

Humanitarianism Unbound: The Context of the Call for Military Intervention in Africa*

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The last few years have seen humanitarian organisations calling for military intervention in Bosnia, Somalia, Rwanda and elsewhere. Both relief agencies and human rights organisations have vocally implored the United Nations, or individual Western countries, to despatch troops to strife-torn nations facing humanitarian disaster. What is commonplace today would have been unthinkable even five years ago. This article examines the reasons for this extraordinary shift in the capacity of humanitarian organisations to make these dramatic statements, and asks whether the analysis, capacity and accountability of these organisations matches their power. It focuses on central and north-east Africa, a region that has the dubious distinction of leading the world in the depth and complexity of its politically-caused humanitarian emergencies.

The Cold War: humanitarianism in a strait-jacket

Until very recently, relief agencies were operating within well-defined limits imposed by the political order established in the wake of World War II. Sovereign governments ruled. Charitable relief agencies – or, as they prefer

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to call themselves, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) – were required to conform to their rules, which prohibited taking a political stand. Those who broke the rules faced expulsion from the countries where they worked.

One consequence of the depoliticisation of relief was that a “natural disaster” model of human suffering prevailed. Repeatedly, when a government reduced its own citizens to a state of acute hunger and desperation, through corruption, ineptitude or brutal counterinsurgency warfare, the blame was put on the weather. The famine in Ethiopia during 1983-85 was perhaps the most spectacularly successful example of this – a famine caused in large part by a combination of military strategy and Stalinist social engineering was attributed to drought and ecological crisis. Even the rainfall statistics were first suppressed and then fiddled. Most NGOs swallowed this line. Others went along with this deception, believing that to dispute it in public would prevent them feeding the hungry.

Throughout Africa, relief operations mounted under such politically-constrained circumstances were less than successful. The literature on the last decade of relief operations in Africa contains little true analysis and much hagiography. The standards of assessment would have made any district officer in the British Raj in India blush with shame. For example, the number of studies of famine mortality in village populations can be counted on the fingers of one hand – students of famine demographics are advised to consult nineteenth century Indian statistics if they want to test their hypotheses. But, gradually, a shocking picture of ineptitude and massive diversion is emerging. There have been some successes, particularly in emergency care in refugee camps, but the sad truth is that the huge pouring of relief aid into Africa for over a decade has contributed to the institutionalisation of violence.

Ethiopia is a case in point. It is now no longer seriously disputed that the massive inflow of aid following BandAid contributed more to the survival of the Ethiopian government – whose army was the main reason for the famine – than the famine-stricken peasantry. Large amounts of international food aid were diverted to the government militias. The flow of aid allowed the army to maintain garrisons that would otherwise have surrendered, and kept open roads that enabled the military to resupply its front line. Food aid distributions enticed young men forward who were forcibly conscripted. Perhaps most insidiously, the aid programmes gave the government spurious humanitarian credentials – while its soldiers were busy

destroying farmers' livelihoods and hence forcing them into relief shelters, the government could claim the credit for allowing international agencies to feed these captive peoples.

The government of Mengistu Haile Mariam became a master at managing humanitarian propaganda. It recognised that the international press is more concerned with the marginal contribution made to rural people's survival – overall no more than 10 per cent of the average daily ration – provided by international food aid, than the 90 per cent provided by the people's own efforts. The latter could be destroyed without international protest, neatly providing a captive population for the military, and a needy population for the relief agencies. Humanitarianism became a component of counterinsurgency.

The alternative option for NGOs was to work in the areas controlled by the liberation movements. This entailed several sacrifices. One was being labelled as a "solidarity" organisation, and hence somehow less professional than those who maintained an operational presence. Perhaps more important, it involved foregoing the chance for publicity, as until the last two years of the war, no television journalists travelled in the rebel-held areas. This was certainly the deciding factor for at least one major US NGO. None of the larger relief organisations trod this path until the final days of the war.

