Neutrality or Impartiality

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The construction of a new world order and the evolution of the United Nations after World War II have been guided by the principle: Never again! The Nazis' unprecedented crimes became a benchmark for an international community founded on certain basic values: opposition to genocide, the search for world peace, and respect for human rights. However, over the years, that determination has been replaced by pragmatism. The United Nations, rendered powerless as a result of superpower hostility, found its role restricted to the provision of development aid. The end of the Cold War raised again the idea of an international community based on shared values, administered by international institutions, and defended by democratic countries. In the face of an increasing number of crises, the UN is now called upon regularly to encourage negotiation, to interpose itself, and to assist people at risk. However, the window of opportunity that seemed to be opening with the end of the Cold War is rapidly closing, and the idea that the UN could be the guarantor of world peace is far from being realized. The honeymoon period and the dreams of a "new world order" seem to be over. The major powers have made it clear that they will neither sanction the UN to be the world's police force nor take on the role themselves, not even the United States.

Fifty years after the creation of the UN and five years after the end of the Cold War, the international community showed its true colors: in Rwanda, it failed to react to the first indisputable genocide since that perpetrated against the Jews; in former Yugoslavia, it failed to react to the return of war and "ethnic cleansing" at the heart of Europe. Under the pretense of neutrality, its only response was humanitarian aid.

The Shortcomings of the "New Humanitarianism"

There has been an unprecedented enthusiasm for humanitarian work throughout the world during recent years, yet it is far from certain that this is always in the victims' best interests. The end of the Cold War ushered in a "new humanitarianism," or "emergency ethic," that has become increasingly prevalent. There was an end to the practice of judging individual victims from an ideological perspective, seen as "good" or "bad," depending on which sphere of influence they were from (communist or noncommunist). Now, they became simply fellow human beings deserving of compassion. However, we were too quick to forget that Cold War values were also combined with

realpolitik and that it was moral outrage converted into action that, above all, helped to counter totalitarian thinking. From Afghanistan to Angola, from Nicaragua to Cambodia, no one major Western power used humanitarian aid as its sole weapon against the Soviets, the Cubans, or the Vietnamese: political or military interventions were key components in a strategy of containment in which humanitarian aid played only a minor role.

However, the examples of Bosnia and Rwanda demonstrated that this "new humanitarianism" can rebound on those it is intended to help. These fellow human beings, fighting to defend values we share, have become "victims" to be assessed in terms of their immediate suffering; hungry mouths to feed, if they survive. Protesting that it was essential to remain neutral, Europe, and later the UN, provided humanitarian aid as their only real response to Serb aggression in Bosnia; the same response, based on the same claim to neutrality, was proffered in Rwanda—when the genocide was over and it was too late to influence the situation. Here the massive deployment of aid to the huge number of refugees became the focus of the world's attention, disguising the culpable failure of the international community to come to the assistance of the Tutsi people. In Bosnia humanitarian aid, elevated to the status of official policy, encouraged and fostered aggression while convincing public opinion to accept both the *fait accompli* by the stronger party and an "ethnic" reading of the conflict.

A Brief History of Neutrality

From a humanitarian point of view, the principle of neutrality cannot be separated form the history of the Red Cross. The movement was founded by Henry Dunant in 1863, in reaction to his horror at the slaughter he witnessed at the Battle of Solferino.[1] This led him to define the principle enshrined in the first Geneva Convention for the protection of wounded soldiers and to set up the neutral Red Cross agency to care for them. Subsequent Conventions extended this neutrality to other noncombatants: civilians and prisoners of war. The almost universally acknowledged Geneva Conventions remain the cornerstone of the Red Cross, a movement that has seen an enormous expansion in membership over the years. The Geneva Conventions represent a fundamental stage in the history of humanitarian action, first, because they enshrine the principle of neutrality applied to noncombatants, and second, because of the importance of the International Committee of the Red Cross, universally recognized for its total respect for the principles of neutrality and impartiality.

