed obligations. Instead of 0.7%, the amount of aid has been between 0.2% and 0.25%, falling about \$100 billion short of the agreed amount. Recently, donor countries have reiterated their commitment. In 2002, they signed the Monterrey

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<sup>18</sup> Larry Minear, *The Humanitarian Enterprise* (Bloomfield, Conn.: Kumarian, 2002), p. 52.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

<sup>20</sup> Jeffrey Sacks, “The Development Challenge,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 84, No. 2 (March/April 2005), p. 87.

Consensus pleading “concrete efforts” towards the allocation of the 0.7% of GNP for development aid. These countries also have subscribed to the United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals, a bold initiative aimed at eliminating poverty, reducing child mortality, and achieving a universal primary education by 2015. Economist Jeffrey Sachs calculates that \$150 billion will be needed to reach these goals.<sup>21</sup> If recent trends continue, even this relatively small sum of money (compared, for example, to the \$450 billion the U.S. spends annually on its military) will not be appropriated.<sup>22</sup> Instead, a further increase in short-term humanitarian and emergency budget can be expected.

##### **5. HUMANITARIANISM MISINTERPRETS THE REALITY WHERE IT INTERVENES.**

Most human rights crises are not in any sense “emergencies” resulting from the sudden and unforeseen deterioration of the environmental situation of a country or region. Instead, they arise from political, economic, and social processes that develop over time and can be identified, isolated, and potentially prevented. The crisis in Darfur, for example, is ultimately a battle to control oil reserves and fertile farming land that has been evolving for years. The roots of the crisis lie in the fifty-year-old civil war that engulfed Sudan. More recently, catastrophic droughts in northern and eastern Africa have soured the relationship between the farming and nomadic communities. While there are elements of ethnic division (the nomads are primarily Arabs and the established farmers of Darfur are mainly Africans), economic and political issues are at the heart of the conflict. The various tribes in the region have found themselves in increasing competition for the same shrinking set of natural resources, including water, grassland, and arable soil.

The main point is that humanitarian crises do not suddenly break out. Not only do crises have a long gestation period, but they also come about because of the choices and actions of particular individuals and groups. Especially when mass killing is involved, the perpetrators require planning, logistical support, and political backing. As a consequence, their actions can and often are detected before mass violence engulfs a country. The events leading up to massive human rights violations are thus in principle within the scope of human control; that is, they can

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<sup>21</sup> Daphne Eviatar, “Spend \$150 Billion per year to Cure World Poverty,” *New York Times Magazines*, November 7, 2004.

<sup>22</sup> When the official development assistance is measured as a share of the gross national product, each of the main donor countries contribute more than the United States—and most by a wide margin—highlighting the United States’ priorities.

be stopped and averted. But the prevailing humanitarian mindset is inherently *ex post facto*, and limited in its capacity to proactively address a critical situation. As the old popular adage goes, when the only tool you have is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail. Humanitarianism is not about prevention, but damage control.

One could argue that the risk of violence in countries with an unstable political system and a history of interethnic disputes such as the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, and Sudan is always present. It is a defining characteristic of these countries that violence tends to repeat itself. As such, even well-meaning external observers can never know with precision when and how civil coexistence is about to break down, and when and how they should intervene. While this reasoning might have a kernel of truth in it, it also condones the lack of appropriate preventive action.

For most crises, a timely and relatively modest international intervention can prevent catastrophe. But, limited by its short-term mindset, humanitarianism is unable to make its voice heard when most needed. As a result, strong warnings of impending calamities often go unheard. The most evident example is that of Rwanda. In April 1993 (one year before the beginning of the genocide), the UN special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions compiled a report following his field visit to Rwanda. He described how the killing of civilian population could be termed “genocide.” He noted that Radio Rwanda was fomenting ethnic violence. He exposed a parallel political structure that, in combination with the official government, was involved in massacres of the civilian population.<sup>23</sup> But his findings went unnoticed. If there was a public awareness campaign among human rights NGOs or international organizations about the forthcoming humanitarian disaster, it failed to reach a broader audience. In creating a peacekeeping force for Rwanda, even the UN Security Council ignored the admonitions of impending violence.

