International humanitarian crises: two decades before and two decades beyond

RANDOLPH C. KENT

Just over 20 years ago to the month, *International Affairs* carried an article on the state of the international disaster relief system.[1] The article is of contemporary interest in two senses. In the first place, two decades ago disaster relief was not regarded as an issue of major concern to the international community. It was not a subject that would seem to fall naturally into the orbit of a journal concerned with substantive global and regional issues. Today, that is not the case. Humanitarian affairs have become big international business. The 'humanitarian enterprise' occupies the attention of more and more bilateral, multilateral and non-governmental organizations and finds itself a relative 'growth industry' when compared to development.[2]

Twenty years later, it is worth considering the reasons for this evolution. In so doing, it is interesting to note how dependent the ostensibly neutral, impartial and independent world of humanitarian action has been upon the ebbs and flows of major political trends. To that extent, the former seems all too often to have been an unwitting though not totally innocent instrument in the distinctly less humane world of international politics. The evolution of humanitarianism also reflects fundamental changes in the assumptions about emergency and disaster causation and vulnerability, and this perspective is increasingly important in terms of understanding the humanitarian challenges that need to be faced in the future.

In looking to that future, one might wonder whether the institutions and structures are in place to assess, monitor and respond effectively to those challenges. A case in point has been the emergence over the past two decades of the United Nations' own humanitarian role. The October 1983 article heralded the need for a substantial increase in the UN's capacity to deal with disasters and emergencies, principally by effectively coordinating international

---

humanitarian responses. At the time, moves in that direction were beginning, albeit hesitantly. The hope was that a strengthened UN would be able to avoid the 'pandemonium-run-riot' approach that marked so many international interventions in the early 1970s, and instead would add measures to ensure greater coherence and more timely and appropriate relief. When that article was written, however, there was considerable resistance to expanding the UN's mandate beyond its three Charter-based responsibilities, those involving peace and security, economic development and human rights. What under the present Secretary General has been called the UN's 'fourth pillar'—humanitarian assistance—was regarded by many within as well as outside the organization as a dangerous diversion from its core functions.

This attitude also reflected a persistent assumption about the role of governments in countries visited by humanitarian crises: namely, that governments—even those of highly disaster-prone countries—had, generally speaking, the responsibility, will, interest and capacity to assist their own people. To that extent, international assistance was more often than not seen as a supplement to domestically generated aid. Perhaps of equal significance in the context of the times was the convergence between that assumption and the relative sanctity of the concept of sovereignty. Governments had responsibilities—to aid their disaster-affected citizens—and rights—to control as well as to act as conduits for international assistance. That there might be a more abiding right that would allow for 'humanitarian intervention' without the concurrence of the affected state would have been unimaginable two decades ago, and certainly at the time would not have been a position that could be sanctioned by the United Nations.[3]

The humanitarian role of the United Nations has indeed been strengthened over the past two decades; and, more than this, in many ways it has become more efficient and effective. Logistics and delivery systems have improved, coordination of responses is far more systematized, and there has been a plethora of initiatives to improve on-the-ground cooperation. And yet, as this article will suggest, there lingers a profound concern that the net result of these efforts has been to replace operational chaos with heavily institutionalized, self-absorbed and relatively insensitive systems that can rarely keep up with the perverse dynamics of humanitarian crises.

If there is any truth in such criticisms, their implications have potentially serious consequences, now and in the future. Global vulnerability to a variety of disasters and emergencies may well increase, or so this article contends; and

---

[3] One of the stumbling blocks that had to be surmounted in 1991 before agreement could be reached on a major General Assembly initiative to strengthen the UN's coordination role (GA 46/182) was the issue of 'consent'. G77 representatives on the drafting committee understood that consent for UN intervention in the humanitarian crises of affected nations would have to be active consent, in other words, a request for intervention by the government of the affected nation. Representatives from developed countries assumed a more passive interpretation of consent: in other words, that humanitarian intervention was acceptable as long as there were no overt or specific objections raised by the government of the affected nation to that intervention.

if that should be the case, then one needs to ask whether there might be better ways than those offered by the systems operating at present to anticipate, in some cases prevent and in others prepare for future humanitarian crises.

In the beginning

Humanitarian crises throughout the 1970s and into the early 1980s were not perceived as events of great political consequence or significance. That is not to say that many—including government leaders at the time—did not sympathize with and indeed attempt to respond to the plight of the disaster-afflicted. In these relatively early days of modern international humanitarian response, the suffering occurring in such seemingly remote places as East Pakistan, Ethiopia and Guatemala elicited considerable public support and empathy.[4] And certainly by 1984–5 with food shortages affecting 21 countries in Africa, donor govern-ments as well as international organizations and private aid agencies were made very well aware of the political consequences of indifference in the face of human suffering—so starkly portrayed by increasingly 'real time' media.[5]

Yet such crises were still perceived as 'sideshows' to *real* political concerns: those defined and determined directly or indirectly by the momentum of the Cold War.[6] Not only did hard-headed realists disparage the rhetoric of aid workers—the latter's insistence, for example, that relief aid be neutral, impartial and independent—but in any event international relief was seen to be too small, too infrequent and of too little impact to be a significant weapon in any political arsenal.

This would all change as the end of the 1980s approached, and the close of the Cold War witnessed a rapid decline in the resources and political support that had sustained many fragile and potentially disaster-prone countries.

Humanitarian affairs in a post-Cold War context

A sense of global harmony, if not euphoria, seemed to follow in the wake of the Berlin Wall's collapse. As Michael Ignatieff viewed the prospects for the

---

[4] Many would argue that the modern relief or humanitarian response system began in the aftermath of the Battle of Solferino in 1859, when Henri Dunant began to formulate a concept of relief assistance that led to the foundation of the International Movement of the Red Cross in 1863. This movement generated a series of international humanitarian legal obligations—the Geneva Conventions—that defined combatants' obligations to civilians and to other 'non-combatants'. It could also be argued that, operationally speaking, the Hoover Commission, initiated to assist the starving in Europe after the First World War, was a 'beginning' in the sense that the lives of many hundreds of thousands in war-torn Europe were dependent upon external intervention.