The more perceptive relief workers came to recognise this travesty for what it was. In the late 1980s there was the beginning of a vigorous debate about the abuse of aid for military ends. Unfortunately, this debate became sidetracked by a single issue, namely the ability of the sovereign government to control the great majority of the aid flows, thereby enabling it to deny relief to civilians in areas held by rebel forces. The questions were: which side should receive the aid and how can relief be transported across battle lines? The central issue of the marginality of relief aid itself was never fully acknowledged. Perhaps this is not surprising given the institutional commitments of all those involved in the debate. The idea of proposing less relief aid was taboo, and lip-service only was paid to the imperative of pressuring governments for substantial changes in military strategies.

Violating sovereignty

A pseudo-solution to the problem of strait-jacketed humanitarianism came with Operation Lifeline Sudan.

Launched in April 1989, this was a path-breaking exercise in the violation of national sovereignty in the name of providing humanitarian aid to civilians on all sides of a conflict – in this case, southern Sudan. The Sudan government, then engaged in peace talks with the rebel Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), agreed to the plan. The aid flowed; famine was stemmed. The relief operation was given the credit, and for much of the succeeding five years, Operation Lifeline Sudan has been held up as a model for a relief operation that reaches all sides of a conflict.

The reality is somewhat different. On the ground, the main contribution to ending hunger was a simultaneous ceasefire that enabled farmers to plant crops and pastoralists to travel more freely and begin to market their animals. When the ceasefire broke down at the end of 1989, Operation Lifeline Sudan acquired a very different dynamic.

As in the case of Ethiopia, food aid has been used to sustain armies, maintain garrison towns, keep open supply routes, and allow generals to don the "humanitarian" mantle. The difference is that it has done this for both sides at the same time. Hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent by the international community on a humanitarian operation that is in fact feeding soldiers more than it is feeding their victims. The SPLA's quartermaster is the World Food Programme, USAID and an array of NGOs. Government garrisons live on international food aid. But no-one knows the true figures for the impact of the programmes, or the rates of diversion, because no proper studies have been done. Meanwhile, the war is in a stalemate.

In southern Sudan, humanitarianism has found itself a new strait-jacket. The relief agencies could pull out, but in doing so they would certainly unleash acute suffering on the people of the war-affected areas. Some civilians are dependent on the airdrops. Soldiers would turn to looting and pillaging to feed themselves. It is a dilemma without a solution. Only recently has it become more widely accepted among NGOs that Operation Lifeline Sudan is not the success that has been claimed. Moreover, this opinion is still almost entirely a private one. Policy is still being made in an empirical and analytical vacuum, by agency staff who have donned, not only in public, an impenetrable armour of moral righteousness.

Beyond sovereignty

The next step in the relief agencies' evolution can be seen in Somalia where the central government collapsed completely at the beginning of 1991. Sovereignty in the conventional sense, as exercised by a government, became irrelevant. Instead, relief agencies found themselves in a wholly new situation – the state had collapsed altogether. Somalia was in fact only the most marked manifestation of a trend that had been evident for some time, notably in Mozambique, but it stands out as a defining case.

The UN agencies and bilateral institutions such as USAID had a straightforward response to the 1991 crisis in Somalia – they withdrew and did nothing. A handful of international NGOs stayed. In Mogadishu, these agencies were not only the providers of emergency medical supplies and child nutrition, but the sole links with the international community. In the absence of a police force, they had to provide their own security. Without a ministry of health, they could formulate their own medical policies. It was both a formidable challenge and a boon. Aid workers in the field had to take on the jobs of diplomats, security experts, news agencies, policy advisors, as well as administering their own programmes. It was frightening, but also exhilarating.

The power of the few aid NGOs that remained was magnified by their treatment by the international media. Foreign journalists who visited Somalia stayed with the aid agencies, were given guided tours by them, accepted their analyses and prognoses, and in turn quoted them at length and gave them enormous publicity. The symbiotic relationship between the Western media and its favourite aid agencies has long been noted; in Somalia this reached new heights. Some journalists even admitted that they deliberately selected their pictures so as to exaggerate the human degradation in the feeding shelters, and all of them skimmed over the shortcomings of the relief agencies' programmes.

Somalia was a guinea-pig for post-Cold War humanitarianism. It was the first time that the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) hired armed guards. It was the first time that relief agencies such as the Save the Children Fund took such publicly outspoken positions criticising the absence of the UN. And finally, it was the first time that international agencies successfully called for Western military intervention.