A few months later, in January 1994, the head of the peacekeeping mission to Rwanda, Canadian Gen. Romeo Dallaire, estimated that the early deployment of 5,000 troops with a robust rule of engagement would have prevented most of the killing. A later study confirmed

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<sup>23</sup> Report by the Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions on His Mission to Rwanda, April 8–17, 1993, UN Document E/CN.4/1994/7/Add.1, 11 August 1993. Available at [www.preventgenocide.org/prevent/UNdocs/](http://www.preventgenocide.org/prevent/UNdocs/). Accessed on November 3, 2004.

this figure.<sup>24</sup> But the UN Headquarters in New York overlooked the General's views. In sum, despite the evidence of how the situation was deteriorating, no serious efforts were made to comprehend the evolution of the underlying power dynamics, or even to take seriously the warnings coming from informed observers. Thus, the idea that the U.S. administration could not have known about the likelihood of mass killing in Rwanda is off the mark.<sup>25</sup>

A similar conclusion is warranted for the dissolution of Yugoslavia. American intelligence had predicted that Yugoslavia would fall apart about eighteen months before the beginning of the civil war. But the tragedy unfolded without any significant attempt by the U.S. to prevent it. Instead, the active lobbying of interests opposed to intervention hindered meaningful intervention. American generals, for example, inflated the number of troops needed to stop the Serb military campaign, claiming that 400,000 troops would be needed to enforce a ceasefire. British pundits claimed that the defeat of the Serbs and subsequent military occupation of Bosnia would require half a million men.<sup>26</sup>

In sum, a modest intervention in the early stages of the Rwanda and Yugoslavia conflicts might have saved hundred of thousands of lives. Instead, major powers decided to stand idly by. Intervention did, however, occur in Kosovo, where the situation was certainly unstable but there was no clear evidence of the existence of a genocidal plan to kill and expel the province's Albanian.<sup>27</sup> It is tempting to conclude, as many observers did, that the political will among American and European foreign policy elites to engage in peripheral countries was simply nonexistent. Instead, the rhetoric of humanitarianism was cynically used as political cover-up. Major powers declare themselves in favor of human rights, but refuse to seriously commit to the defense of those rights.<sup>28</sup>

Perhaps more than major powers' egoism is involved in the failure to act. Because most humanitarians think of their work as short-term, technical, and exceptional, they are ill-placed to detect long-term political dynamics. They do not even want to look for signs and warnings that

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<sup>24</sup> Scott R. Feil, *Preventing Genocide: How the Early Use of Force Might Have Succeeded in Rwanda* (New York: Carnegie Commission on Deadly Conflict, 1998). Dallaire's views are discussed on pp. 7–10.

<sup>25</sup> This is the argument of Alan Kuperman, *The Limits of Humanitarian Intervention: Genocide in Rwanda* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2001).

<sup>26</sup> Brendan Simms, *Unfinest Hour: Britain and the Destruction of Bosnia* (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 229.

<sup>27</sup> Roberto Belloni, "Kosovo and Beyond: Is Humanitarian Intervention Transforming International Society?" *Human Rights and Human Welfare*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (January 2002), pp. 35–43.

<sup>28</sup> This is the main thesis of Samantha Power's Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *A Problem from Hell: America in the Age of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

presage disaster. More often than not, their choice is to abstain from political analysis and even more so from political involvement. This choice leaves them the possibility of taking the moral high ground while holding others responsible for their failures. Humanitarians condemn or approve a military intervention (or lack thereof); they speak truth to power, but they are freed from the responsibilities of exercising it. In the process, Western governments can cynically take over the humanitarian vocabulary and use it for their own narrow-minded political interests.

#### **6. HUMANITARIANISM REINFORCES THE PREDOMINANCE OF LOCAL WARLIKE ELITES.**

It is often remarked that humanitarian aid can prolong wars and feed killers. The misappropriation of aid and its use for non-humanitarian goals is at the heart of the problem. While some misuse of aid is perhaps inevitable, the large amount involved makes it impossible to regard it as a marginal side effect. For instance, as much as half of all aid to the former Yugoslavia is estimated to have been misappropriated to support the war effort. In such cases, this can foster the birth of local mafia groups determined to exploit the influx of resources, and with an interest in prolonging the war as long as possible.