[5] The UN Secretary General at the outbreak of the 1984 Ethiopian famine was Javier Perez de Cuellar. He was told in no uncertain terms by the then head of UNICEF, Jim Grant, and the World Food Programme's executive director, Jim Ingram, that if the UN failed to respond to the Ethiopian crisis, the media's reaction would be devastating for the UN and its agencies and programmes (personal communication with the author).

[6] The term 'sideshow' in this context harks back to the point made by William Shawcross in *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon and the destruction of Cambodia* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979) that the US was more than willing to sacrifice the peoples of Cambodia to press home its prosecution of the Vietnam War.

post-Cold War world, 'It was not utopian to expect a new age of robust but pragmatic collaboration between the superpowers to damp down the proxy wars that were beggaring so many regions of Africa, Latin America, and Asia.'[7] Perhaps not since the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle in 1818, with the reintroduction of post-Napoleonic France into the Grand Alliance, had there been a similar sense of universal common cause and optimism. But, like that distant period, the late 1980s and early 1990s began to reveal undercurrents, difficult at the time to discern, that rapidly swamped the tender plant of global aspirations.

Former Cold War client states increasingly faced the prospect of discontent, civil strife, disintegration and even collapse. Common cause among the major powers in the face of this mounting disorder was—except in the case of Iraq's 1991 invasion of Kuwait—difficult to generate. To the contrary, in many instances, such as the former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Rwanda, a semblance of contentious balance-of-power alignments and, in the case of Rwanda, a community of indifference seemed to have replaced the bipolar order.

As disillusion began to replace euphoria, there was a growing tendency for the major powers to shun the complexities and potential quicksands associated with the emerging 'post-Westphalian world'. In some instances, as in Germany's recognition of Croatia in 1992, unilateralism replaced consultative processes, bypassing the fora of multilateral institutions such as the EU or the UN. In all too many instances, when timely big power intervention might not only have promoted peace but also saved hundreds of thousands of lives, key governments opted to disengage. This could be seen in the initial indifference that greeted the crises in Liberia and Sierra Leone as well as in the former Yugoslavia. It was starkly and grimly apparent in Rwanda.

Disengagement reflected on the one hand a general disinclination to invest the so-called 'peace dividend' in anything other than narrow, principally domestic interests. On the other hand, disengagement also reflected a lack of interest in engaging in complex, highly sensitive and possibly risky diplomacy that might threaten the false sense of harmony that reigned among the powers. The undercurrents of disharmony were disguised; until, of course, unilateral action best served individual power interests.

All these tendencies directly and indirectly determined the role of humanitarianism; and not only did humanitarianism—no matter how well intentioned the motives of the UN and its agencies—become an inadvertent instrument of post-Cold War politics, its very principles as well as its operations were all too often determined by that politics.

---

[7] Michael Ignatieff, *The warrior's honor: ethnic war and the modern conscience* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1997), p. 89. Ignatieff continues by suggesting that 'it was not beyond the bounds of possibility to envisage, in the peace-dividend of the end of the Cold War, a sustained increase in aid and development budgets to the Third World' (p. 89).

Disengagement, disharmony and unilateralism

One commentator suggested that 'the twin catastrophes of Srebrenica and Rwanda brought to a close a brief period of hope that had opened up in 1989'.[8] The former indeed reflected the disengagement and disharmony that to a significant extent symbolized the emerging reality of the post-Cold War period. The fate of the latter, however, was in no small part dependent upon events in Mogadishu, the capital of the collapsed state of Somalia, which occurred seven months before the 1994 Rwandan genocide.

While the United States had refused to become embroiled in the Bosnian conflict that resulted in large-scale refugee flows, 'ethnic cleansing' and concentration camps, the Bush administration in its final lap in January 1992 felt compelled to respond to the prospect of mass starvation that threatened up to 500,000 Somalis.[9] The US military would be used in Operation Restore Hope to provide logistics and security support to relief agencies that were attempting to provide assistance in the midst of the chaos and civil strife pervading much of the country. This intervention was generally well received internationally as well as in Somalia, whatever the interpretations of American motives.[10]

However, moving beyond its immediate humanitarian objectives, the United States began to undertake measures to restore stability and governance in Somalia, an initiative that resulted in crossing swords with one of Somalia's most powerful warlords, Mohammed Farah Aideed. In one battle in Mogadishu in October 1993, 19 US soldiers were killed, which in turn unnerved the Clinton administration and precipitated a degree of international disengagement that few would have foreseen four years before.

As events in Rwanda from April to July 1994 demonstrated, the United States was not alone in narrowing the scope of its international interests and engagement. No government was willing to take any steps to prevent the Hutu-dominated regime's planned genocide, and in four months an estimated 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were slaughtered.[11] Instead, during and in

---

[8] Ibid., p. 89.

[9] It is worth noting that, while agreement on Somali population figures has always been elusive, estimates in 1991 ranged from 6.5 million to 8.8 million. In this context, half a million people clearly indicates the extent of the threat.

[10] David Halberstam, in *War in a time of peace: Bush, Clinton and the generals* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), p. 251, refers to top National Security Council officials suggesting that US intervention in Somalia was 'Powell's way of doing something humanitarian, but equally important, of not sending troops to Bosnia'.