The agency most responsible for the call for intervention was CARE-US. The CARE-International programme in Somalia was adrift. Designed along conventional lines, with staff recruited for logistical experience rather than diplomatic finesse and local understanding, it faced enormous difficulties. The ICRC, with a more flexible and creative approach, and above all by its close working relationship with its local partner, the Somali Red Crescent Society, moved far more food far more quickly. But CARE, partnered with the extremely inept World Food Programme, became mired down.

The president of CARE-US, Philip Johnston, led the calls for international military intervention. His long-term motives may have included creating a niche for CARE as the lead agency in future programmes under international military protection. The stated rationale was not that the intervention would save Somalia, but that it would save the CARE-WFP relief programme – subject to inordinate diversion and delay. Such was the automatic equation of a successful relief programme with the conquest of famine that few stopped to consider that the famine might be healing itself although the CARE-WFP programme had yet to become properly functional. Hence the US marines landed in the week that saw death rates in Baidoa, the epicentre of the famine, fall to one tenth of their famine peak, and just as farmers in the Shebelle valley, breadbasket of Somalia, prepared to gather in their harvest.

The UN, the Pentagon and other relief agencies joined the calls for intervention because they saw institutional advantages: new, expanded roles at a time when budgets were being cut. US citizens were also caught up in the moral panic that gripped the country in that political no-man's land between a lost presidential election and the inauguration of the new president. It was also the time of Thanksgiving and Christmas, a period when the conscience politic is particularly vulnerable, and when charities raise most of their funds. Once the momentum in favour of intervention had gathered force, no agency dared speak up against it – though many field staff had serious doubts.

Above all, however, the call for intervention was a call of desperation. In common with many of his colleagues, Philip Johnston was simply lost in the Somalia of 1992. Violence he could not understand he characterised as “random”; authority structures he did not have the patience to deal with he called “anarchic”. With an inchoate urge to “do something”, he called on the US marines to save the day.

Most accounts of Operation Restore Hope in Somalia argue

that the intervention was sound in its early, US-led and “purely humanitarian” phase, and went wrong later on when the UN (at US bidding) sought to confront General Mohamed Farah Aidid. This is not correct. Operation Restore Hope was flawed in its conception; it was aimed at supplying massive food aid to a region that no longer needed massive food aid. Meanwhile it neglected the most pressing relief needs: a programme against malaria and effective measles vaccination. There is in fact no evidence that the intervention had any impact on mortality rates at all.

It is quite possible that Operation Restore Hope did save tens of thousands of lives. But no one can be sure. Such is the absence of systematic accountability in the famine relief business that no proper investigations have been done. What has been researched and written are internal analyses that look at the logistics of food movement, inter-agency co-ordination and the provision of security. None of the reports investigate whether lives were saved, rehabilitation facilitated, or a sense of hope restored. They simply claim that it was so. Humanitarianism, it seems, is its own justification.

The guinea-pig, of course, bit back, discrediting military humanitarian intervention for some time to come. But rather than examining the shameful indifference to Somalia in the prolonged gestation of the crisis, when both the UN and the US turned their backs on the country, the lesson learned seems to be one of further disengagement. Did the NGOs learn anything? That remains to be seen.

The search for new humanitarian principles

The end of the capacity of the governments of poor countries to exercise total control over the activities of humanitarian agencies operating within their borders opens up new and exciting possibilities. In theory, no longer should aid agencies be compelled to remain silent when they witness grave abuses of human rights. They should be able to develop integrated analyses of the situations in the countries, and lobby in an unconstrained manner for integrated solutions. Subject only to the attentions of the [UK] Charity Commissioners – whose interest in and expertise on most African countries is not great – relief agencies should be able to become much more political.

And, as the emergencies in question are essentially political emergencies, this should free the agencies to make real progress.

But it has not happened like that. Some aid agency staff are pressing in this direction. But another powerful set of constraints is at work: the donors.

Non-governmental relief agencies have grown enormously in size in the last 15 years. They have become the preferred conduits for emergency aid from Western governments. This is for a variety of reasons. One is that donor governments have become tired of the inefficiency of host government bureaucracies. A second is that donations to Western NGOs gain them favourable publicity and can obscure the reality of declining aid budgets. A third is that grants through NGOs are much more discretionary than to governments, and subject to much less formality. This gives more room for flexibility and rapid response, but it also removes a central component of accountability – there is no obligation for the donor to provide the resources. If an NGO is present in a certain country, that country is privileged – NGOs have no duty to be present.