The criminal use of humanitarian aid is a well-known and straightforward phenomenon. The political impact of humanitarian impulses is subtler. According to Fiona Terry, humanitarianism can prop up the authority and legitimacy of local warmongers in four ways. First, negotiation with local leaders to gain access to a particular area recognizes these leaders as legitimate representatives of a particular group or population. Second, local leaders can direct resources towards their supporters and thus consolidate their political power vis-à-vis domestic opponents. Third, by their very presence, international aid agencies can legitimate a human rights-violating regime. Fourth, aid agencies can replace the state in providing goods and services to its citizens. By so doing, they assuage potential dissent that might challenge local leadership. Terry concludes, “The legitimacy that humanitarian action can inadvertently bestow upon warriors and local officials is in many respects the negative side of the popular development notion of ‘empowerment.’”<sup>29</sup>

The negative consequences of humanitarian action in legitimating war criminals and perpetuating political crises can be illustrated by international intervention in Central Africa between 1994 and 1996. In the summer of 1994 about one million refugees poured from

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<sup>29</sup> Terry, *Condemned to Repeat?* p. 46.

Rwanda into eastern Zaire to escape the advancing Tutsi-dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front. In most cases, entire villages moved together, preserving their leadership structures. This massive number of people in precarious hygienic conditions could have sparked a humanitarian catastrophe. In response, outside donors spent about \$1.3 billion to support this oppressed population. What cynically came to be known as the “gold rush” thus began. To empower existing village leadership, humanitarians relied on “local capacities,” that is, the leadership structures present in the camps. These camps, unfortunately, hosted tens of thousands of genocidal perpetrators who exploited the influx of humanitarian aid often against the refugee population they claimed to represent. Meanwhile, aid allowed them to reorganize and conduct cross-border raids on Rwandan territory.

Humanitarian agencies in eastern Zaire were well aware of the precariousness of this situation, and some organizations (most prominently the French chapter of Doctors Without Borders) decided to pull out. Most organizations, however, remained in the refugee camps to feed and shelter the same individuals who shortly before massacred about 800,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutus in one hundred days, a rate not even Nazi Germany had been able to achieve. As I shall further elaborate below, humanitarians became victims of their own agenda—subordinating humanitarian aims to their own interests. Most organizations decided to remain in eastern Zaire even when their contribution to furthering human rights was doubtful. As widely anticipated, the provision of international aid was the prelude to further humanitarian disaster. In late 1996, after having warned several times that the presence of refugee camps just across the border constituted a threat to Rwandan security, the Rwandan army crossed into Zaire, and closed the camps by force. Thousands more died.

In sum, humanitarian action in eastern Zaire first consolidated the power of criminal elites and then did nothing to prevent a dramatic showdown. This outcome was not inevitable. While international humanitarians must have local counterparts, they do not need to legitimate and reinforce the predominance of warmongers through negotiation, delivery of aid, and international recognition. Local leadership is not simply a domestic constraint beyond the control of international actors. In Somalia, for example, Algerian diplomat Mohamed Sahnoun achieved some success in promoting alternative sources of authority to prevent the breakdown and chaos that would engulf that country for most of the 1990s. His attempt, however, was quickly undermined by American diplomacy, which recognized the two main warlords,

Mohammed Farah Aided and Ali Mahdi as the legitimate representatives of the Somali people, thus ending Sahnoun's grassroots work.<sup>30</sup>

Similarly, humanitarians in the Balkans made little effort to empower alternative grassroots groups. In Kosovo, Albanians created their own parallel society in the 1990s, covering practically all aspects of social and political life. Although this parallel society was not multiethnic, it was consciously justified and framed by its members in human rights terms. After the 1999 war, however, it was simply set aside by international officials who believed it was not a "good model for democracy."<sup>31</sup> Instead, the new model included quick elections empowering the same elites opposed to interethnic reconciliation, and the promotion of western style NGOs with little or no local support. Similarly, the international approach in Bosnia was to conduct quick elections, while transplanting Western-style NGOs largely unknown prior to the war.<sup>32</sup>

As a result, humanitarianism in both Kosovo and Bosnia shows similar limits. In both localities, intervention legitimated the same politico-economic elites actively working to undermine interethnic coexistence; at the same time, it attempted to undermine those elites by empowering newly created and externally financed local NGOs. To date, there is little evidence that this strategy is working effectively.