[11] To date there is little agreement on the numbers of Tutsis and moderate Hutus who were killed in the four-month genocide, but figures normally range from 750,000 to 1 million. Rather than respond to the genocide, most countries astutely avoided their obligations under the 1951 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, the US by referring to the massacres as 'genocide-like'—not genocidal—incidents. France, Belgium and Italy sent in troops at various times to extract their citizens. Arguably the French initiative to create a Zone Turquoise with 2,500 troops in June 1994 might be seen as an effort to stop the genocide, but most analysts agree with Samantha Power in *A problem from hell: America and the age of genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), p. 380, that on the one hand 'French troops were deployed extremely quickly … illustrating the pace at which a determined state could move', but on the other hand the French force did little to prevent the Hutu instruments of genocide, e.g. the racist radio station and the so-called 'mopping up exercises' by Hutu extremists.

the aftermath of the genocide Rwanda became a target for major bilateral and multilateral humanitarian relief operations.[12] Inside the country internally displaced persons and those who had survived the genocide were beneficiaries of humanitarian assistance. So, too, were almost one million refugees who had fled to neighbouring countries in July 1994 in the wake of the Tutsi-led Rwandese Patriotic Army's takeover of Rwanda.

If humanitarian assistance served as a kind of apology for the international community's failure to act to prevent the slaughter in Rwanda, it was used similarly as an alternative to political action to deal with the seemingly unrelenting crimes against humanity that were occurring in the former Yugoslavia between 1991 and 1995. Humanitarian action was the 'filler' that was used to plug the policy gaps caused by the inability of the major powers to agree on political solutions to a profoundly political problem. Germany, France, the UK and Russia could not agree on a common course of action. Worse, France and Germany pursued objectives that proved to be mutually destructive. For almost three years, the United States resisted becoming involved, in part to focus on the Clinton administration's domestic agenda.[13]

All, however, could agree that humanitarian measures should be taken. Humanitarian assistance would stem the flow of refugees who otherwise would have spilled over the borders into western Europe, and would quell the rising media chorus of accusations of genocide and 'ethnic cleansing': it was, in sum, a course of action upon which an otherwise disparate and dissonant group of states could agree. 'Containment through charity' is the reported comment by one UN official; and, as Reiff also concludes, the UN's 'deeply ingrained institutional culture made it the "perfect implementing partner" … for the great powers as they looked for an excuse not to intervene militarily'.[14]

Humanitarian assistance was increasingly being used as an alternative to political solutions to complex political problems, as tragically evidenced over the past five years in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In that respect, humanitarian assistance reflected the increasingly conditional nature of sovereignty itself, with the UN increasingly accepting that international actors could violate this mainstay of international order where there existed 'just cause'—for example, a need for humanitarian intervention.[15] Most recently this has been

[12] In July 1994, while the genocide was petering out, 1 million Rwandese crossed the border into what was then Zaire to seek refuge from the advancing Tutsi-dominated Rwandese Patriotic Army that had been based in Uganda. This refugee exodus triggered enormous relief operations in refugee camps along the Zairean–Rwandese and Tanzanian–Rwandese borders. Relief operations in Rwanda itself were slower, but nevertheless enormous pledges for relief and recovery assistance were made from August 1994 onwards.

[13] Halberstam, *War in a time of peace*, pp. 167–8.

[14] David Reiff, *A bed for the night: humanitarianism in crisis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), p. 131. Michael Ignatieff, in *The warrior's honor*, poses the possibility that humanitarian intervention actually prolonged wars in the former Yugoslavia (pp. 102–3). He comments thus on humanitarian assistance in the Sarajevo context: 'in effect, the West's policy consisted of saying this: we will not fight the chief aggressor, and we will not enable the victims to resist, but we will try to prevent the victims from being wiped out' (p. 102).

[15] See e.g. Christopher Clapham, *Africa and the international system: the politics of state survival* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

evidenced by the UN Security Council's position with regard to the Darfur crisis in Sudan.

Yet, as events since the bombing of the World Trade Center towers demonstrate, humanitarian assistance could also be used as a weapon in the arsenal of military 'hearts and minds operations'. In other words, the independence, neutrality and impartiality that were the moral as well as practical mainstays of humanitarianism were enlisted more and more to serve political and military-related objectives.

In Afghanistan in late 2001, relief aid was provided with little hesitation from the same aircraft bomb-bays that only one or two days before had been dropping bombs; and two years later, in Iraq, occupying powers would see the provision of humanitarian assistance as a means to bridge the widening gulf between them and the Iraqi people. In both instances, there is considerable evidence to suggest that the volume of humanitarian assistance that was provided went well beyond identified needs, and rather reflected in no small part a perceived inducement to support foreign intervention.[16] Both also reflected a clear distortion of the principles of International Humanitarian Law, and both were facilitated by the support of the United Nations humanitarian system.

Globalization and human vulnerability

Two decades ago, manifestations of globalization were becoming increasingly evident. The subject of multinational corporations spawned a burgeoning literature, and free market forces were seen as the agents of a paradigmatic shift that would, among other things, liberate the Third World from the intensifying burdens of poverty. What few saw at the time was the prospect that globalization would become a major factor in creating the sorts of vulnerabilities that would lead to a growing number of disasters and emergencies.

Globalization, as described by even one of its fiercest critics, should hold out enormous benefits for the world as a whole. The closer integration of countries and peoples has been to a very significant extent the result of an enormous reduction in transportation and communication costs, and the dismantling of artificial barriers to flows of goods, services, capital and knowledge.[17] All these patterns are probably in and of themselves worthwhile; but their consequences have been very mixed, notably when it comes to their humanitarian effects. There can be little doubt that, while globalization has resulted in considerable economic progress in many parts of the world, particularly in South-East Asia and the Far East, even that progress has deepened divides between rich and

---

[16] See e.g. Joanna Macrae and Nicholas Leader, *Shifting sands: the search for 'coherence' between political and humanitarian responses to complex emergencies*, Humanitarian Policy Group Report no. 8 (London: Overseas Development Institute, August 2000), pp. 55ff.