Dunant did not invent the concept of neutrality. Indeed, since the earliest times there have been many examples of neutral behavior during conflicts and of bilateral agreements aimed at respecting the wounded, civilians, and prisoners. But it was Dunant who had the genius to see that the principle enshrined in a convention would be universally respected. His wish has been realized; the four

Conventions now in force, signed in 1949, have now been ratified by almost every country in existence today. Thanks to Dunant, the Red Cross is an agency backed by international law, to which it can refer when calling on warring parties to respect a certain number of basic rules in regard to the treatment of the wounded, both prisoners and civil populations.

However, despite this undeniable progress, the Red Cross principle of neutrality was soon brought into question and the difficulties that it presents have not been resolved. First, the principle of neutrality certainly could be applied to pitched battles between the armies of European countries that shared much of the same ideology. But it was rendered null and void when, in the name of civilization, the white man attacked "barbarians." Then humanitarian law ceased to apply. The British, for example, after the battle of Omdurman, in the Sudan, did nothing to assist fifteen thousand wounded enemy soldiers. Yet this was 1898, thirty years after Britain had signed the first Geneva Convention.[2] The principle of neutrality was conceived with a civil war in mind, or a war of two opposing comparable forces. What relevance did it have in a war of aggression or in a case of systematic genocide such as that perpetrated by the Young Turks against the Armenians? Chateaubriand, the French writer, gives the answer: "Such a neutrality is derisory for it works against the weaker party and plays into the hands of the stronger party. It would be better to join forces with the oppressors against the oppressed for at least that would avoid adding hypocrisy to injustice."

Second, although the Red Cross is a private institution, it has always depended on national governments to enforce respect for humanitarian law. In order to avoid embarrassing Convention signatories, it has constrained itself to the discrete silence that is an essential part of the Red Cross image. In fact, over several decades the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) has limited itself to transmitting protests from one party to another during a conflict without ever commenting on their validity. Meanwhile, many national Red Cross organizations, far from being apolitical or neutral, seem to have taken on the role of faithful government helpers.

The Red Cross grew up at the end of the nineteenth century, in a period of liberal ideas. Lenin and, to a greater extent, Hitler confronted it with regimes that were fundamentally opposed to the values on which it is founded. Forced to decide between respect for humanitarian principles and the universality of the movement, the Red Cross has always chosen the second alternative, persuaded—and not without reason—that only thus could it continue to play the role of a neutral intermediary in conflicts. The Red Cross has never broken off relations with a country's government—not with Mussolini, not with Lenin, and not with Nazi Germany, not even when Jews were expelled from the German Red Cross.

Although this was not clearly understood at the time, it was when faced with the "Final Solution" that the limits of humanitarian action really showed themselves. The Red Cross, as well as the Allies and the Vatican, knew about the terrible reality of the Nazi extermination camps. And today it is still reproached for never denouncing them and keeping silent about the largest-scale genocide in the twentieth century. Worse still, despite everything, the Red Cross tried to assist those held in the death camps by handing over aid packages for them, without any control whatsoever, to the German authorities. No matter the reasons the Red Cross presents as justification for its silence, the stance it took represents a black page in the history of the movement.[3] One result has been that the role played by the ICRC in other domains (prisoners of war, tracking down and reuniting family members, and so on) has received less attention than it deserves. Neutrality might have been an issue in regard to the German and Allied armies, but how could it be evoked in the face of the Nazi extermination camps? Organizations that aim to be "*sans frontières*" ("without borders") were founded on lessons learned from that experience. The inhuman must not be humanized; it must be denounced and it must be fought against. Such organizations consider that they have a dual role to play: they provide aid to victims in the field, but they also speak out as witnesses to intolerable events.