## **7. HUMANITARIANISM SIMPLIFIES TOO MUCH.**

Humanitarianism sustains a worldview in which individuals are either victims or perpetrators rather than human beings in complex set of relationships. The recurring plot has been described as a "fairy story." There is a hapless victim, either a malnourished child, or an ethnically cleansed refugee. There is a villain, no longer the unpredictable draught or hurricane, but the racist and bloodthirsty ethno-nationalist. And finally there is a knighted savior, i.e., the international aid agency, the Western foreign minister who has been working night and day on the crisis, or the journalist who has uncovered the dramatic story of human despair.<sup>33</sup>

Differences between victims and their particular experiences are eradicated. The victimized

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<sup>30</sup> See Mohamed Sahnoun's own account in "Mixed Intervention in Somalia and the Great Lakes: Culture, Neutrality and the Military," in Jonathan Moore, ed., *Hard Choices: Moral Dilemmas in Humanitarian Intervention* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), pp. 88–89.

<sup>31</sup> Julie Mertus, "Improving Post-Agreement Intervention: The Role of Human Rights Culture in Kosovo," *Global Governance*, Vol.10, No. 3 (July–September 2004), p. 340.

<sup>32</sup> Roberto Belloni, "Civil Society and Peacebuilding in Bosnia and Herzegovina," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (March 2001), pp. 163–180.

<sup>33</sup> Chandler, *From Kosovo to Kabul*, p. 36. The expression "fairy story" comes from Jonathan Benthall.

local population is weak, helpless, and non-white, while the rescuers are brave, generous, white Westerners.

This underlying ethnocentric model has led some critics to charge humanitarianism with more or less implicit racist attitudes.<sup>34</sup> The accusation of racism might be too extreme. Yet, it is often the case that humanitarianism identifies the reasons for political upheaval in the domestic features of war-torn societies. By so doing, it reinforces the image of irrationality it claims to address. The outbreak of war and the downward spiral of human suffering are attributed to backward and warlike people who have always been at each other's throats. Of course, this localization keeps the rest of the world ignorant of Western contributions to the outbreak of a humanitarian crisis, elevates the West as the epitome of reason, modernity, and tolerance, and stigmatizes needy states as passionate, overly-traditional, and fanatic. Not only is this view inaccurate, but it also serves to justify the use of violence for humanitarian purposes. Once the West is classified as the model of morality and righteousness, the use of military violence in the name of protecting moral values is easier to endorse. Furthermore, because violence is used against supposedly irrational and brutal peoples, it can be freely employed.

Media coverage contributes to the simplification of reality where humanitarian crises occur. As leading humanitarian advocate Michael Ignatieff explains, television structures its message by means of synecdoche, that is, by taking the part for the whole: "The starving widow and her suffering children who stand for the whole famished community of Somalia; the mute victim behind the barbed wire at Tranopole who stands for the suffering of the Bosnian people as a whole."<sup>35</sup>

Synecdoche can foster the most ruthless behavior among journalists in the field. A well-known example is that of a journalist who, during the war in Bosnia, broke into a collective centre looking to interview "any woman who has been raped and speaks English."<sup>36</sup> In addition to being distasteful, synecdoche is a meager approach to compassion. By focusing on a particular victim, it tells a story void of content and meaning. It induces the viewer to identify

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<sup>34</sup> Larry Minear, Colin Scott, and Thomas G. Weiss, *The News Media, Civil War, and Humanitarian Action* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1996), p. 37.

<sup>35</sup> Michael Ignatieff, "The Stories We Tell: Television and Humanitarian Aid," in Moore, *Hard Choices*, p. 294. Ignatieff, who is a leading advocate of humanitarianism, exemplifies the humanitarian tendency to be oblivious to context and detail. "Tranopole" is likely to be "Trnopolje," the site of one infamous Serb-run detention camp.