[17] For a fuller definition and critique of globalization, see Joseph Stiglitz, *Globalisation and its discontents* (London: Allen Lane, 2002). Stiglitz also rightly notes that, 'to a lesser extent', globalization is also reflected in the flows of people across borders.

poor.[18] And it is poverty—without some form of protective 'safety net'—that leaves individuals and communities exposed to another impact of a more liberalized and globalized economy: namely, agents of disasters and emergencies.[19]

All this is not to suggest that the links between poverty and disasters and emergencies were not appreciated twenty years ago, but rather to suggest that the full global implications beyond the confines of the Third World were not sufficiently understood. Or perhaps, to make the point in another way, the spectrum of factors that impinge upon the relationship between globalization and increased human exposure to agents of disasters and emergencies has over the ensuing years expanded significantly. Global climate change and its implications for the ways in which human beings live underscore the fact that more and more disaster and emergency threats are global. At the same time, the rapid spread of diseases across continents emphasizes the increasingly transnational nature of a growing number of disaster and emergency agents.[20]

Globalization and poverty

In the early 1980s a number of analysts warned that humanitarian crises resulted from the ways in which societies were structured and allocated their resources. It was not, for example, the cyclone, the flood or the hurricane that harmed human beings; rather, it was their poverty that forced them to live in areas where they were exposed to the impacts of such forces. The momentum of globalization has exacerbated this situation.[21] As globalization has intensified the division between rich and poor within societies, so the effects of natural phenomena upon the growing number of poor have become greater. The Red Cross's 1999 *World disaster report* notes, for example, that when Hurricane Mitch struck Central America in 1998, it caused $7 billion of economic damage, of which only $150 million was covered by insurance. Insurance, though a major component of disaster preparedness, is an unaffordable luxury for millions of the poor.

While the linkage between poverty and vulnerability was known, globalization reflected new forces that were reinforcing those linkages. Subsidized

---

[18] The effect that globalization has in terms of deepening the divide between rich and poor within societies is evidenced in the United States where, according to the independent research institute the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, the 2002 census data indicate 'that poverty increased in 2001, while median household income fell, and the income gap between the affluent and the rest of society either tied or set new all-time record highs … The number of people living in poverty rose by 1.3 million in 2001.' This pattern appears to have been part of a consistent trend since 1979. 'Analysis of Census Bureau Poverty and Income Data for 2001', Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Washington DC, 24 Sept. 2002.

[19] See e.g. *Global environmental outlook 2000* (Nairobi: United Nations Environment Programme, 1999), ch. 1, which notes that 'the income gap between rich and poor countries and between the rich and poor within countries would increase for several decades'.

[20] Randolph Kent, *Humanitarian futures: practical policy perspectives*, network paper no. 46 (London: Humanitarian Policy Group, April 2004), pp. 11ff.

[21] International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, *World disasters report, 2001* (Geneva: IFRCRCS, 2002).

agriculture in western Europe and the United States enabled farmers in the developed world to offload their produce onto the developing world, frequently undercutting local Third World production. Ironically, a good portion of western-subsidized produce came in the form of emergency relief assistance to the families of famine-threatened farmers. Ready access to global markets enabled large companies to pick and choose when and where to establish their production lines, which was frequently profitable to their local counterparts, but condemned to chronic insecurity those totally dependent upon the whims of their employer. 'For millions of people globalization has not worked,' says Nobel Laureate Joseph Stiglitz '[It] will continue to create poverty and instability. Without reform the backlash that has already started will mount and discontent with globalization will grow.'[22]

Resource wars and humanitarian crises

The tragic events of the Congo in 1962, when the flame of liberation and democratic rule was so quickly extinguished, reflected in no small part a tale of continuing post-colonial resource wars. Similar tales were to emerge—particularly but not solely on the African continent—for years to come. Few, however, anticipated that seemingly legitimate (though morally questionable) commodity trade would drag countries into national crises that in turn would create some of the worst humanitarian disasters evidenced to date.

In impoverished countries such as Liberia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, ruling elites were not hesitant to use their authority to corner markets in commodities such as diamonds to maintain their own rule and enhance their individual wealth. Governments were part and parcel of internecine struggles to gain control over these markets, struggles that led to extraordinary violence and cruelty involving not just members of gangs but entire tribes and communities.

These conflicts totally disrupted agricultural production, drove hundreds of thousands of people into urban areas that could not provide even the most basic services for survival and sent millions of people across neighbouring borders as refugees. The impact of resource wars, no respecters of borders or international laws, ultimately engulfed entire regions.[23] While international initiatives were undertaken to right such wrongs, the benefits that accrued to elites in resource-rich countries and to those who traded with them from around the world perpetrated the trade that from the late 1980s to the present has created tens of millions of 'resource war victims'.

[22] Stiglitz, *Globalisation and its discontents*, pp. 248–9.
[23] A good example has been the use of so-called 'conflict diamonds' in West Africa, particularly in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia and Sierra Leone, where 'for too long diamonds have been used to fuel conflict leading to deaths and maiming millions of vulnerable people in Africa'. 'Conflict diamonds; Kimberley Process still in process' (Oxfam–America press release, 30 April 2003). The Kimberley Process itself is an agreement launched on 1 Jan. 2003 in which diamond miners, traders and shippers—enforced in many instances by national legislation—agreed to a certification scheme that bans the trade in conflict diamonds and promotes transparent verification modalities.

Randolph C. Kent

Transforming the planet

Among the hallmarks of the present age is the fact that human beings have become a force that in many ways dictates the course of nature. The relationship between nature and humans has to that extent altered significantly. Throughout most of history, human beings were subject to nature's whims. Now the actions of humankind not only affect the prospects for the survival of the species itself, but also impact on the oceans, the lands, the weather and indeed the very stability of the planet.

