



SPECIAL REPORT

2301 Constitution Ave., NW • Washington, DC 20037 • 202.457.1700 • fax 202.429.6063

ABOUT THE REPORT

The militarization and politicization of humanitarian efforts have led to diminishing effectiveness on the ground and greater dangers for humanitarian workers, leaving humanitarian action in a state of crisis. Without a vigorous restatement of the principles of humanitarianism and a concerted effort by the international community to address the causes of this crisis, humanitarian action will, as this report concludes, progressively become a tool selectively used by the powerful and possibly fail in its global mission of protecting and restoring the dignity of human life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Søren Jessen-Petersen is a former assistant high commissioner for refugees in the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and UN special representative for Kosovo. He has served UNHCR in Africa and the Balkans as well as at its headquarters in Geneva and New York. He is currently teaching migration and security at the School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University, and at the School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University. He was a Jennings Randolph guest scholar at the United States Institute of Peace from November 2006 to June 2009.

© 2011 by the United States Institute of Peace.
All rights reserved.

SPECIAL REPORT 273

JUNE 2011

CONTENTS

Introduction	2
Causes of the Crisis	3
Conclusions and Recommendations	8

Søren Jessen-Petersen

Humanitarianism in Crisis

Summary

- With the end of the Cold War, internal conflicts targeting civilian populations proliferated. As international political institutions struggled to figure out how to deal with these conflicts, humanitarian action often became a substitute for decisive political action or, more worryingly, was subsumed under a political and military agenda.
- The increasing militarization and politicization of humanitarian efforts have led to growing ineffectiveness of humanitarian action on the ground and greater dangers for humanitarian workers. Without a vigorous restatement of the principles of humanitarianism, humanitarian action will remain in a state of crisis and continue to be a selective tool for the powerful and hence fail in its global mission of protecting and restoring the dignity of human life.
- There are six main causes of the humanitarian crisis, which first began to manifest itself in the former Yugoslavia and Kosovo and later in Afghanistan and Iraq. These causes are principally structural and operational in nature.
- The new post-Cold War types of conflict have thrown humanitarian workers and organizations into the middle of conflicts, with a constant risk of being perceived as taking sides.
- Many humanitarian agencies and their donors too easily and uncritically accept the conditions for involvement set by the military in those increasingly frequent operations where security forces are part of the integrated response to a crisis. This problem is aggravated by the fact that key military forces often come from the countries that are also donors to the humanitarian organizations.
- As recent events in the Arab world demonstrate, there can be no stability if human security is not protected. The main protection responsibility is the legal protection of the displaced and refugees. Today, humanitarian staff is often obliged to provide physical protection and assistance in the midst of conflict zones.
- There are far too many humanitarian organizations present in new and major emergencies. For example, in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, there were more than nine hundred international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) on the ground.

ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

The United States Institute of Peace is an independent, nonpartisan institution established and funded by Congress. Its goals are to help prevent and resolve violent conflicts, promote postconflict peacebuilding, and increase conflict management tools, capacity, and intellectual capital worldwide. The Institute does this by empowering others with knowledge, skills, and resources, as well as by its direct involvement in conflict zones around the globe.

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

J. Robinson West (Chair), Chairman, PFC Energy, Washington, D.C. • **George E. Moose** (Vice Chairman), Adjunct Professor of Practice, The George Washington University, Washington, D.C. • **Anne H. Cahn**, Former Scholar in Residence, American University, Washington, D.C. • **Chester A. Crocker**, James R. Schlesinger Professor of Strategic Studies, School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C. • **Kerry Kennedy**, President, Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights, Washington, D.C. • **Ikram U. Khan**, President, Quality Care Consultants, LLC, Las Vegas, NV • **Stephen D. Krasner**, Graham H. Stuart Professor of International Relations at Stanford University • **Jeremy A. Rabkin**, Professor of Law, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA • **Judy Van Rest**, Executive Vice President, International Republican Institute, Washington, D.C. • **Nancy Zirkin**, Executive Vice President, Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, Washington, D.C.

MEMBERS EX OFFICIO

Michael H. Posner, Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor • **James N. Miller**, Principal Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy • **Ann E. Rondeau**, Vice Admiral, U.S. Navy; President, National Defense University • **Richard H. Solomon**, President, United States Institute of Peace (nonvoting)

The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Institute of Peace, which does not advocate specific policy positions.