<sup>36</sup> I have heard this story many times on my several visits to Bosnia, but I have been unable to locate the original source, or the name of the journalist. Perhaps the fact that many Bosnians know and believe this story is true is in itself a sign of a broader disillusionment with the quality of media coverage.

with *that* particular victim, at *that* particular moment, without understanding why he or she became a victim in the first place. Inevitably, this shallow empathy with the victim is destined to quickly fade when a new crisis, a new victim, or a new starving child appears on television.

The goal of simplified and direct messages is not that of raising consciousness and making the Western public think about poverty, war, human rights violations, and the like. On the contrary, it is to avoid considering and examining the reasons for such human suffering. Hunger and pain are presented to the public only when it is necessary to convince viewers to contribute a small sum and return to their daily business. Television viewers will then be relieved to know that they contributed to a noble mission whose impact, however, remains questionable. Humanitarianism, then, is the means to temper public conscience in Western developed countries.

The media is only one of the reasons why humanitarian crises are depicted in a deceptively simple manner. The media operates in an effective synergy with humanitarian agencies on the ground. Both need each other. The media needs humanitarians to provide the information on the subject matter they investigate, just as humanitarians need media coverage to make a crisis known to the world and thus raise the funds to address it. Both sometimes exploit victims for shock value, dehumanising those who suffer in what has been aptly termed “pornography of suffering.”<sup>37</sup> Both face a difficult moral dilemma. They can opt to present a nuanced analysis of a crisis at the cost of leaving the public disinterested and aloof, and thus even limiting humanitarian agencies’ fundraising abilities and the related capacity to achieve their humanitarian goals.

Or they can adopt unethical tactics to provoke an impression among the general public and enable humanitarian organizations to raise more funds. More often than not, this dilemma is resolved in favor the latter.

## **8. HUMANITARIANISM IS ORGANIZATIONALLY DYSFUNCTIONAL.**

Humanitarian NGOs, government agencies, and international organizations are all broadly committed to the same humanitarian goals. Indeed, their staffs share a common culture and frequently move between different institutions. For humanitarian NGOs, this closeness is a kiss

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<sup>37</sup> Susan D. Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War, and Death* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 18.

of death. While government agencies and international organizations have only partly altruistic motives (thesis 3), NGOs are thought to be the indispensable independent link in the humanitarian chain. They are expected to speak truth to power, chastise governments' often slow and inept reactions to humanitarian crises, and even rise to the task of responsibly advancing humanitarian causes when needed.

This is not the case. NGOs are often less independent from government policies than they would like to be. By accepting donors' money (and priorities), they are part of the same humanitarian system that allows governments to discharge the political responsibilities supposedly underpinning the humanitarian impulse, while at the same time claiming to be actively engaged in protecting human rights and humanitarian principles. Humanitarian aid agencies not only participate in but also actively contribute to perpetuating the system and hiding its flaws. In extreme cases, humanitarian agencies are even expected to become accomplices to military actions. In a controversial statement, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell praised humanitarian NGOs for their role as a "force multiplier" for the US government.<sup>38</sup>

Because of the need to secure funding, NGOs have strong institutional incentives to portray humanitarianism as necessary to address and alleviate human suffering, even when its actual impact is debatable. As mentioned earlier, only a handful of NGOs decided to withdraw from eastern Zaire in 1994–1996. From northern humanitarian NGOs' points of view, tolerating the misuse of funds makes sense. Human rights organizations, like other organizations in a competitive environment, suffer from a vicious version of the prisoner's dilemma, that is, a situation in which whatever the other one does, each is better off by following a suboptimal course of action. In fact, even if all organizations agreed that their actions are actually causing more harm than good, the chances that they would all draw the coherent and consistent conclusion to withdraw aid is quite small. If one organization pulls out, it will do so at the cost of losing its "market share."<sup>39</sup> Other organizations might decide to stay, and thus solidify their reputations as reliable partners to donor governments. Thus, an ethical stand might result in long-term damage to an organization's capacity to survive and develop.

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<sup>38</sup> Colin Powell, Remarks to the National Foreign Policy Conference for Leaders of Nongovernmental Organizations, U.S. Department of State, October 26, 2001, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2001/5762pf.htm>.