This has become most immediately evident in respect of global climate change. As the International Panel on Climate Change observed in 2001, 'The effects of climate change are expected to be greatest in developing countries in terms of loss of life and relative effects on investment and the economy ... [but globally] extreme events are projected to increase in the mean and/or variability of climate, so it can be expected that the severity of their impacts will also increase in concert with global warming.'[24] These trends have been more and more evident over the past 15 years. El Niño, Hurricane Mitch, increased propensity to drought and increased tropical peak wind intensities are all reflections of the globalization of human vulnerabilities.[25]

It was not that scientists and many others during and before the early 1980s had not warned about the implications of humankind's unintended transformation of the planet. However, it is only recently that such transformations have translated themselves into increasingly evident sources of disasters and emergencies. From the humanitarian perspective, these emerging events were all part and parcel of a growing vulnerability that was manifesting itself in modern historical terms in the unprecedented frequency and nature of humanitarian crises.

A complex and competitive aid environment

Since 1983 humanitarianism has departed quite significantly from the conceptual isolation and the degree of tolerated chaos that marked its early history. The post-Cold War order and globalization have opened the way for a 'humanitarian enterprise' that in all too many instances has taken centre stage in ways that are neither justified nor appropriate. Over two decades, the number of humanitarian actors has increased dramatically. In the mid-1980s there were an estimated 280 organizations—including governmental, intergovernmental and non-governmental—that had some recognized expertise in disaster and emergency relief. That figure has now multiplied fourfold.[26] Similarly, annual

[24] IPCC, Summary for policymakers: climate change 2001—impacts, adaptation and vulnerability, available at www.ipcc.ch.
[25] Ibid.
[26] This is a very loose estimate, and hinges on various definitional qualifications, e.g. 'who recognizes whom' in terms of expertise etc. The basis for these estimates begins with Jürgen Lissner's The politics of altruism: a study of the political behaviour of development agencies (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1977), supported by the present author's own work in preparation of Anatomy of disaster relief: the international network in action (London: Pinter, 1987). The estimate has subsequently been updated on the basis of an

expenditure on humanitarian assistance has tripled over the past 14 years from an estimated $2 billion to something in the realm of $6 billion.[27]

Perhaps more significantly, both the types of actors and the nature of humanitarian assistance have changed significantly. These changes have introduced considerable competition and added to the complexity of providing humanitarian assistance.

Changing actors, changing motives

In many countries, domestic military contingents are used to supplement the capacities of civil authorities to provide humanitarian assistance. Only recently, however, have foreign military forces assumed responsibility for the distribution of disaster and emergency assistance alongside or as part of their military objectives.[28] This combining of roles has created at least three problems within the broader humanitarian context. In the first place, the mixed role of military contingents puts into jeopardy the very fundamental principle that life-saving aid should be provided to whomever is in need, in ways that are and *are perceived to be* impartial, neutral and independent. Second, as the recent withdrawal by the relief organization Médecins Sans Frontières from Afghanistan suggests, the lack of distinction between the impartial and independent aid worker and the military creates very real security problems for the former as well as tensions within the affected communities.[29]

Finally, despite the tripling of humanitarian funding over the past decade, the involvement of the military in humanitarian assistance increases the already intense competition for finite resources. This competition for scarce resources is increased by the growing engagement of the for-profit or private corporate sector, epitomized by the growing number of companies within the much-publicized Washington DC beltway that are competing for lucrative humanitarian and development contracts. They parade their capacity to add value to

---

analysis of membership of the three main NGO consortia (the International Council for Voluntary Agencies, the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response, and Inter-Action, as well as certain very rough calculations about the emergence of 'relief units' in the governments of developing countries.

[27] J. Randel, *Global humanitarian assistance flows, 2003: an independent report on humanitarian aid flows* (Evercreech, UK: Development Initiatives, March 2003). These figures do not include unofficial aid flows that are thought to be significant but are poorly understood and difficult to calculate. Such aid flows stem often from non-DAC (Development Assistance Committee of the OECD) countries, voluntary donations by the general public, assistance provided by the diaspora, and other sources including religious contributions such as Islamic *zakat*. For an interesting discussion on Islamic charitable funding, see J. Benthall, *The charitable crescent: politics of aid in the Muslim world* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2003).

[28] Joanna Macrae, Emery Brusset and Christine Tiberghien note that 'this diversification of "humanitarian" response has been facilitated by the coming into force of the Amsterdam Treaty in May 1999, and the so-called "Petersberg Tasks" (Article 17, TEU), which provided for the deployment of Western European Union (WEU) military forces for humanitarian and rescue tasks, peace-keeping and tasks of combat forces in crisis management, including peacemaking': Joanna Macrae et al., 'Coherence or cooption? Europe and the new humanitarianism', in *Europe in the world: essays on EU foreign, security and development policies* (London: BOND, May 2003).

[29] 'Top charity to abandon Afghanistan over deaths', *International Herald Tribune*, 29 July 2004, p. 1. Médecins Sans Frontières cited 'the United States military's use of humanitarian aid for political and military motives' as one major reason for its withdrawal.

the service provided in terms of private sector efficiencies, and often also regard humanitarian assistance as a way into the more lucrative areas of large-scale infrastructural development.

Such competition should in theory make humanitarian response more effective; and that might well be the case if donor funding were provided in a predictable and rational manner. Sadly, it is not. As a recent study has confirmed, donors' motives for providing humanitarian assistance all too often have little to do with humanitarian needs. More often than not, donors give for domestic considerations or in furtherance of international interests that are a world apart from the specific needs of those affected by the disaster or emergency. Such motives are in turn reflected in the ways that resource allocations are made to aid-providing organizations.[30]

Aid-providing organizations are funded by donors for various reasons, one of which is perceived to be the extent to which such organizations have responded to donors' 'humanitarian concerns'. One major UN agency made no bones about the fact that it felt that it was deemed by donors only 'to be as good as the last operation', and that it had little alternative but to respond to crises determined by donors' interests. Hence, in this instance, 'our resources and best people' had to be shifted from southern Africa—an area in considerable need of humanitarian assistance—to Iraq, where the actual humanitarian requirements were considered to be less urgent. This perspective was shared by two other major UN aid providers.[31]

This highly competitive situation is complicated further by the fact that, while humanitarian assistance funds have grown as a proportion of official development assistance, ODA itself has declined over the past decade.[32] Humanitarian assistance is sometimes the only form of support that some countries have available to them. Furthermore, as disaster and emergency budgets increase, agencies are increasingly inclined to present funding requirements under the guise of 'humanitarian requirements'. Hence enterprises such as gender sensitization programmes, livelihood support and work to create institutional governance capacity are frequently presented as 'emergency projects', because that is where the funds are.