To request permission to photocopy or reprint materials, e-mail: permissions@usip.org

- Although there has been considerable improvement in the coordination among humanitarian agencies, a continued lack of coherence among political, security, development, humanitarian, and human rights agencies continues to pose serious problems.
- In too many operations, the presence of a noticeable number of humanitarian NGOs from the North and the West give weight to the perception in many countries in the South that humanitarian operations are an integral part of a political strategy to maintain and increase the power and dominance of the North and West.
- The challenges confronting humanitarian action have no easy answers. To begin to address the crisis, the international community should pay more attention to conflict prevention to minimize human costs and to mitigate the need for humanitarian action. Militaries should be trained in how to respect humanitarian principles in their operations, and humanitarian organizations should be proactive in maintaining impartiality and independence of action.

Introduction

With the end of the Cold War, internal conflicts proliferated as hitherto oppressed people rose up against totalitarian regimes. As international political institutions struggled to figure out how to deal with the new type of conflicts, humanitarian action often became a substitute for decisive political action or, more worryingly, was subsumed under a political and military agenda, including the so-called war on terror.

Operations in the former Yugoslavia (early 1990s), Kosovo (1999), Afghanistan (2001), and Iraq (2003) not only tested the principles of humanitarian action but also jeopardized its integrity. In all these operations the distinction between humanitarian and military operations became blurred, and thus the principles of independence, impartiality, and neutrality underlying the latter have become increasingly confused, diluted, and eventually disregarded. The lack of clear political objectives (former Yugoslavia), the lack of an international mandate covering the military intervention (Kosovo and Iraq), and operations that explicitly targeted one side of the conflict (Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq) compounded the problem.

Collectively, these operations have left humanitarian action in a state of crisis. The militarization and politicization of humanitarian efforts have led to growing ineffectiveness on the ground and greater dangers for humanitarian workers. Without a vigorous restatement of the principles of humanitarianism, humanitarian action will remain in a state of crisis and continue to be a tool used selectively by the powerful and might fail in its global mission of protecting and restoring the dignity of human life.

The crisis in humanitarian action comes at the worst possible time. For the foreseeable future, there is no doubt that conflicts, disasters, and displacement will pose humanitarian challenges of levels and dimensions as never before and will require humanitarian support. The growing spread and effectiveness of the social media will put potent means at the disposal of societies' marginalized people and pose mounting challenges to regimes prioritizing state security to the detriment of human security. The world faces—indeed, is already facing—natural disasters of unprecedented dimensions and complexities. Conflicts will proliferate as competition grows between ethnic, religious, and social groups over dwindling resources. Displacement and migration will increase significantly, whether internally from rural to urban areas or externally as whole lands and islands disappear or become uninhabitable. As the *Financial Times* reported in June 2009, there are estimates that the world may experience climate change—or natural disaster—induced migration of up to 200 million people in the coming years.

Respect for the human being and wherever possible relief of human suffering without regard to nationality, race, religion, class, or politics is at the heart of mankind's common

humanity. As a humanitarian active in the field for more than thirty years, I understand the dilemmas that humanitarian workers and agencies face, yet strongly believe that humanitarian action should not become a football of international politics. It is important that humanitarian values, principles, and the continued relevance of impartial and independent delivery of humanitarian aid be reaffirmed. To this end, this report first examines the causes of the crisis and then offers a series of recommendations for resolving it.

Causes of the Crisis

There are six main causes of the crisis, which first began to manifest itself in the cases of the former Yugoslavia and Kosovo and later in Afghanistan and Iraq. These causes are principally structural and operational in nature.

The Changed Nature of Conflict

The new post-Cold War type of conflict is mostly internal, often a struggle over identity—be it ethnic, religious, cultural, or social—and frequently targeted against the civilian population. Humanitarian workers and organizations are often thrown into the middle of these conflicts, with a constant risk of being perceived as taking sides. And even if humanitarian agencies are doing their utmost to remain impartial, many rebel and other groups consider those not taking their side as automatically siding with the opponent and thus working against them. In other words, impartiality is perceived as complicity with the adversary. In whatever they do, humanitarian workers risk being perceived as part of a political strategy or operation.

The killings of humanitarian workers have more than doubled in the last seven years both in Afghanistan and across the globe as aid workers are lumped together with Western governments and military forces. UN humanitarian agencies are at particular risk when one arm of the United Nations takes positions that are deemed to be unfriendly by the host government or by insurgent groups. In many countries there is no understanding of the diversity of the United Nations and other international organizations or the distinction between political, judicial, development, and humanitarian groups. For example, when the International Criminal Court decided to indict President Omar Bashir of the Sudan, many Sudanese political and rebel groups from the northern part of Sudan made no distinction between the decision by this body and the action of UN humanitarian staff in Darfur.