<sup>39</sup> Sarah Kenyon Lischer, "Collateral Damage: Humanitarian Assistance as a Cause of Conflict," *International Security*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Summer 2003), pp. 79–109, at p. 106.

Furthermore, humanitarian agencies' organizational structure contributes to their limited capacity to assess the impact of their work. From a practical standpoint, many humanitarian organizations are based in the West, employ Western individuals, and rely on Western public opinion for their support.<sup>40</sup> Few humanitarian workers have a contextualized knowledge of the language, tradition, customs, and habits where they operate. International staff is often oblivious and detached from the local reality where they intervene. In many cases, humanitarians are sent to a specific mission precisely because they have no contextual knowledge, and thus are assumed to be more neutral to the parties in conflict. They do not speak the local language nor do they need or want to learn it. They follow donors' funding, frequently moving from one mission to another.

Humanitarians justify their lack of contextualized knowledge by arguing that they are "professionals" with technical skills applicable everywhere, and not area specialists with narrow and ultimately less useful contextual knowledge. While until the late 1980s professional training was an afterthought, since the boom of the humanitarian aid industry in the 1990s, humanitarian workers need to be conversant with management skills, fundraising procedures, international human rights norms, capacity-building trainings, and anything else which is being added to the humanitarian tool kit. Some observers take this development towards professionalism to its most extreme conclusion, arguing that the adoption of explicit businesslike professional practices for humanitarian aid workers would further improve their professionalism and thus their efficiency.<sup>41</sup>

This is doubtful. The possibility that professionalization could improve humanitarian performance, foster genuine partnerships between international and local actors, and develop local resources is almost nil. Instead, professionalization reinforces a view that the outside "expert" knows how best to address the causes for domestic distress. Instead of sustaining local development, this approach reinforces a form of control.<sup>42</sup> As Ivan Illich has argued more than thirty years ago in his seminal *De-schooling Society*, reliance on "professionals" and "experts"

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<sup>40</sup> The International Committee of the Red Cross, for example, has a multinational staff, but only 5 percent are from the Global South. See David P. Forsythe, *The Humanitarians: The International Committee of the Red Cross* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), ch. 6, forthcoming.

<sup>41</sup> Antonia Chayes, Adam Chayes, and George Raach, "Beyond Reform: Restructuring for More Effective Conflict Intervention," *Global Governance*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (April–June 1997).

<sup>42</sup> Minear, *The Humanitarian Enterprise*, p. 154.

come with an additional cost.<sup>43</sup> Experts can dull imagination, self-reliance, and creativity, making it unlikely to envision learning experiences and personal achievements outside the confines of official education or professional training. Finally, professionalism and expert knowledge allow humanitarians to avoid the contentious terrain of politics. Foreign “experts” conceptualize political work in the same way as the technical work of rebuilding a bridge, a highway, or a building. By so doing, they make themselves remain marginal to local political reality, and thus scarcely effective. Alternatively, when humanitarians do have a political impact, their technical mold can blind them from appreciating the impact of their actions on the local reality.

#### **9. HUMANITARIANISM REPRODUCES THE SAME CLEAVAGES IT TRIES TO OVERCOME.**

Despite the fact that humanitarians often think they hold perspective on ethnicity and identity diametrically opposite to that of criminal ethno-nationalist militants, they actually share many principled ideas with the perpetrators of ethnic cleansing and mass human rights violations. Prominent among these ideas is that ethnic identities are inherently conflictual and that peace requires ethnic separation. Once again, the Balkans offers an important illustration. While the international presence there has been justified in humanitarian terms to overcome fear and divisions, it has endorsed and perpetuated the very same cleavages it sought to address.

The situation in Kosovo is a case in point. NATO’s 1999 war was waged on the grounds that ethnically diverse societies should not only be protected but also actively promoted. This principle aligned NATO with the defense of Albanian rights. The outcome of NATO’s intervention is well known and barely needs to be mentioned: the victims of yesterday became today’s oppressors. Following the departure of the Serb military from Kosovo, ethnic Albanians could take revenge against Serb (and Roma) civilians for years of repression. Many non-Albanians saw no other option than to leave. The small number of those remaining relocated to those few municipalities in the north where they constitute a majority of the population. Kosovo’s two main ethnic communities are even more divided now than they were prior to the war.