In turn, NGOs become more closely tied to donor governments. Some try to put a ceiling on the proportion of income they will take from governments, but this ceiling rarely applies in the case of emergency grants. Hence, emergency officers in NGOs are continually forced into the donors' mindset simply in order to receive funds. An agency that undertakes radical development projects may be exceptionally conservative when it comes to relief. There are, in fact, no radical relief agencies.

Equally important is the role of public appeals. The majority of the large agencies believe, along with most journalists, that only a certain kind of humanitarian story will elicit public sympathy and public funds. The story is stripped down to its barest essentials: helpless victim, evil bandit or warlord, and saviour – the latter invariably white. At least this is an improvement on earlier days when the villain was the weather.

While maintaining the charitable imperative at the core of their activities, NGOs have also sought to expand their mandates for humanitarian intervention. Two concepts have crept in: peacemaking and human rights. These are strictly ancillary to responding to immediate human need. When Oxfam ran its campaign, "H stands for hunger, Oxfam stands for justice", it never meant that it proposed establishing human rights principles for its programmes, nor campaigning on human rights issues. But, Oxfam staff assure one, human rights are at the

centre of the organisation's mandate. Similarly, peacemaking has become a vogue term – but while many NGOs are implicitly pacifist in conviction, none has developed a set of clearly defined principles for operation in a war zone. The exception to this is the ICRC.

The pressure for expanded mandates has also come from outside the agencies. With the Western disengagement from poor countries in Africa, donor governments have sought to use NGOs more and more as an instrument of policy. The analyses and opinions of NGO staff – often young and inexperienced – are sought after and listened to. Now that African countries lack commercial or strategic importance, Western interest is often confined to maintaining good publicity at home, which means supporting international NGOs and keeping human suffering to acceptable, or at least invisible levels. The NGOs are thus pushed by their donor governments into taking on political concerns.

Meanwhile, with the humanitarian space no longer defined by the diktat of the host government, the agencies have to demarcate it for themselves. They do this using two notions in particular. One is “fieldcraft” – ie making compromises with the governing authorities (frequently abusive authorities) for the greater good. This principle allows the field officer to tolerate a certain level of diversion. The level is never defined, and what is unacceptable in one situation is tolerable in another. “Fieldcraft” also makes a mockery of any avowal of human rights. A field officer will be required to turn a blind eye to human rights abuses in order to protect the agency's programme, becoming a silent witness. In human rights, consistency is all: once an organisation has publicly affirmed that it is committed to human rights, it cannot compromise in this way.

The second concept is “neutrality”. The ICRC has a highly developed doctrine of neutrality, which involves slow, convoluted and expensive procedures. It also involves discretion: the ICRC is the most publicity-shy relief organisation. The ICRC's neutrality involves a readiness to withdraw if its principles are flouted, no matter how desperate the immediate human need. It also involves a recognition that any relief involvement in a conflict brings material or moral benefit to the combatants – hence the elaborate procedures to try to minimise the imbalance of this, and hence also the secrecy of many operations.

Other NGOs have, however, assumed that simply putting a flag on a landrover and proclaiming neutrality is enough to

establish neutral status. This is nonsense. As publicity-seeking institutions, most NGOs have neither the patience nor money for the kind of procedures followed by the ICRC, and would not accept the constraints imposed by discretion under any circumstances. Hence NGO programmes run the risk of becoming inadvertently partisan. This is a dangerous state of affairs, not only for the staff on the ground who often believe their own humanitarian propaganda, but for the principles of humanitarianism themselves.

It is important to distinguish *operational* neutrality from *objectivity* or neutrality of principle. Operational neutrality means refusing to take sides in a conflict, or to take any action or make any public pronouncement that could be interpreted as being partisan. The ICRC once again manifests this: it refuses to take a position on the waging of war, refuses to condemn violators (except when the violations are committed against the ICRC itself), and is thoroughly discreet.