Attacking humanitarian staff workers is also relatively simple as they will always be softer targets than UN peacekeepers, although the latter are also increasingly targeted. During the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, and mainly in Bosnia, many resolutions adopted by the UN Security Council were considered by the Serb separatists to be anti-Serb and often caused serious threats and security risks for the staff of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian agencies. As the special representative of the UN secretary-general for Kosovo and head of the UN Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), I had to go to great lengths in making clear to the people of Kosovo that the indictment of the former prime minister of Kosovo was an action by the UN International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, an independent body, and that the United Nations in general and UNMIK in particular had neither the mandate nor the means to influence or interfere with its decisions.

As a result of the inevitable or at times intentional confusion between what is political and what is humanitarian action, the logo and flag of the United Nations, which are used by all UN organizations and agencies, rather than providing a distinct identity and a degree of protection for UN staff, now draw attacks by insurgents and rebel groups and even at times by states. Furthermore, the logos of both the United Nations and the International

The killings of humanitarian workers have more than doubled in the last seven years both in Afghanistan and across the globe.

Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), until recently an acknowledged sign of neutrality, are drowned in a sea of multiple logos and flags belonging to nongovernmental organizations that invade every new emergency. Undisciplined rebel and insurgent groups and sometimes national militaries may be ignorant and completely confused by all the flags, logos, and vehicles flying around. In the process, operational efficiency has decreased and security risks for humanitarian staff have increased.

The operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, both launched by Western powers as part of the so-called war on terror, have sharpened this confusion. The Taliban have been declared the enemy, and for the fighters of the Taliban, there is little difference between Western political or military forces and Western humanitarian workers. The exposure of the humanitarian agencies is further increased when civilians are killed inadvertently by NATO forces. The civilian population finds it difficult to understand how actors in what they consider to be an assistance mission can kill with one hand and offer aid with the other hand, and the Taliban are never slow to exploit this apparent contradiction. It is difficult to suggest what humanitarian agencies can do to maintain their independence and neutrality in such situations, but it is obvious that political and military actors in Afghanistan should and could be much more mindful of the importance of not undertaking any humanitarian action that is not strictly respecting humanitarian principles of impartiality and neutrality. A strict separation of mandates, and respect for the separation, would go some way in reducing the risks of the public and insurgent forces ignoring or exploiting the confusion.

The civilian population finds it difficult to understand how actors in . . . an assistance mission can kill with one hand and offer aid with the other hand, and the Taliban are never slow to exploit this apparent contradiction.

The Militarization of International Action

Many humanitarian agencies and their donors too easily and uncritically accept the conditions for involvement set by the military in those increasingly frequent operations where security forces are part of the integrated response to a crisis. This problem is aggravated by the fact that key military forces often come from the countries that are also donors to the humanitarian organizations. It seems that some humanitarian organizations worry more about being present and visible in a major operation than the reasons why they should be there—in other words, to provide impartial and independent protection and assistance to the victims of conflict. In many situations, there will be a need for a military presence to provide a secure environment for the delivery of humanitarian assistance, and while there is a growing understanding among some in the military for the independence and nature of humanitarian action, it is often the humanitarian organizations that are too timid in defending their need for impartiality and independence and often fail to speak out loudly and clearly on these imperatives out of fear of losing donor support. Organizations must insist on acting in a humanitarian operation with military support rather than in a military operation with humanitarian support.

Organizations must insist on acting in a humanitarian operation with military support rather than in a military operation with humanitarian support.

A special responsibility lies with senior officials in the United Nations. The UN secretary-general should be the first to speak out when humanitarian operations and principles are disregarded by political or military forces, as the former UN secretary-general, Kofi Annan, often did. And the senior UN humanitarian official, the emergency relief coordinator, should be the advocate and guardian of these principles both with the UN political bodies and the UN Security Council, and with governments and donors. Two former humanitarian chiefs in the United Nations, Sergio Viera de Mello and Jan Egeland, were powerful voices for the victims and the principles ensuring their protection and survival—possibly because they both, like Kofi Annan, had a background in the humanitarian world and understood that if they did not speak out, humanitarian action would lose its integrity and the often voiceless victims would not be heard and helped.

A New Operational Focus

The changed nature of conflict has led to a need for a new type of response. In the more traditional situations of displacement, the main protection responsibility was and still is the legal protection of the displaced and refugees. The international protection of refugees, defined in the mandate of the UNHCR and codified in the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees, consists in rendering back to refugees the status they lost because of their flight, meaning the rights and responsibilities that come with citizenship, including the right to travel documents. The most important protection responsibility is to ensure that refugees are not forced back to the country where their lives and freedom are threatened, the principle of nonrefoulement.