There are multiple reasons for this division, including a long history of conflict that has mostly indigenous roots. Even prior to the 1999 war, most Kosovars understood their own

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<sup>43</sup> Ivan Illich, *De-Schooling Society* (London: Penguin, 1971).

human rights in opposition to the rights of the other group. Albanians and Serbs perceived their mutual relationship in zero-sum terms. But even granted the endogenous roots of the conflict, the outcome of NATO's intervention raises important questions about the usefulness of violent means for humanitarian purposes. Not surprisingly, these violent means polarized the population even further, and only in a very superficial way did they begin to create the foundation for a multi-ethnic society.

NATO's reaction to such violent polarization shows its implicit acceptance of a worldview of ethnic division running diametrically opposite to the stated goals of intervention. NATO leaders decided to interpret post-war Albanian violence against Serbs and Roma as the "natural" outcome of the new circumstances. By so doing, they endorsed the same underlying extreme ethno-nationalist worldview that sees interethnic violence as perpetual and inevitable. Having endorsed this belief, NATO's role became that of (temporary) guardian of ethnic peace. Following the end of the war, the NATO-led Kosovo Force (KFOR) set up checkpoints and patrols aimed at limiting the possibility of violence by reducing contact between the different communities. From NATO's perspective, as well as from the perspective of local ethno-nationalists, peace requires the separation of Serbs and Albanians in ethnically homogeneous communities.

Julie Mertus correctly concludes that international humanitarianism in Kosovo has promoted an adversarial conception of human rights. This conception did not erode the long-standing zero-sum attitudes characterizing the Serb-Albanian relationship, and it is hard to imagine how it could have been otherwise. NATO bombed the Serbs in order to end real and perceived discrimination against the Albanians. After the war, the Alliance let Albanian extremists take revenge against Serb and Roma civilians, and then it concluded that it needed to focus on the rights of the Serb and Roma populations who, almost overnight, became the new threatened minorities. It is no surprise that these actions did not affect the underlying conflictual relationship between the local communities. Even less surprising is the outcome: after years of post-war international administration, "Kosovo is decidedly not a multiethnic and secure society, and equal access to basic human rights protections remain illusory."<sup>44</sup>

Additional evidence of the negative consequences of promoting an "adversarial conception" of human rights comes from Bosnia. The war in this country led to the

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<sup>44</sup> Mertus, "Improving International Peacebuilding Efforts," p. 333.

displacement of more than two million people and to the creation of the ethnically-homogeneous areas. For the first time in the history of mass dislocation, the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement foresaw the post-war return home of DPs and refugees. This was to be a Homeric task, likely to be boycotted by all of those local politicians who fomented the war precisely to destroy any semblance of multi-ethnicity. Faced with this difficulty, international humanitarians again legitimised and reproduced the very same local cleavages they were attempting to overcome. In the first two post-war years, humanitarians did very little to support the displaced population's return. The High Representative of the International Community, tasked with supervising the implementation of the civilian aspects of the peace agreement, believed that this return home was politically destabilizing. He shared this view with Bosnian Serb ethno-nationalists who justified attacks against non-Serb returnees on the same grounds.

When lack of return became a security problem because of the fear that the displaced population could re-take by force what was denied to them through peaceful means, international humanitarians finally focused on the problem of displacement. The first ambitious program set up to help return was the so-called "Open Cities Initiative," coordinated by UNHCR. This program foresaw the allocation of economic resources to those Bosnian municipalities who declared themselves "open" to the return of ethnic minorities. Cities and municipalities taking concrete steps to allow return and reintegration of refugees and DPs would be rewarded with additional reconstruction and development aid.

The impact of this program was nil at best, and negative at worst. Authorities in many of the recognized open cities made only cosmetic changes, while paying lip service to the principle of a successful return. More importantly, the very idea of positive conditionality exacerbated resistance and opposition among the general population. Because the priority given by donors to returnees explicitly discriminated against the local majority (who was as much in need as the returnees), positive conditionality quickly became counterproductive and even reproduced the same cleavages emerging from the war. By addressing the problem of displacement in the same terms it was framed by local nationalists (as the return of one ethnic group to an area dominated by another ethnic group), humanitarians embraced the same ethnic divisions that nationalist elites worked to preserve.