---

[30] Minear and Smillie, in *The quality of money*, provide an interpretation that compares with a realist perspective in international relations studies. The present author, though reaching conclusions that approximate those of Minear and others, sees a more complex set of factors at play through the prisms of organizational and bureaucratic behaviour models. See Kent, *Anatomy of disaster relief.*

[31] Various portions of this article reflect research undertaken for a UN-sponsored project, funded by the US Agency for International Development, on behalf of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, by Randolph Kent, Mark Dalton, Karin von Hippel and Ralf Maurer, *Changes in humanitarian financing: implications for the United Nations*, 11 Oct. 2003, www.reliefweb.com.

[32] 'As a share of overall ODA (official development assistance), humanitarian aid increased from an average of 5.83% between 1989 and 1993 to 10.5% in 2000. While humanitarian aid has increased, total aid flows have declined. In 2000, official aid amounted to $53.7 bn, 12% lower than the 1992 peak. Aid has also declined as a proportion of national wealth, from around half of the UN's target of 0.7% of gross national product (GNP) in the 1970s and 1980s to 0.22% of GNP in 2000.' Joanna Macrae et al, *Uncertain power: the changing role of official donors in humanitarian action*, no. 12 (London: Humanitarian Policy Group Report No. 12, Overseas Development Institute, Dec. 2002), p. 15.

Such projects are generally worthwhile and well intentioned. Yet they are not 'humanitarian' per se; and labelling them as such not only puts the utility of humanitarian principles in jeopardy but also intensifies the competitive aspect of the aid environment. The threat to principles arises out of the fact that non-life-saving projects are inherently judgemental, reflecting preferences and value-driven options—for example, types of governance system, the need for gender sensitization and livelihood options—in a way that is at odds with humanitarian imperatives of impartiality and neutrality.

In expanding the bounds of humanitarianism, one also intensifies competition among humanitarian actors. Donors have objectives which may not sit easily under the rubric of humanitarianism, but nevertheless can be funded through humanitarian budgets. Such donor objectives present opportunities for many intergovernmental and non-governmental bodies to fill organizational coffers, and foster what one UN agency has described as an 'I-can-do-that-too' attitude towards so-called humanitarian programmes and projects. Here, again, it is not the competition to meet the demands that is dangerous, but rather that humanitarian organizations are tempted to undertake activities that have little to do with their mandates and even less to do with their expertise. The results are overlap, duplication and fissures in an environment that should be marked by coherence and compatibility.[33]

One reason why humanitarian organizations are lured into 'trying on' activities that relate only marginally to their core responsibilities is the need to fuel their increasingly voracious relief structures. Twenty years ago, there was little permanent, predictable or indeed professional in the relatively ad hoc humanitarian response system. This has changed significantly over the past decade as more and more organizations in the UN system, for example, have established separate cells, units, departments and bureaux devoted to humanitarian response. Such growth has been reflected in an increased number of humanitarian workers in an ever-growing number of disaster- and emergency-affected countries around the world.[34]

This burgeoning expansion in relief structures was not generated only by the increasing number of humanitarian crises. UN agencies and others became trapped in a circular dilemma. To demonstrate their ability to respond to humanitarian crises, agencies built up structures that were not always used: an analogy was fire departments, which need to maintain their capacities even if fires are relatively rare events. To ensure that they could maintain such structures, not only did agencies stretch their mandates as well as the very definitions

---

[33] An interesting analysis of the consequences of this sort of inter-agency dynamics can be found in K. Bezanson and F. Sagasti, 'Perceptions and perspectives on overlap and duplication in the United Nations development system specialised agencies', paper submitted to the UK Department for International Development in 2002.

[34] The *Report of the Independent Panel on the Safety and Security of UN Personnel in Iraq* (New York: United Nations, 20 Oct. 2003) notes that over the past decade the number of UN staff—development and political as well as humanitarian workers—has increased from 34 missions requiring 9,331 staff to 91 missions requiring 40,062 staff (p. 19).

of humanitarianism, they have also, on more than one occasion, prolonged emergency operations when objectively speaking the crisis itself was over.

All too often this competitive aid environment also distorts the very assessments of beneficiary needs and the international appeals for assistance to meet such assessed requirements. According to one recent and generally well-received study, the process by which needs are determined is not based upon a systematic approach to data collection and prioritization, but more normally is determined 'by the resource-mobilisation process'. As for efforts to monitor the impact of humanitarian interventions, the study concludes that accountability in this respect is determined more often than not by humanitarian organizations' concerns about meeting donors' reporting requirements than with the effects that aid has had upon those in need.[35]

While not dismissing the extraordinary efforts made and successes achieved over the past 20 years by a host of organizations and thousands of aid workers to protect and save lives, one nevertheless cannot ignore dangerous trends that threaten the very integrity of humanitarian action. If principles become fungible, if beneficiary needs are frequently determined by donors' interests and organizations' fixation on institutional survival, if aid becomes a witting or unwitting accomplice in political and military strategies, then the moral and practical significance of humanitarianism will have been lost. Here, since that effort 20 years ago to propose a role for the United Nations in humanitarian assistance, lies the new challenge: to what extent can the UN now and in the future restore integrity to the humanitarian commitment?