In the first forty years following UNHCR's establishment in 1950, its role as a guardian of the convention was mainly a judicial function. As such, UNHCR promoted the ratification by states of the relevant refugee conventions, advised states and their authorities on how to carry out their responsibilities, and oversaw that the conventions were respected and implemented. Operationally, UNHCR's legal role consisted in ensuring that refugees were admitted into a safe country and given asylum, mainly in developing countries, and then given access to both survival assistance and more long-term assistance, aiming at self-reliance and eventually a durable solution to their plight.

Beginning in the early 1990s, with the emergence of internal conflicts that targeted civilian populations, a growing need emerged for UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies to focus also on the physical protection of the victims. This kind of response, throwing humanitarian personnel right into the middle of conflicts, has tested the security of staff and the agencies' understanding of politically sensitive involvement, courage, and stamina. It has also severely exposed the difficulties in combining such action with the fundamental principles of impartiality and neutrality. How do you maintain your neutrality and impartiality when a forceful Sri Lanka military embarks on a final onslaught on the military forces of the Tamil Tigers and in the process indiscriminately targets the civilian population whom you are trying to protect? Do you speak out and risk incurring the wrath of the authorities and expulsion, leaving the civilians to their own fate, or do you silently try to do what you can against formidable odds? Can you and, indeed, should you be neutral in the face of such blatant atrocities on the civilians?

The protection of affected civilians should not be seen as the exclusive responsibility of just a few mandated agencies but as the *raison d'être* for any humanitarian activity. Lives cannot be rebuilt if the focus is not on saving and protecting them in the first instance. At the same time, protection should not primarily be an international responsibility but should first and foremost be a crucial part of responsible sovereignty, a principle anchored in and rightly seen as the first step of the responsibility to protect. In many of today's humanitarian operations, the focus often seems to be on delivery of assistance without a clear understanding of assistance as part of a protection-oriented strategy. It is important that assistance activities are designed and implemented in such a way that they promote the protection of civilians and do no harm to the beneficiaries or to the principles underpinning the integrity of humanitarian action. It is essential that all parties to an integrated humanitarian operation, be they political, security, development, or humanitarian actors, understand and respect that the operation's primary goal must be protection and that any activity should be carried out with that in mind.

The Security Council has also recognized that intervention in today's conflicts requires a much stronger focus on the protection of civilians. I addressed the very first session of the Security Council in 1997, focusing on the protection of civilians in my capacity as UNHCR director in New York. Vital progress has been made since then. There is an increased

The protection of affected civilians should not be seen as the exclusive responsibility of just a few mandated agencies but as the *raison d'être* for any humanitarian activity.

awareness of the issues involved, and a number of resolutions have established an ambitious framework for action. The challenge now is to realize that ambition and to ensure that resolutions mandating international action in conflicts whenever appropriate contain a clear authority for peacekeeping forces and humanitarian agencies to ensure the protection of civilians caught up in the conflict. Furthermore, it is essential that the peacekeeping operations be given the means and resources to carry out their mandate lest they risk becoming a toothless tiger and doing further damage to the credibility of the United Nations.

The Proliferation of Humanitarian Actors

There are far too many humanitarian organizations present in new and major emergencies. In the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, there were more than nine hundred international NGOs on the ground, adding to the confusion and lack of coherence and coordination on operational and strategic goals. The United Nations organizations, the ICRC, and major international voluntary agencies, as well as national authorities, which in the case of Haiti was already considerably decimated and understandably paralyzed by the dimensions and complexity of the disaster, waste too much time in having to monitor hundreds of small NGOs that run around in circles and cause more havoc than help.

It is not only major emergencies that attract an inordinate amount of agencies but also high-profile ongoing operations. A September 2008 op-ed piece by Anne Applebaum in the *Washington Post* talked about the “chaos that is foreign aid in Afghanistan . . . where the alphabet soup of aid agencies . . . are driving up real estate and food prices . . . where the minister of rural development admits that he doesn’t know what all the NATO reconstruction teams in rural districts do.”