Some other NGOs espouse a watered-down version of this. For example, they refuse to condemn one side to a conflict without also condemning the other, and call for the investigation and punishment of human rights abuses without naming the perpetrators. They regard operational neutrality as incompatible with naming names. In certain circumstances this is undoubtedly true, and hence it cannot be aspired to by any human rights organisation that works through public campaigning.

Neutrality of principle, or objectivity, means assessing the parties to a conflict according to the same standards. This is what human rights organisations aspire to do. This often means that one party is criticised far more than the other, reflecting the reality that some governments and armies are far more abusive than others. In extremis, one side may be guilty of a horrendous crime, such as genocide, of which the other is innocent – a state of affairs that obliges selective action against one party to the conflict. A human rights organisation that failed to follow this principle, and instead preferred to “balance” its criticism, would be applying double standards, and hence would, in fact, be partisan towards the more abusive party.

The cost of objectivity can be the inability to operate in a certain country or region. A human rights organisation must always be prepared to run the risk of being declared *persona non grata*.

One of the problems faced by operational relief agencies that have tried to take on human rights concerns is that they run the

risk of confusing the two kinds of neutrality, and ending up achieving neither. One way out of this dilemma is to panic and call for international military intervention.

Rwanda: mandates at odds

The mass murder of the political opposition and the genocide in Rwanda presented exceptional challenges to relief agencies. The traditional approach of providing relief, no questions asked, would certainly have made agencies complicit in mass murder, because there can be no doubt that the majority of relief aid would have been taken directly by the army and *interahamwe* militia, which were responsible for most of the killing. In the event, this problem did not arise inside Rwanda as significant relief operations did not get under way in government-controlled areas while the massacres were going on. It has, however, occurred in the refugee camps, where effective authority is often in the hands of the men who supervised the genocide.

Rwanda presents a stark conflict between operational neutrality and human rights objectivity. The government was guilty of genocide, and the rebel Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) was not. The genocide was meticulously planned and all the institutions of government were dedicated to a policy of massacres. The Genocide Convention, and any form of moral argument, led to the conclusion that the Rwandan government needed to be ostracised and defeated and the architects of genocide brought to trial for crimes against humanity.

One NGO that took a prominent public stand on Rwanda rapidly found itself impaled on the horns of this dilemma. This was Oxfam. Other NGOs took a range of similar positions; this discussion will focus solely on Oxfam, to illuminate the nature of the dilemma.

In late April, three weeks after the killing was unleashed, Oxfam publicly called it genocide. For an organisation with human rights near the centre of its mandate, the implications were clear: those guilty of the crime should be named and every effort should be made to bring them to court. But Oxfam is also an operational agency, with expertise in the provision of safe water supplies to refugee camps, and funds from a public appeal to spend on humanitarian work. The refugee camps contained many of the men responsible for the slaughter. Oxfam believed it could not simultaneously name certain people as international

criminals and then try to carry out its humanitarian work alongside them, or even with their co-operation.

Oxfam had widened its mandate without fully considering the implications, and now had to choose between its priorities. Its solution was to fudge the issue of genocide. It did this in two ways. One was by calling for a UN investigation into the genocide, and refusing to name names itself. Given Oxfam's knowledge of the situation on the ground and its moral authority, this came as a severe disappointment to many Rwandans who were looking for international moral leadership.

The second element of the fudge was to call for international military intervention to stop the genocide. This position was deeply flawed.

The call for UN military intervention presupposed, first, that there was no effective alternative and, second, that it would work. Some Oxfam staff certainly recognised that neither of these assumptions was true, and the agency even conceded publicly that UN troops alone could not stop the killing. But the impact of their public advocacy was to present the Rwandan disaster as one soluble only by international forces.

The greatest failing of military intervention is that, the moment it is canvassed, it dominates the debate like a huge dark cloud, and obscures the need and opportunity for other forms of international action. In Somalia and Bosnia there were vital opportunities for civil initiatives that were not taken because of the blinkered obsession with troops. In the event, the presence of the troops did not solve problems, it merely changed them. But, even after these debacles, military intervention is still heralded as a trump card.