The United Nations and humanitarian futures

Two decades ago, when a growing number of advocates championed a stronger UN role to lead and support the efforts of the international humanitarian community, few appreciated how complex and competitive the aid environment in which the UN would have to operate was to become. Many, however, did recognize that there would be an increase in the scale and variety of disasters and emergencies, and many also appreciated that more and more actors were emerging on the humanitarian scene. Indeed, it was this awareness that led the General Assembly in December 1991 to give the UN an unprecedented leadership role in coordinating and responding to humanitarian crises.[36] The UN's humanitarian role was becoming a recognized 'fourth pillar' in the core activities of the organization, a status which its marginalized predecessor came nowhere near attaining.[37]

---

[35] James Darcy and Charles-Antoine Hofmann, *According to need: needs assessment and decision-making in the humanitarian sector* (London: Humanitarian Policy Group, Overseas Development Institute, July 2003), p. 14.

[36] GA Resolution 46/182, 'Strengthening of the coordination of humanitarian emergency assistance of the United Nations'.

[37] GA Resolution 2816 created the Office of the United Nations Disaster Relief Coordinator—after two years of deliberation—in December 1971. The UN agencies and programmes found UNDRO's coordination role very difficult to accept, and no matter how ambiguously its mandate was drafted to accommodate agency and programme concerns, UNDRO lacked any real capacity to provide substantial coordination and facilitation leadership.

The UN was now seen as having a central and unique role to play in providing leadership and coordinating the efforts of the international community to support disaster-affected countries, and it was urged to ensure the prompt and smooth delivery of relief assistance in ways consistent with humanitarian principles.

This initiative—when compared to the lukewarm initiatives of the past— had all the trappings associated with a major commitment by the member states. It would be supported through a separate UN department within the secretariat—the Department of Humanitarian Affairs—led by an under-secretary general who also bore the title Emergency Relief Coordinator. Its coordination function was to be facilitated through an Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) comprising representatives of the International Red Cross movement, the major consortia of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and of course the UN humanitarian organizations. The UN's humanitarian remit extended to crisis prevention and preparedness as well as to response, and a Central Emergency Revolving Fund (CERF) was created to facilitate operations that would otherwise be delayed for want of cash.

Yet despite all these structural innovations, despite the ostensible increase in professionalism, over the years the UN—along with most other actors in the humanitarian community—has never seemed prepared for the changes in the type and dimensions of the disasters and emergencies that have occurred. Those key organizations that should have been able to anticipate patterns of vulnerability and promote appropriate disaster and emergency responses have never seemed to be engaged in coherent and systematic strategic thinking. The very few humanitarian-related organizations that have dared to speculate about the future have been institutionally isolated.[38] The advocacy necessary to ensure equity for beneficiaries has all too often seemed to be subordinated to the operational necessity of responding to donors' concerns. The voice of the UN and its Emergency Relief Coordinator has been rarely heard to challenge the donor community to provide humanitarian assistance more equitably, more consistently and more predictably. Obsessed with criticisms about inter-agency rivalries within its own system, the UN has become absorbed with ensuring domestic harmony rather than developing the leadership and coordination roles proffered by the General Assembly. For understandable though unfortunate reasons, it has got caught up in the collusion in which humanitarian response became entangled with institutional survival—all in order to live to fight another day.

Almost perversely, this collusion has not been lost on the very community that in no small part created and perpetuated the complex and competitive aid

---

[38] The 1990s International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR) was an example of efforts to promote creative approaches to identifying and addressing hazard trends. However, interest in its work was diminished by the attention given during that decade to so-called 'complex emergencies'; and its value was also weakened by the fact that it worked outside the main institutional humanitarian stream of the UN. It would seem that with the forthcoming January 2005 Kobe Conference on Natural Hazards, the successor body to IDNDR —the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction—may capture the attention of an international community increasingly concerned with hazards such as global warming and climate change.

environment: the donors. Donors have been in many instances highly critical of the UN's assessment processes, often wary of its disaster and emergency predictions and sceptical about one of the UN's flagship innovations, the Consolidated Appeal Process (CAP). The CAP—designed to reflect the humanitarian needs of disaster- or emergency-affected peoples—has seemed to many little more than 'shopping lists' presented by the UN, to ensure the survival of the participating organizations as much as the affected.[39]

In the light of the growing complexities that face humanitarian organizations and the very real prospect that there will in the foreseeable future be more and greater emergencies and disasters, in terms of size, types and impacts, this is an unfortunate conclusion. It is also unfortunate in that the very integrity of a principle of practical, moral and universal importance has been placed in jeopardy.

This danger, and the malaise which surrounds humanitarianism in general, have not been lost on the humanitarian community as a whole, and certainly not on the UN's Secretary General in particular. In the aftermath of the bombing of the UN's headquarters in Baghdad on 19 August 2003, he recognized in a meeting of UN principals that humanitarianism might have to be protected conceptually and practically from environments that threaten its independence, neutrality and impartiality. In a context of wider UN reform, the organization's fourth pillar needs to make some hard choices about its role now and in the future. It needs to consider ways to reposition itself to have greater impact upon the wider humanitarian community. It needs to escape the operational duality that threatens its own integrity; and it must become more accountable to, and a more effective advocate for, those in need and those who seek to meet those needs.

Strategic repositioning

From a humanitarian perspective (and perhaps from other perspectives as well), the UN needs to reposition itself in at least four ways in order to be a more effective partner, leader and coordinator of humanitarian assistance. In the first place, it must move away from its operational role to a more normative role. Over the past few years it has become increasingly evident that the UN's role as coordinator and facilitator has been compromised by its efforts to be operational, to compete in that competitive aid environment for humanitarian programme and project funding. There is a surfeit of organizations that can deliver effectively. In fact, most UN agencies actually deliver humanitarian assistance through implementing partners such as NGOs. There are few

---

[39] This conclusion stems from a study sponsored on behalf of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance and funded by the US Agency for International Development: R. C. Kent et al., *Changes in humanitarian financing and the implications for the United Nations*, 11 Oct. 2003, available at www.reliefweb.com. The reflections noted in this paragraph are based upon over 200 interviews, which included extensive interviews with most major donor governments as well as representatives of the G77.

organizations that have the global credibility and capacity to assess, monitor and evaluate humanitarian needs and the impact that assistance might have.