The Lack of Coordination

Humanitarian agencies and political, security, development, humanitarian, and human rights bodies must coordinate and cohere their strategies and efforts to ensure the effective and principled delivery of protection and assistance to the victims of conflict. A lot of time and energy have been spent over the years among humanitarian agencies and donors to discuss coordination. In particular, the United Nations, with its obsessive focus on process, has often given the impression that coordination was becoming an end in itself rather than the means toward the end. Humanitarian coordination should not be a bureaucratic exercise but a hands-on daily sharing of planning, information, implementation, and risks among staff and operational agencies in the field. Lately, considerable improvement has been made, with a much stronger focus on cooperation in the field rather than endless meetings in the UN corridors in New York and Geneva. In particular, the agreement among humanitarian agencies, under the leadership of the UN emergency relief coordinator, to establish the cluster approach to the response of situations of internal displacement, whereby selected agencies are given chief responsibility in providing assistance to various sectors such as camp management, protection, shelter, water, sanitation, and food, has clearly led to a much better and more predictable and effective response in addressing emergency situations of displaced. This approach became necessary as there is no mandated agency in charge of response to situations of internal displacement, unlike in the case of refugees, where UNHCR has the mandate based on the Statute of the Office of the UNHCR and various other General Assembly resolutions. However, the relatively slow response to the admittedly unprecedented and overwhelming crisis resulting from the 2010 earthquake in Haiti showed that there is still room for improvement in the cluster response.

While donors continue to insist on better coordination among humanitarian agencies, the donor response is often completely uncoordinated and, with the growing focus

Humanitarian coordination should not be a bureaucratic exercise but a hands-on daily sharing of planning, information, implementation, and risks.

on bilateral support, aimed at increasing national visibility and “showing the flag.” As a result, donors make it difficult for the United Nations to take charge of better coordination although the donors always urge the United Nations to do. A former UN special representative for Afghanistan, who at international conferences had been given a strong mandate to coordinate the donors, often complained, and rightly so, that donors did not respond to his efforts to coordinate them. I faced the same problem as the special representative of the UN secretary-general for Kosovo when I urged donors to coordinate their capacity-building projects in a more strategic operation to prepare Kosovo for statehood. Despite my appeals and concrete proposals, most donors continued their bilateral, uncoordinated efforts, with the result that the new state of Kosovo is still facing major problems of administrative and governing capacity.

Whereas there has been noticeable improvement in the coordination among humanitarian agencies, a continued lack of coherence among political, security, development, humanitarian, and human rights agencies continues to pose serious problems. On one hand, humanitarian agencies need to recognize that only political action can prevent or resolve conflicts. They have an interest in linking up with political bodies to ensure that humanitarian issues are factored into political discussions whether aimed at mediation efforts or peace agreements, and to insist on respect for the humanitarian principles of independence, impartiality, and neutrality in the conduct of integrated missions in the field. On the other hand, political bodies must respect humanitarian action as an integral part of the pursuit of durable peace and understand the need for humanitarian actors to act in a nonpolitical manner. Some politicians still look at humanitarian assistance as charity and the work of do-gooders. Political agreements are too often pursued with scant regard for humanitarian principles or interests, which is shortsighted at best and irresponsible at worst. No political agreement is sustainable if the root causes of conflicts are not addressed or resolved, which means listening to the grievances of victims on, among other issues, the need for justice, compensation for lost property, the return of the displaced to their places of origin, and efforts of reconciliation.

Concurrently, humanitarian actors must be consistent and united in their defense of the essential humanitarian principles and be prepared to speak out loudly and clearly if those principles are not being respected. More importantly, humanitarian agencies need to decide whether the short-term pursuit of donor support of an integrated mission—where political and military interests are overriding the humanitarian imperatives—is in the long-term interest of the integrity of humanitarian action. Organizations such as the ICRC and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) have already made up their minds both by speaking out forcefully against the politicization and militarization of humanitarian action and by not hesitating to pull out of operations where humanitarian principles are not being scrupulously respected. For example, MSF pulled out of the militarized operation in the Great Lakes Region of Africa in the mid-1990s and ICRC temporarily withdrew from the operation in Iraq.

To stay or not to stay—that is not just the question but also a huge dilemma for organizations that see their mission first and foremost as a protection responsibility. A decision to remain when humanitarian principles are being overridden by political and military considerations puts the long-term integrity of humanitarian action at risk. But a decision to withdraw puts at immediate risk the victims of conflict and beneficiaries of the humanitarian presence. As a senior official in UNHCR, I experienced that dilemma in the mid-1990s, when those responsible for the genocide in Rwanda moved hundreds of thousands of civilians, mainly women and children, across the border to what was then Zaire (today, Congo) and effectively took control of the running of the refugee camps, with no regard for humanitarian principles and with constant violations of the rights of the refugees. MSF and Care decided to pull out in protest against the military nature of the refugee camps. In UNHCR, while sharing the concern

of the NGOs, we struggled for days with what to do, but we decided to remain in order to not leave the refugees isolated and at the mercy of the killers and “genocidaires” and in the hope that our presence might eventually have a positive impact on the protection of the refugees and the pursuit of a solution to their plight. It was one of those situations where a decision to remain was wrong and a decision to leave was equally wrong. We chose a pragmatic approach and what we considered to be the lesser of two evils and were heavily criticized by many governments, organizations, and media representatives. I have no doubt that we would also have been subjected to much criticism if we had opted to pull out. The lesson in this and in many similar situations is that decisions need to be made that consider the best interest of those whom you are mandated to protect, preferably based on consultations with them if that is feasible, and carried out with full transparency and clear communication on the reasons for the decision.