The Biafra crisis was another important stage in the evolution of the humanitarian movement. On one hand, it again underlined the limits of the Red Cross's "neutral" approach. It was unable to achieve an agreement between the two parties in order to allow food to get through to the Biafran enclave. It was a group of churches that finally decided to disregard the objections of the Nigerian government and the Red Cross and launched an air bridge to the encircled Biafran secessionists.[4] The churches thus invented the modern concept of humanitarian intervention, while making a significant breach in the principle of sovereignty that has so often been used as an excuse for nonintervention, and that is still invoked today.

The stance taken by the Western powers during the Biafran crisis foreshadowed the treatment of the Bosnian crisis, when all the major powers played the humanitarian card without ever looking for a political solution. France, for example, openly encouraged Biafra to secede, but it neither recognized the secessionist government nor provided arms to allow it to stand against Lagos. Unfortunately, Biafra's leaders soon learned that pictures of their starving children were the best weapons for ensuring an international response and famine became inseparable from the conflict itself.[5] When the time came to sum up, it was clear that the amount of humanitarian aid provided was

always ridiculously small in comparison with the scale of the tragedy, although sufficient to allow the great powers to maintain the illusion of an international commitment. The world was convinced that it had flown to the rescue of Biafra: television images were proving more convincing than reality.

The guerilla-style conflicts of the 1980s are an even clearer illustration of the limits to neutrality. The Red Cross and UN agencies, refused access to guerilla zones, had to chose between maintaining a presence that provided support exclusively to the government side or withdrawing completely. "*Sans frontières*" organizations were much better suited to provide assistance in that period of guerilla wars. They could intervene clandestinely in most of these conflicts via neighboring countries, in defiance of international law and the niceties of national sovereignty. Unlike the Red Cross, this type of organization does not rely on humanitarian law but on the backing of public opinion aroused by witness accounts of massacres and aggression. Most of the larger-scale conflicts of the 1980s were indirect consequences of the growing influence of the USSR and her allies in developing countries, which became the battlefields where the Cold War was fought by proxy. As a result, consciously or unconsciously, humanitarian aid became a powerful instrument in the anti-Soviet struggle throughout the world as more than 90 percent of refugees during this period were fleeing from "progressive" regimes allied to the USSR. Humanitarian assistance was provided both to populations that could only be reached by the clandestine intervention of "*sans frontières*" organizations, and to those in refugee camps set up on the borders of neighboring countries, which also served as sanctuaries for the guerillas. It was at this time that the UN High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR), working in such refugee camps, developed into one of the most important agencies in the aid system.

If it was during the 1980s that the serious flaws in the concept of humanitarian neutrality became very apparent, it was in former Yugoslavia and in Rwanda that they came to be seen at their most perverse.

Bosnia: The Placebo Effect

The war that was fought in Bosnia for over three years claimed two hundred thousand victims, most of them civilian, and turned four million people into refugees and displaced persons. This conflict, the first on European soil since 1945, began in April 1992, the day the Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina was recognized by the European Community (EC) and the United States. When Bosnian Serb forces, with the support of the Yugoslav federal army, quickly seized almost 70

percent of the new republic's territory, the Western powers appeared to acquiesce in this *fait accompli*, confining their response to reopening Sarajevo airport and deploying Blue Helmets in an attempt to help those most in need.

Although newspaper editorials had forecast war in Bosnia month before it finally broke out, there were no attempts to try to prevent it. The populations of Bosnia's towns and villages forced to leave their homes were not only the principle victims of the combat, but also the target of the whole pitiless conflict. Europe, reduced to the role of a charitable though powerless witness, raised no obstacle to ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, which was at times carried out under "humanitarian protection."