The UN also needs to become far less self-absorbed and far more externally focused. One can argue that mechanisms such as the IASC have broadened the perspective of the UN's humanitarian system. Much more, however, needs to be done to earn the UN's humanitarian system recognition as a humanitarian partner as well as a leader and coordinator. The necessary adjustments are many, but for the purposes of this article the intention can be summarized in the observation that little the UN has done to date fosters the sense among the wider community of humanitarian actors that there is a 'common humanitarian endeavour'.[40]

Of crucial importance for the UN humanitarian system, and indeed for the humanitarian community at large, is a clearer and more closely defined conception of humanitarianism. It is difficult to promote and protect principles, to add legitimacy and veracity to assessments, evaluations and the range of accountability mechanisms so necessary to ensure humanitarian integrity, without a clear appreciation of what humanitarianism actually is. The UN needs therefore to change its all-embracing and hence ambiguous approach to humanitarianism, and lead the way to a more precise understanding of humanitarianism's limits and core elements. Efforts to gain greater clarity and conceptual as well as operational agreement could prove to be an important test of the UN's efforts to be more externally orientated and effective.

The UN also needs to position itself in a way that focuses greater attention upon the causes of humanitarian crises and less on the symptoms of such crises. In one sense, responding to those in need is—despite all the physical and psychological hazards and frustrations—the relatively easy part of the humanitarian challenge. More difficult is the persistent effort to eliminate or mitigate the sources of such crises. The UN, with its extensive network of agency offices in over 160 countries, has the infrastructure as well as the capacity for longer-term institutional commitments to focus on emergency and disaster risk reduction. The subject rarely grabs headlines, but needs to be seen as an imperative in an increasingly crisis-prone world.

To what end?

The chaos, the pandemonium-run-riot that marked the humanitarian response process two decades ago, has significantly lessened. In its place has emerged a system that has become paradoxically more professional but also less assured. The universality of its values and principles is perceived as uncertain and ambiguous. The 'client' affected by disaster and emergency is too often sacrificed to the interest of that other 'client', the donor. The voice of the Samaritan remains subdued, uncertain about the consequences of providing assistance.

---

[40] For specific initiatives that the UN could take to foster the sense of a 'common endeavour', see Kent et al., *Changes in humanitarian financing*, pp. 41–7.

Humanitarianism's evolution is now marked by a sense of malaise. While much good work continues to be done under its rubric, humanitarianism is increasingly rudderless.

In a period when complexity and rapid change make the need for greater transparency and accountability ever more important, the future of effective humanitarian action will also require greater transparency and accountability. To that extent, humanitarianism needs a 'standard-bearer' of principles, norms and standards that can guide the efforts of the wider humanitarian community in longer-term strategy as well as immediate response. There are few organizations in the humanitarian community as potentially well placed to undertake this role as the UN humanitarian system. It has the global reach and prestige to perform the role; the key issue is the extent to which the UN would be willing to make the difficult transition that would be required to assume it.

The standard-bearer model

When asked about the unique contribution the UN system can make as a humanitarian actor, a significant proportion of representative donor and G77 government representatives, as well as representatives of NGOs, point to five core components:

- upholding humanitarian principles;
- fostering and promoting norms and standards;
- coordinating and facilitating the efforts of humanitarian actors;
- assessing the needs of the affected; and
- monitoring and evaluating the impact of humanitarian operations.[41]

Few rate the UN's ability to deliver relief assistance as a particularly unique or important UN role, with perhaps the single exception of the World Food Programme.[42]

To fulfil these five core functions effectively, the United Nations will not only have to reposition itself in the ways suggested earlier, it will also have to make three fundamental decisions. In the first place, it will have to shed the constraints that arise from the UN's efforts at balancing its normative and operational roles. It needs to give full attention to what are generally perceived as the core components of its unique task, unencumbered by the moral obfuscations and compromises that arise from its dual role.

A second decision of considerable importance will be for the Secretary General, along with member states, to accept that the UN's humanitarian role

---

[41] Research for this study included an intensive interview programme that involved approximately 140 representatives of donor governments, governments of disaster- and emergency-prone countries, the Red Cross movement, non-governmental organizations, UN agencies, programmes and funds, as well as academics and analysts.

[42] The UN's World Food Programme is one of the world's largest transporters of food.

should wherever possible be compatible with, but not integrated into or subservient to, the UN's peacebuilding or conflict prevention roles. One would hope that effective humanitarian assistance would add calm to otherwise unstable situations, but that its principles and practice would not be sacrificed to the more judgemental objectives of the organization and the international community. This point would require structural adjustments within the UN system itself, to which the Secretary General has already alluded in the run-up to the UN's reform process.

Third, the UN's humanitarian system has to use the full capacity of its expert agencies and programmes to approaches humanitarian concerns more strategically. At present virtually no long-term consistent and coherent consideration is given to possible vulnerability trends and their implications. For example, while the interrelationships among poverty, global climate change, vulnerability and large-scale migratory patterns constitute a compelling trend, the UN as a system has done little to speculate on such futures. Yet to do so is important.

If rapid change and complexity are the hallmarks of this century, then the global standard-bearer should be in a position to speculate on ways in which humankind can anticipate and mitigate vulnerabilities. This is important as part of the essential advocacy role that a standard-bearer must play, and it is a role essential for an organization which, as a standard-bearer, purports to give guidance and leadership—unencumbered by perceived self-interest—to a wider community.

If one looks back over the two decades since this journal carried an article on the evolving humanitarian response of the international community, it is possible to identify one abiding difference between that period and the next 20 years. Large-scale human vulnerability is no longer a marginal issue randomly affecting Third World countries. With increasing rapidity it is becoming a global issue—having global impact, requiring global solutions, and necessitating global guidance and leadership.