Only when humanitarians changed this policy did return home of refugees and DPs gain momentum. The creation of a legal framework for property repossession in 1998–1999 set the

precondition for a more successful return process. All refugees and DPs, regardless of their ethnic background, could claim their properties. The presence of this framework, which applied in principle to all regarding their ethnicity or status, was an important improvement toward establishing the rule of law based not on ethnic affiliation but on universal principles of equity. For local politicians it became increasingly more difficult to prevent return. As a result, the majority of those displaced were able to retake possession of their properties, and hundreds of thousands returned home. As this development confirms, there is nothing inevitable about humanitarianism's questionable impact. There are no perfect choices, but humanitarians should learn to distinguish between better and bad ones.

## CONCLUSION

The last point suggests that humanitarianism can be made more effective. Human rights are important to improve the human condition but the present approach just does not seem to fit the bill. A different approach can only be briefly outlined here. Implementing the following changes would be a step forward.

- *Focus on prevention.* Preventing conflict is currently an unfashionable task. The dog that does not bark hardly attracts attention and consideration. Moreover, indicators of a deteriorating situation might be contradictory. And yet, the signs are often available for the attentive observer, while the human and economic costs of post-disaster intervention vastly outnumber those of prevention.
- *Change Western practices.* The predominant view that the West is the realm of reason and human rights and that Western states are slowly developing a genuine concern for humanity simply does not bear scrutiny. For example, the main world producers of weapons (the United States, United Kingdom, France, Japan, and Israel) are also those countries mostly involved in the humanitarian business. In 1999, as the UK was preparing to participate in the NATO-led war against Yugoslavia to end human rights abuses in Kosovo, it was also selling weapons to Indonesia—which in turn was preparing itself to unjustifiably devastate East Timor in the fall of the same year.
- *Begin with human rights at home.* The main stumbling block to effective humanitarianism is the persistence of nationalist views and their priority over trans-national moral issues. Both morality and interest are in large measure nationally based,

and Western policymakers know how to take advantage of nationally-bounded views. After all, selling weapons to a distant and alien state can increase domestic employment—while the human costs are born by others. Effective humanitarianism requires building a domestic human rights culture among the general public. As long as the moral imagination of Western citizens is limited to national boundaries, then humanitarianism is likely to continue to be an afterthought whose primary task is simply that of controlling the spillover effects of political instability for Western states.

## **INTERNATIONAL SECURITY PROGRAM**

The International Security Program addresses the most important challenges to U.S. national security and international security in the quarter-century ahead. As the first issue of the journal *International Security* stated in 1976, “We define international security broadly to include the full array of factors that have a direct bearing on the structure of the international system and the sovereignty of its members, with particular emphasis on the use, threat, and control of force.”

Program researchers analyze security issues rigorously, draw prescriptive conclusions, and communicate their recommendations directly to makers of public policy and shapers of public opinion. The program also seeks to advance scholarship in security studies by contributing to significant academic debates through its own research activities and by publishing the leading journal in the field, *International Security*. Each year ISP develops and trains new talent in security studies by hosting a dozen pre- and postdoctoral research fellows. The program also presents its research in the book series, *BCSIA Studies in International Security*.

### ***INTERNATIONAL SECURITY***

The basic mission of *International Security* is to publish articles on defense and foreign affairs that combine policy relevance with scholarly analysis and research. The journal seeks to bridge the gap between contemporary security policy issues and academic research on international security studies. We define the field of international security studies broadly, to include nonmilitary as well as military threats to the security of states. Compared to some other journals, we also interpret policy relevance broadly to include many articles that bear on general theoretical questions - such as the causes of alliances or the role of international institutions - as well as historical topics, ranging from the origins of the First World War to U.S. nuclear strategy in the 1950s. As the editors of the journal wrote in its first issue, our intended audience includes the “scholars, scientists, industrialists, military and government officials, and members of the public who bear a continuing concern” for the problems of international security.

### **BCSIA STUDIES IN INTERNATIONAL SECURITY**

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