In fact, in a war being waged with the ultimate aim of excluding and expelling a large part of the population, humanitarian workers faced an impossible dilemma. There were two choices. Either they assisted people to evacuate so that they could be protected, which inevitably helped to achieve the objectives of ethnic cleansing, or they refused to ally themselves with such inhumane acts and left people to endure even more terrible suffering. The major preoccupation was no longer to provide material assistance but to protect the people, which has never been in the mandate of humanitarian organizations, but should have been included in that of the Blue Helmets. Thus, humanitarian action was reduced to feeding the mass of refugees. UNHCR representatives, delegated by the UN and EC to coordinate aid in the former Yugoslavia, had to decide countless times during the conflict which as the lesser of two such evils. Trying to protect refugees without having the power to prevent them from becoming refugees in the first place not only undermines humanitarian principles but actually aggravates the problem.

Paradoxically, humanitarianism, while siding with the victims, also became an arm of the aggressors. The Serbian army quickly realized the advantages to be gained from opening up "corridors of ethnic cleansing" for those they were expelling and bringing them to the "humanitarian front line." Indeed, on several occasions, the UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR) directly contributed to the enforcement of ethnic cleansing by "helping" in the exchange of population. In some ways, the humanitarian effort unintentionally served to help achieve Serbian military objectives because the ethnic cleansers were only too happy to hand over responsibility for the victims of their crimes to the international community.

The distribution of aid was subject to the acquiescence of the Serbs who opened and closed the tap to the aid pipeline as and when it suited them, but never without deducting a substantial levy. For more than a year, the encircled towns and villages of eastern Bosnia received no aid at all as UNPROFOR convoys never used force to get through.

Humanitarian arguments are used to explain the failure of governments to make clear strategic decisions. But the real question is whether humanitarian work should have been entrusted to UN troops in the first place. When peacekeepers are sent into the middle of a way, they may be expected to use their weapons. If relief work is impeded by violence, then the obvious role of armed UN troops is to protect relief convoys and oppose the people who are obstructing them. Unlike Somalia, in Bosnia the humanitarian problems were not the result of a general breakdown of order but of Serbian aggression. If force had any role to play in relieving human suffering in Bosnia, it should have been used to protect the population against the armed thugs who were massacring, raping, looting, and driving away people from their homes. But that was never the intention.

Many NGOs wish governments would leave humanitarian work alone and concentrate on the roles proper to them, which are political and military. In Bosnia humanitarian problems had political causes that governments failed to acknowledge and deal with. UNPROFOR was used in a humanitarian role as the alibi for the international community's disastrous cop-out, making it appear something was being done while failing miserably to react in the politico-military sphere, the only arena for resolving the root causes.

From Total War to Total Humanitarianism

World War II taught Western democracies that no spoon is long enough for supping with the devil. "Never again!" cried Europe in unison, and a whole generation grew up under the influence of this, rejecting all ideas of racial purity and territorial ambition. But this belief system was shattered the first time that Europe was again confronted from within by a racist policy based on religion and ethnic group. From that moment, history was forgotten and all the certainties and idealism flew out of the window; the countries of Europe started to behave as if they had learned nothing. Admittedly, there seemed only a small risk of the conflict spreading and becoming more generalized. Admittedly, Milosevic, or Karadzic, is not Hitler. Nevertheless, the Bosnian disaster flouted all the ideals on which the European democracies were founded in the aftermath of World War II, and no real attempt was made to defend them.

It was Winston Churchill who developed the concept of a "total warfare against Nazism, enforcing land, sea, and air blockades that even prevented food getting through to Occupied Europe. The deterioration in health that inevitable resulted was seen as a weapon in this form of total war where politics forced humanitarianism off the stage. Although this concept posed a dilemma from a humanitarian point of view, the Allies were convinced that it was justifiable. In Bosnia, we passed from one extreme to the other, from the concept of "total war" to that of "total humanitarianism";

people were provided with food but not protection, and no real political pressure was put on the aggressor. The logic of humanitarianism prevailed over the logic of a politics that did not dare exercise its prerogatives for fear of endangering humanitarian efforts in the field. The question of what would have been the best course of action from the victims' point of view was made totally subordinate to that of how the international community could avoid involving itself in military intervention. Certainly food got through to Sarajevo most of the time and the impressive humanitarian effort saved the life of tens of thousands of people throughout the area. Certainly the presence of the Blue Helmets on the group had a moderating effect. But what about Vukovar, Gorazde, and Srebrenica? Should we really be congratulating ourselves that fifty years after the creation of the UN we were unable to stop that kind of slaughter?