The Lack of Diversity within Humanitarian Organizations

There are still too many workers from the northern and western hemispheres in humanitarian aid projects. In too many operations, the presence of a noticeable number of humanitarian staff from that part of the world gives weight to the perception in many countries in the South that humanitarian operations are an integral part of a political strategy to maintain and increase the power and dominance of the North and West—a perception evidently reinforced when the humanitarians are embedded in the operation and the military, literally, are calling all the shots. How can the United States expect an Afghan civilian to respect the neutrality and commitment of an American humanitarian worker if U.S. or other Western military forces launch indiscriminate or inadvertent attacks against targets in civilian environments? They become part and parcel of the same image of the foreigner and the enemy. In the process, the ability of the humanitarians to deliver support decreases and the risks to their security increase.

A more visible and active presence of national and local organizations from the South would go a long way in dispelling the perceptions that humanitarians are part of a Northern and Western agenda. It would also underline the universality of humanitarian principles that have suffered greatly over the last decade with invasions and interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. Furthermore, involvement of agencies from the south would also reduce the security risks to humanitarian staff coming from the same countries as the military contingents. It is a positive trend that today more than 75 percent of UN staff members around the world are nationals of the host country. But it is a sad fact that 80 percent of UN civilians killed during the same period have been local staff. It is essential that security precautions not only include local staff but that the particular exposure of such staff be addressed in any security plan as they easily risk being perceived as siding with one party to the conflict in view of their ethnic, religious, or social origin. When that risk does not exist or measures are taken to preempt such risks, local staff are often better than international staff in assessing the risks, crossing the front lines, negotiating passage at checkpoints, and resolving other problems on the way. I recall, for example, that the real and often unsung heroes in the humanitarian operation in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the early 1990s were the local staff of UNHCR and other agencies.

A more visible and active presence of national and local organizations from the South would go a long way in dispelling the perceptions that humanitarians are part of a Northern and Western agenda.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The challenges confronting humanitarian organizations have no easy solutions if any at all. If they get involved, they may be identified with a one-sided mission driven by political and military objectives. If they leave the military to take charge in the delivery of humanitar-

ian action because of security risks and problems of access, they jeopardize the future of humanitarianism. If they withdraw, either because of security concerns or in objection to conditions for the delivery of services set by political or military actors that run counter to humanitarian principles, they risk leaving the victims of conflict without protection and assistance or by default to assistance driven by the very political goals of the conflicting parties that prompted their withdrawal in the first place.

Humanitarian organizations and their supporters have often voiced concern over these challenges and the threats to the integrity and future of independent humanitarian actions that such challenges pose. Their voices of concern and objections have, however, been either too timid or silenced by the involvement of other agencies that may be prepared to accept involvement in operations without the necessary respect for humanitarian principles. At the same time, they have been ignored by political and military forces who either use humanitarian action in pursuit of their own strategies or who have scant regard for the importance of safeguarding humanitarian principles in their pursuit of what they consider to be broader and more important military or political goals.

Recognizing that there are few easy solutions to address the crisis in humanitarianism, humanitarian agencies and political actors could consider the following six actions:

1. Devote more attention and action to conflict prevention and, once deployed, recognize the specific role of humanitarian action. The new types of conflicts increasingly affect civilians. Massacres, atrocities, and population displacement are frequently part of a deliberate strategy for political control. Humanitarian assistance toward survival and recovery is important but must be an integral part of an overall strategy of safeguarding the physical and human security of the civilian population, meaning both ensuring its protection and empowering people to shape their own livelihood and dignity. As such, action to prevent and combat the targeting of the civilian population should not be taken solely by humanitarian agencies. More importantly, it should be initiated by political action and, if necessary, backed up by the support of peacekeeping forces.

Early preventive action, among other things based on early warning signals often originating from humanitarian staff in the field, would preempt both a humanitarian crisis and often save considerable costs both in terms of human lives and money. In case the crisis is not prevented, humanitarian action can buy time and space for political action but must not become a substitute for political action nor a reason to slow down the momentum and urgency in settling the conflict. In a postconflict settlement, humanitarian issues such as the return of the displaced, reconciliation, and demobilization must figure prominently.