In Rwanda too, there were alternatives. The genocide was planned and implemented by a group of well-known political extremists. These men, having put the genocidal machine into action, had the power to apply the brakes. This could have been done by severe moral and diplomatic sanctions: for example, by expelling Rwandan ambassadors, expelling Rwanda from the UN Security Council, publicly naming the genocidal maniacs in the interim government, and threatening them with prosecution for genocide unless the killings were halted at once. In the name of diplomatic operational neutrality, neither the UN nor its member countries tried any of these options. Rwanda even continued to sit on the UN Security Council throughout, and the interim foreign minister was permitted to deliver a racist diatribe at the Security Council in person. The UN stand was the antithesis of moral leadership.

The option of UN military intervention under established principles also presumed that authority had broken down. This was precisely what the architects of genocide were anxious to tell the world, to cover their crime, and present the killing as an outbreak of "spontaneous ethnic violence". By murdering 10 Belgian UN soldiers on 7 April, the extremists had shown their willingness for military confrontation, so that a dedicated UN force would have had to be prepared to take casualties. Moreover, given the poor record of UN peacekeeping, it is difficult to see how UN intervention could have been a solution.

The second option was to seek an indigenous military solution – that is, to advocate the defeat of the genocidal government by its internal opponents. This would have forsaken operational neutrality for practical human rights objectivity.

The genocide was brought to an end by the military advance of the RPF. The RPF was not implicated in the genocide, and its advance had the effect of halting the killing. It did this more swiftly and effectively than any UN intervention force could have done. Yet throughout, the UN and most international agencies were calling for a ceasefire. This was done for reasons of operational neutrality. But a ceasefire was precisely what the killers wanted – a chance to complete their genocide undisturbed. When the RPF declared a 96-hour ceasefire in May, the killings did not stop.

While there was no connection between a ceasefire and an end to the killing, a ceasefire could have helped to prevent the mass exodus of refugees to Zaire. The refugee crisis was, in some respects, a straightforward humanitarian emergency requiring food relief, clean water and medical care. NGOs were accustomed to responding to this sort of disaster, and had a perceived obligation to deal with it. Oxfam's position gave the priority to preventing a crisis of hungry refugees over stopping genocidal killing.

The RPF advance was a form of humanitarian intervention. But it was not recognised as such, because the RPF, as a party to the conflict, was not operationally neutral. But, as the only force capable of halting the genocide, it was morally bound to intervene. Arguably, as a component of the government under the peace agreement signed in 1993, it was also legally bound to do so under the provisions of the Genocide Convention, to which Rwanda is a party.

The option of supporting the RPF advance, on the grounds that it was the quickest and most effective way of halting the killing, does not imply indemnifying the RPF for human rights

abuses, nor refusing to criticise components of its past and present military, political and human rights policies. It merely means recognising that the RPF advance was the only effective way that the international community could have fulfilled its obligation to halt and punish the crime of genocide.

A UN military intervention could only have been achieved with a concomitant ceasefire. It is highly unlikely that the UN force would have been effective at halting the genocide. It would not have been prepared to take casualties, nor jeopardise its operational neutrality, by confronting the Rwandan army. Hence such an arrangement would have continued the killing, and also given impunity to the killers – because one cannot prosecute politicians with whom one is negotiating an agreement.

Oxfam did not advocate these alternatives, in order to preserve its operational neutrality. Probably, had a UN force been despatched and behaved in the manner suggested, Oxfam would also have been among its critics. When the French government – Rwanda's leading arms supplier and diplomatic ally – proposed a unilateral intervention in June, Oxfam opposed it. This was the correct line, but the French army could have legitimately complained, as the US marines did in Somalia, that agencies that called for a military presence had little right to criticise the soldiers for behaving in a military fashion after they arrived.

The redeeming feature of Oxfam's advocacy is that it failed in its specific goals, while it succeeded in gaining greater international attention for Rwanda. But this should give pause for thought to the senior staff of Oxfam and other NGOs that take public policy positions on issues of similar import. These are not commitments that can simply be taken up and cast off at will.

Humanitarianism unbound

The case of the Oxfam lobby on Rwanda is striking because the dilemmas are so clear. But, like Somalia beforehand, it reflects the disorientation of the humanitarian agencies in the post-Cold War world. The NGOs have shaken off one straight-jacket, and they have broadened their mandate and seized immense new opportunities for political influence. International policies towards entire African countries can now be dominated by the NGOs' humanitarian agenda.