Despite the sop it offered to European public opinion, in the short term, humanitarianism achieved little. In the longer term, it served as an alibi for political impotence. Finally, in September 1995, under strong pressure from an American government that finally decided to involve itself more actively, air strikes were directed at Serb military targets and the Dayton Agreement led to the establishment of a NATO-led international task. But it was all too late to avoid the inevitable: the separation of Bosnia into separate, ethnically based ministates that may yet divide even further. When they were confronted once again with Milosevic's intransigence, this time in Kosovo, Europe and the United States utilized the hard lessons learned from Bosnia.

Rwanda: From Indifference to Compassion

What took place in Rwanda between April and July 1994 was a genocide: and exceptional event in twentieth-century history. The term was first coined in 1944 by Raphael Lemkin[6] and is the basis of the UN General Assembly's convention committing member countries to punish and prevent genocide.[7] This convention, passed in 1949, defines genocide very specifically as those "acts committed with intent to destroy a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group." By applying it too generally, this specific meaning has been so watered down, taken out of context, and misused by those seeking to draw attention to other horrors that the real intention behind this particular crime has been lost and the word genocide has become synonymous with any act of mass murder. In fact, only three instances of mass slaughter the twentieth century can correctly be called genocide: the massacres of Armenians under the Ottoman Empire in 1915 and 1916, the extermination of the Jews and Gypsies under the Nazis, and the 1994 slaughter of almost 1 million Tutsis by Hutu militias in Rwanda.[8]

When the massacres first began in Kigali, the world turned its back and the UN decided to pull out its main body of Blue Helmets. Yet the death toll was increasing daily, and within four weeks it was estimated that almost a million people had been killed. But the genocide could have been stopped early on if two moves had been made. The UN could have used its troops to protect the churches, hospitals, schools, and other places where Tutsis were desperately seeking refuge, and the UN could have clearly recognized the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) as the legitimate government of Rwanda and broken off relations with the government that initiated the genocide. Such measures would have changes the course of Rwanda's history, but they were not implemented. Again, the Security Council of the United Nations decided to remain neutral and not to take sides with the RPF.

By the end of June 1994 the crises in Rwanda was seen exclusively as a humanitarian catastrophe affecting hundreds of thousands of (Hutu) refugees, arousing international compassion, and completely distracting attentions from the genocide that had more or less run its course because there were no more (Tutsi) victims available for slaughter. As the RPF troops advances, the architects and instigators of the genocide organized a mass exodus of the Hutu population into rapidly erected refugee camps in Goma (Zaire) and Tanzania, or into the French-controlled security zone within Rwanda. The former government planned this deliberately so they could claim that the RPF might have won the land, but not its people.

Humanitarian aid poured into the camps, fueled by the generosity of a public moved by television pictures of cholera victims in Goma. However, although such aid may well be intended and based on sound principles, as had already been pointed out, it can never be totally neutral. In this case, as so often elsewhere, it represented almost the only source of food, equipment, and jobs in the camps and thus became a major stake in the power struggle for control over the refugees. Humanitarian workers were continually confronted with the same problem: how to aid the victims without getting caught up in the power game being played by their oppressors, or in this case militias who were acting as the strong arm of the politicians in the camps.

The problem was (is) that the refugees settled commune by commune in the camps under the direction of the local leaders who had accompanied them. But this situation posed a major ethical problem inasmuch as these leaders, who were also implicated in the genocide, retained their authority over the refugees and passed on instructions to them from the former government-in-exile. It is with such people that the aid agency had to collaborate.