Any peace agreement can only lead to durable peace if it addresses the root causes of the conflict. Humanitarian actors cannot perform what the political institutions fail to do, and tackling the root causes should not be left to those charged with the implementation on the ground. Doing so would throw the humanitarian actors into a political role. As special envoy of UNHCR for the former Yugoslavia, I was in charge of an operation promoting the return of the some four million people who had been displaced during the wars. Unfortunately, while the Dayton Peace Accords stopped the war, the Accords did not address the root causes of the conflicts, which were the forceful change of territories and the forcible displacement of civilians. Rather, the Accords left in place the results of the war—new borders, new majorities, and the permanent displacement of hundreds of thousands of people. I soon realized that appealing to those same leaders who had conducted the ethnic cleansing in the first place to reverse what the war had been all about was a hopeless political task for a humanitarian official.

2. Train the military in humanitarian principles. The nature of today's conflicts, many of which are internal, target the civilian population, and are fought by undisciplined groups, means that security for and access to the humanitarian operation will often require

Humanitarian action can buy time and space for political action but must not become a substitute for political action nor a reason to slow down the momentum and urgency in settling the conflict.

military support. It is essential that security forces be trained to understand and accept the fundamental principles of impartiality and independence guiding a humanitarian operation, and it is equally important that humanitarian organizations be trained to cooperate with security forces and ready to stand up and defend those principles to maintain the integrity of humanitarian action. Donor support must be based on performance and not conditioned upon agencies accepting being part of an integrated operation where the military literally call the shots. Humanitarian agencies should be able to count on the support of UN senior executives in defending their principles.

If considering whether to withdraw from an operation that blatantly violates the principles of independence, impartiality, and neutrality, humanitarian agencies should carefully weigh considerations of the short- and long-term threat to the integrity of humanitarian actions and the implications of withdrawal on the protection of and assistance to the beneficiaries of humanitarian action and choose the “least bad” decision to resolve such dilemmas. Any decision should be based on the best interest of the beneficiaries, ideally based on consultations with them, and carried out with full transparency and clear communications on the reasons for the decision. Military institutions should also understand that compromising humanitarian principles may constitute short-term gains but long-term losses as doing so would weaken future humanitarian involvement and make it difficult if not impossible for humanitarian agencies to engage in a postconflict recovery and reconstruction mission that had been preceded by the use of force against one party to the conflict.

3. Operationalize the concept of the responsibility to protect. The protection of civilians is a crucial part of responsible sovereignty, a principle anchored in and rightly seen as the first step of the responsibility to protect (R2P), the concept endorsed by the UN General Assembly at its summit in 2005. It is important that the concept of R2P, which is first and foremost a responsibility to prevent conflicts and human suffering, not primarily a means of intervention, be operationalized. The concept proposes a whole range of actions from diplomatic pressure, to sanctions, to international criminal prosecutions, and ultimately to the use of military action if all previous peaceful steps have failed and then only with the blessing of the UN Security Council.

Since the late 1990s, the UN Security Council has recognized that internal conflicts targeting civilians are a threat to peace and security and require a much stronger focus on the protection of civilians, and has passed a number of successive resolutions that have established an ambitious framework for action. However, key Security Council member states, including permanent members such as China and Russia, seem increasingly reluctant to mandate any action that would suggest interference in the domestic matters of states. As long as member states fail to assume their responsibilities in maintaining peace and security, R2P and the UN Security Council resolutions on the protection of civilians will remain dead instruments. Just as the protection of civilians is a matter of responsible sovereignty, collective action through the Security Council to protect civilians in and from conflicts must be regarded as a matter of responsible solidarity. The continued opposition from many member states of the United Nations to putting the concept into practice has limited the UN Secretariat in its options. The appointment of a special adviser to the secretary-general and regular debates on the concept in the General Assembly are process rather than practice and, as such, harmless to member states not in favor of taking any further steps and harmful to all those victims, past, present, and future who might be saved and supported by more decisive national and international action protecting victims of conflict.

As recent events in the Arab world have demonstrated, there can be no stability if human security is not protected, respected, and promoted. The action by the international community to implement R2P and to take all appropriate necessary measures to protect the civilian population so directly targeted by the regime in Libya was a defining moment both

for the concept of R2P and for the credibility of the United Nations to move from words to action. Events in Libya serve as yet another example of the importance of timely humanitarian assistance; apart from saving and supporting lives, it can buy time and space for political action, but it should not be a substitute for political action.