The powers of analysis and the rigours of accountability have not increased in step with the NGOs' influence. There are internal discussions within the agencies on these questions, to be sure, but the moment that there is a hint of public debate, the moral armour is donned, and the shutters of self-censorship come down. On several occasions, NGOs have reacted with outrage to the arguments presented here, but then refused to join the debate.

It is in this context that the call for military intervention has emerged: ungrounded in a sober and professional appraisal of the situation, unencumbered by demands for accountability, and subject only to the hasty demand to "do something" by an array of organisations that have monopolised the moral high ground. Can the NGOs really call for the military occupation of a country with complete impunity? Are they really accountable only to a fawning and forgetful press?

Postscript

During 1995, the shortcomings of humanitarianism unbound have become more patent than ever before. In March, the UN finally withdrew from Somalia. The wheel had turned full circle from the days in 1991 when the crisis in Somalia was wholly ignored by the world, and the UN agencies sat in neighbouring Kenya and refused to involve themselves. Except that in the meantime many lives have been lost, many resources squandered (and some spent wisely – the ICRC operation of 1992 will always remain one of the most remarkable relief programmes of all time), and an enormous amount of goodwill wasted. Hope has in fact been all but extinguished.

In Rwanda and the Rwandese refugee camps in Zaire, relief operations have continued on a huge scale, but the unresolved moral issues have become more and more evident. The vast majority of assistance has continued to flow to the refugee camps and – until April 1995 – to displaced camps in the zone formerly occupied by the French army. Evidence has been mounting that the extremists responsible for the genocide have been able to profit from this assistance. The survivors of the genocide have received very meagre assistance, and the government has received almost no help in rebuilding the basic institutions of governance, including justice.

In November 1994, several relief agencies threatened that they would withdraw unless certain preconditions were met in

terms of security: modest improvements followed, but these conditions were not met, but the agencies still stayed, with the sole exception of Médecins sans Frontières, France. It is a striking case of the moral elasticity of voluntary agencies under pressure: they are rarely able to hold the line on a point of principle.

Perhaps more disturbing was the concerted effort by many NGOs to keep open the camps in the south-west of Rwanda. The humanitarian and economic rationale for these camps had evaporated: farmers could return home and cultivate, and the most vulnerable could be assisted better in their homes rather than in the overcrowded and unsanitary camps. The camps were also the last bastion of organised extremism inside Rwanda, and this has presented a serious security problem. The government and UN concurred that they should be disbanded. But camps are emblematic for humanitarianism: they are visible signs of concentrated need; they justify an intense humanitarian presence and facilitate fundraising. Some agencies forwarded spurious arguments to keep open the camps.

This, predictably, contributed to disaster. By April, only one camp remained, at Kibeho. This was the last stronghold of the extremists, where many fugitives had concentrated to escape justice or retribution. The delay in closing Kibeho, combined with the high media profile of the closures made possible by the NGOs, created an explosive situation: the Rwandese Patriotic Army (of the new government) faced the extremist militia. Several hundred people, perhaps over one thousand, were killed in the final confrontation. To compound the disaster, certain NGOs made premature, highly public and highly distorted claims for what had occurred – exaggerating the deaths to eight thousand, arguing that this indicated a systematic RPA campaign against innocent civilians, and advocating suspending all aid to Rwanda. An independent commission of inquiry put the record straight, but the agencies responsible for the fabrications have yet to be called to account.

Humanitarian impunity therefore remains the order of the day. But it is increasingly criticised. There is an encouraging move towards independent assessments of humanitarian relief operations. Since the Humanitarianism Unbound critique, evaluations of a number of emergency programmes have been published. Two studies of Somalia have been completed, a review of Rwanda commissioned by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development is nearing completion, and an independent assessment of Operation Lifeline Sudan has

been commissioned. These are all some way short of the full transparency required – for instance many NGOs did not cooperate with the review of the Rwanda operation, so that it was not possible to account for a large amount of assistance. Nonetheless, it is a start, and the very shortcomings of the process show how necessary it is to go further, and institute a quasi-judicial procedure whereby humanitarian agencies are obliged to cooperate in a process of accountability.

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