It is useful to draw a parallel here with the way in which the Khmer Rouge were able to gain power over Cambodian refugees by manipulating humanitarian aid. At the beginning of 1979 the Khmer Rouge, who were responsible for the massacre of a million of their fellow Cambodians, fled

before the advancing Vietnamese army. Using force and propaganda, they took with them hundreds of thousands of civilians into refugee camps in the frontier area with Thailand, where they experienced dreadful famine. The international community mobilized, although more slowly than would happen today, and thousands of lives were saved. But the humanitarian effort also fed the Khmer Rouge and inadvertently helped them to establish their control over the refugee population, enabling them to continue the conflict for a further decade.

It is clear that the international relief effort in Rwanda created a similar vicious circle, fed by aid that could at worst grow into a future conflict and at best ensures that the Hutu refugees remain in the camps. This is the result of treating the Rwandan crisis as a purely humanitarian matter when it was first and foremost a political issue. Other measures could have been taken, for example, early deployment of human rights observers in Rwanda, increasing the amount of aid distributed directly though Kigali, reestablishing the justice system as quickly as possible, and organizing a Nuremberg-style trial for the main instigators of the genocide. If the right conditions had been provided, many humanitarian organizations were convinced that most of the refugees would have returned home. Instead, it is very likely that the world will have to assist two million refugees for a period that could stretch into years, war may well break out again, and further aid will be required for future victims. Political inaction thus risks a much stronger negative effect on the situation than the positive effects of the outpouring of solidarity that swept the world in 1994.

Humanitarian action provided a way of responding to the crisis while continuing conveniently to overlook the fact that a genocide had taken place, until the situation had evolved to the point where it could be ignored completely. In a world where humanitarian aid seems almost the only international response to a crisis, aid that neither can nor will make a distinction between different categories of victim, all catastrophes are treated alike and reduced to their lowest common denominator—compassion on the part of the onlooker. Certainly all victims merit our care and consideration, whether they be Tutsis suffering as a result of genocide or their murderers forced to become refugees and struck by cholera. Humanitarian action is at the service of all victims: it seeks to care for and feed them and does not take sides. But goodwill on its own is not enough and humanitarian aid is useless if it is not accompanied by political action and efforts to achieve justice.

Humanitarian action transforms any dramatic event—crime, epidemics, natural disasters—into catastrophes for which it seems that nobody is every given the blame. Humanitarianism also masks the obligation and the necessity to intervene in other ways and acts as a defense against any possible future accusation of nonassistance to persons in danger. There are only a handful of individuals who might risk speaking out in the middle of a catastrophe, when donations are rolling in, to point out

that giving food and drink to people who have lost everything in the wake of horrendous massacres is only the least that can be done. Unfortunately, any kind of debate along these lines is usually pursued when it is too late to be anything other than theoretical. It only can be usefully carried on while a crisis is occurring and some practical resolutions can be reached. Leave it too long and those who should be accused of mass murder have succeeded in rehabilitating themselves politically and become parties to the debate.

In short, confronted with the first unquestionable genocide since the Nazi Holocaust, the world reacted with indifference. It was the sight of hundreds of thousands of refugees pouring out of Rwanda and the subsequent cholera epidemic that aroused compassion and led to a purely humanitarian intervention. This was a convenient cover-up for nonintervention at the political or military level and allowed Western governments to look good because they appeared to be doing something. The refusal of the UN and the principle countries that should have been involved to take a firm stand against the former criminal regime in Rwanda allowed them to remain neutral in the face of the planned extermination of a population. But the concept of neutrality has no sense when genocide is being carried out.

The Limits of Humanitarian Action

Humanitarian action has acquired a monopoly on morality and international action in ongoing wars of a local nature. But if it is not coupled with political action and justice, it is doomed to failure: it can work as a palliative, not as a panacea. Even worse, when held up to the limelight by the media for its work during a major crisis, it becomes little more than a plaything of international politics, a conscience-saving gimmick. There is an enormous disparity today between the principles and values proclaimed by our democratic societies on the one hand, and the measures taken to defend them on the other. In summary, although we may take great satisfaction in commemorating past victories over tyranny, the historical lesson was not sufficiently well absorbed to move us into action against the first indisputable genocide since World War II in Rwanda or the return of ethnic cleansing to the heart of Europe.