4. Limit the number of humanitarian agencies and strengthen initiatives to hold humanitarian agencies accountable for their performance. The proliferation of humanitarian agencies in new and major emergencies and in some ongoing high-profile operations like those in Iraq and Afghanistan is not conducive to efficient, credible, coordinated, and accountable delivery of survival assistance. The multiplicity of actors is a drain and distractive on often limited host government capacity. Too much precious time is spent on coordinating and organizing timely and crucial response to the emergency. It leads to duplication of efforts and often is not in sync with the priorities of the humanitarian operation but rather driven by the priorities of the organization than by the needs of the host population.

There are several groups focusing on humanitarian performance. For example, the Humanitarian Accountability Project (HAP International) acts as a quality assurance scheme for humanitarian agencies and vets members' compliance with standards of accountability and management. An ideal approach—but one that would probably be difficult to realize—would be a universal project of humanitarian accountability with certificates of competence awarded only to organizations that meet basic humanitarian principles and guidelines for humanitarian action and that recognize existing models of leadership and coordinating structures of the humanitarian response should act as a screening mechanism by both the host government, international agencies, and donor governments. The UN emergency relief coordinator should monitor the compliance with this requirement and should inform both the host government and donors accordingly. No agency without a “humanitarian certificate” should be allowed into the operation nor supported by donor money.

5. Improve coordination among humanitarian agencies. Coordination among humanitarian agencies must always be a hands-on daily sharing of planning, information, implementation, and risks among staff and operational agencies in the field, supported and backstopped by coordination activities at the headquarters of agencies, and aimed at mobilizing donor support and filling gaps in the delivery of protection and assistance. Donors must support the coordination of multilateral humanitarian action, and whether channeling their support bilaterally or multilaterally, they should coordinate better among themselves and ensure that bilateral or multilateral support does not undermine or complicate attempts at operational field coordination. Coordination of assistance efforts should be aimed at a more speedy, efficient, and effective delivery of support to those in need and toward more streamlined, simpler, and fewer calls on host governments, which are often severely overworked and underresourced. Support should not be used to promote national agendas or international mandates.

6. Diversify and encourage participation of local organizations and staff. The universality of humanitarian principles and the effectiveness of humanitarian action would be strengthened by a more visible and active involvement in operations of staff and agencies from countries in the South. Such involvement would also be helpful in changing the perception that humanitarians are part of a Northern/Western agenda of dominance and, in the process, reduce the security risks to humanitarian staff from those parts of the world. At the same time, national authorities and international organizations and donors should invest more resources in strategic and operational capacity building, training, and providing special security measures for national staff of the host country. National authorities should be aware of their special responsibility in protecting both national and international personnel, and be mindful that attacks on humanitarian staff are crimes falling under the mandate of the International Criminal Court. National staff should be involved in all phases of an

An online edition of this and related reports can be found on our Web site (www.usip.org), together with additional information on the subject.

operation, eventually leading, planning, monitoring, and reporting from the first stages of a new operation, bringing to the exercise their better knowledge of local conditions, key players, including spoilers, and dangers. Donors should set aside earmarked funding for the support and involvement of national agencies and staff, whether operating as implementing partners of international organizations or as part of local agencies or authorities.

In conclusion, humanitarian organizations must take the lead in launching a new debate aimed at defining and reaffirming the identity of humanitarian action and agencies as well as recovering the prominence and relevance humanitarian organizations once enjoyed. And they should lead a discussion of how and who should confront and tackle the many new humanitarian challenges the world will be facing over the next couple of decades—not for their own sake but in the interest of those millions of people who today, tomorrow, and in the coming years will rely on humanitarian staff to save and rebuild lives and societies in all parts of the world. While there will continue to be situations that, as a last resort, call for nonpeaceful means to stop the oppression of a civilian population, such situations should be addressed by military intervention based on an international mandate. Humanitarian action should not be intervention. It should be based on the fundamental principles of independence, impartiality, and neutrality. In turn, political and military institutions should see their own interest in supporting the integrity of humanitarian action so that their own primary mission is not deflected by a need to undertake humanitarian action. Further, such support may allow humanitarian action on the ground to buy time and space for political initiatives and conflict resolutions.

Civilians are the targets of many of today's man-made conflicts and the victims of an increasing number of natural disasters. They should not be the political targets of humanitarian aid but the beneficiaries of independent, impartial, and neutral support. Safeguarding humanitarian principles is a reflection of our common humanity.



**United States
Institute of Peace**
2301 Constitution Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20037
www.usip.org