For the international community to claim neutrality is a shaky defense of inaction. To be neutral is defined in the dictionary as “not assisting either party in the case of war between other states.”[9] The Red Cross is more specific: “In order to maintain the confidence of all parties, the Red Cross withholds from taking sides in hostilities and never takes sides in political, racial, religious or philosophical controversies.” This is a radical interpretation of neutrality that suits the very specific mandate of the Red Cross (especially in regard to prisoners of war). However, if applied generally by

the international community, NGOs, the UN, and individual states, there may be disastrous consequences for populations in danger.

A claim of neutrality makes no sense at all in the case of genocide, where neutrality is reduced to the weakest possible definition of "indifference" and succeeds only in removing every distinction between the victims and those who victimize them. A number of humanitarian organizations have founded a very comfortable refuge in neutrality on the intellectual level, which provides them with an excuse not to question the sense or the consequences of humanitarian action. Indeed, neutrality can become a refuge large enough to accept inhuman policies.

Whether working at the heart of conflicts, the course of which they influence, or whether faced with governments and totalitarian parties that are void of any scruple, humanitarian organizations are always faced with two recurring and related questions in the long term: first, to use the expression of William Shawcross, "how to feed the victims without also providing aid to their tormentors,"[10] and second, how to avoid humanitarian aid involuntarily having a negative effect on the victims instead of improving their situation. These questions often take on sharper meaning in extreme crisis situations. It is self-evident that humanitarian action saves human lives. But it also risks a series of induced and secondary consequences that are extremely important. In Somalia, food and other resources provided by the humanitarian organizations help keep the conflict alive because gangs of armed bandits also benefit from it. Such aid often helps to prolong and modify the course of a conflict in other ways, because humanitarian organizations require authorization from the warring parties in order to have access to victims and this renders them vulnerable to blackmail, manipulation, and all sorts of other pressures.

Alternative Reactions

Diagnosis

A doctor's duty toward a sick patient is first to establish a diagnosis before undertaking a treatment, and this principle should be applied just as systematically by the international community when faced with a crisis situation. We have too often seen a cure attempted before any serious analysis of the situation has been carried out. This results in a rash and unreflective prescribing of the type that largely explains the failures in international responses to Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia. Intervention should be a question of timely reaction motivated by political rather than humanitarian

intentions. When the UN has to deal with a deadly conflict, it should analyze what is at stake for the parties involved, particularly the civilian population, and then base its response on a clear distinction between two kinds of conflict.

On the one hand, there may be a clear-cut, unilateral aggression by a very much stronger party against another. In such cases, the UN cannot remain neutral. It must stand with the victims and the "weaker side" against the aggressor, and military intervention should at least be seriously considered. However, given that this might entail a risk of involvement over a long period, urgent consideration should also be given to other possible actions, including the use of diplomatic or economic sanctions. What is important is that the international community show a clear signal that it will no longer stand by helplessly in the face of massacres and the slaughter of civilians.

In Bosnia, during the spring and summer of 1992, a choice had to be made between allowing Serbia's Milosevic and Karadzic to seize territory and practice ethnic cleansing and supporting the multinational government led by Bosnia's President Izetbegovic. The second alternative was the only one worthy of honest consideration. In Rwanda, as soon as it became obvious that Habyarimana's regime and his armed forces were conducting a genocide, the only morally responsible choice was to support the forces of the RPF, who could have halted the genocide. In cases such as these, it should be clear which is the right choice to make.

On the other hand, the conflict may take the form of a general breakdown in civil order with no clear-cut issues, no central authority in command, and an increasing number of warring factions and militias out of control. This would describe the situations in Somalia. The UN must recognize that very little can be done to prevent or stop this kind of conflict without force, and that its role is to avoid the ultimate collapse of the state and the prolonged suffering of civilians. Every diplomatic measure must be considered, and the earlier the better; the art of preventive diplomacy should be practiced far more often. Humanitarian assistance must, of course, be maintained impartially throughout the course of this type of conflict.

Most crises are a complex mixture of both models and there are some conflicts that do not fit neatly into either description; therefore, diagnosis is even more essential. Other political considerations complicate the situation even more. It is clear that it is not possible to react in the same way to Russia's intervention in Chechnya as to, for example, an attack on Belize by Guatemala. The principal point that must be recognized is that the international community and the UN failed in Rwanda and Bosnia because of a refusal to define and categorize the crises before responding to them.

Impartiality

"Neutrality" is a highly problematic concept. By the official Red Cross definition, "it means not taking sides—military or ideological—in hostilities or engaging at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature." This is a radical definition. This definition presumes that no distinction is made between, for example, a racist authoritarian regime and democratic forces, between victims and their executioners. It also presumes that the crimes committed cannot be qualified because the parties to a conflict will never agree on the meaning of terms such as genocide or crimes against humanity. This definition of neutrality seems dangerous as it takes no account of the necessary distinction between criminal and other politically motivated actions, or the level of gravity of the acts committed.

There is an alternative to neutrality that does not pose these kinds of problems and that is impartiality. Whereas neutrality focuses on the warring parties, impartiality focuses on the victims as individuals. In this sense, impartiality means making no distinction between the victims with regard to race, ethnic origin, political, philosophical, religious, or other beliefs. In humanitarian terms, it primarily means to stress equality of all those who are in distress, with only priority given based on the acuteness of the need for help. It does not mean reserving judgment of a political nature, but rather recognizing the validity and rights of an individual in distress. Were this concept to be emphasized by the international community and its official bodies (the UN and so on) in situations of deadly conflict, the rights of the victims would pass before that of any such ambiguous concept or excuse of neutrality of sovereignty. There would then be greater freedom to react in a variety of ways, and countries could no longer refuse to do more than provide an exclusively humanitarian response.

Justice

It is essential that those responsible for formulating, instigating, and carrying out genocide, crimes against humanity, or ethnic cleaning be brought to trial. Justice is not only a moral imperative but also a political necessity: Ensuring that justice is seen to be done will discourage others from carrying out further mass crimes. Justice is necessary not only for the victims, but also for international order. There is an enormous potential in the world today for crises with an ethnic dimension. The greatest threat to society internationally is the rebirth of racist ideologies, with their racial hierarchies that reject and exclude all others. Only the threat of punishment for mass murder

will make leaders think twice before playing the ethnic card to tighten their slacking grip on power. Justice must play a more important role in international relations and could become a powerful instrument of preventive diplomacy.

Conclusion

Humanitarian action sometimes shows humanity at its most noble, providing assistance to victims, fellow human beings trying to regain control over their own destiny. When the international community, supposedly still acting in the name of humanity, reduces human beings to the status of mere biological organisms by providing food in the place of the military and political support they so desperately need and ask for,[11] then it must stand accused of complicity in a massive crime against humanity: nonassistance to people in danger. It must be states one more time that passing food through the window when nothing is being done to get the assassin out of the house is not a humanitarian act. When hostages are taken, the first priority is to overcome the hostage takers, not to feed the hostages while they are eliminated one by one.

To sum up, humanitarian problems are always the result of some more profound problem and cannot be solved by humanitarian means alone. In cases of aggression, crimes against humanity, and genocide, the international community can no longer invoke neutrality and be satisfied with an exclusively humanitarian approach, rendering it an accomplice to the most criminal regimes. If humanitarian assistance is to be worthy of its name, it must work in parallel with efforts to meet the demands of justice and respect for human rights.