

# **Somalia: A Humanitarian Crime**

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Le *Centre de réflexion sur l'action et les savoirs humanitaires* (CRASH) a été créé par Médecins sans frontières en 1999. Sa vocation : stimuler la réflexion critique sur les pratiques de l'association afin d'en améliorer l'action.

Le Crash réalise des études et analyses portant sur l'action de MSF dans son environnement immédiat. Elaborées à partir des cadres et de l'expérience de l'association, ces textes ne représentent pas la « ligne du parti » MSF, pas plus qu'ils ne cherchent à défendre une conception du « vrai humanitaire ». Leur ambition est au contraire de contribuer au débat sur les enjeux, contraintes, limites – et par conséquent dilemmes – de l'action humanitaire. Les critiques, remarques et suggestions sont plus que bienvenues, elles sont attendues.

The *Centre de reflexion sur l'action et les savoirs humanitaires* (CRASH) was created by Médecins Sans Frontières in 1999. Its objective is to encourage debate and critical reflexion on the humanitarian practices of the association.

The Crash carries out in-depth studies and analyses of MSF's activities. This work is based on the framework and experience of the association. In no way, however, do these texts lay down the 'MSF party line', nor do they seek to defend the idea of 'true humanitarianism'. On the contrary, the objective is to contribute to debate on the challenges, constraints and limits –as well as the subsequent dilemmas- of humanitarian action. Any criticisms, remarks or suggestions are most welcome.

# Somalia: A Humanitarian Crime

Rony Brauman

Let it be said at the outset: few of us were thrilled by the announcement that an American landing in Somalia was imminent. We were not persuaded by the chorus of praise that greeted the UN's historic decision and the emergence of the first humanitarian army, calling it "a fantastic step forward" towards the right to intervention on humanitarian grounds. At the time, the press rightly pointed out that as early as 1988, French President Mitterrand had spoken at the United Nations of the international community's "profound obligation" to assist peoples in danger, even if this meant violating the sacrosanct Article II of the United Nations Charter (which establishes the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign state). To us, however, the exception made in the name of solidarity for Somalia seemed insufficient grounds for declaring that international relations would no longer be governed by the balance of power and calculation of national interest. The proponents of intervention, however, insisted that the intentions of the Western countries were "pure". In Afghanistan, Iraq, and Vietnam, humanitarian relief efforts had, in the course of easing the distress of the victims, been used to denounce totalitarian regimes. Nothing like that could happen, it was said, in a country that raised as few political or ideological issues as Somalia: "Utter destitution on the one hand and pure pity on the other – the West wants to save Somalia for the sake of saving Somalia, and nothing more." Those whom the Gulf War had not yet convinced that a new international moral order had come into being were to wait and see. After Operations Desert Storm and Provide Comfort, Operation Restore Hope offered the prospect of an action so obviously disinterested and so spectacularly effective that it would necessarily be approved by all. In this dismal period, it offered a substantial glimmer of hope in a devastated country, and as such ought to be praised out of common propriety alone. But 300,000 deaths and a year and a half of near-complete indifference seemed to us reason enough not to cry victory too soon.

Our reservations, which were strengthened by the conventional thinking and premature enthusiasm we witnessed, soon turned to stupefaction and then to outrage when, a few months later, the United Nations' forces allowed themselves to be caught up in a spiral of violence in which civilians were the primary victims. The "international humanitarian order" began to look like a bad western, with a reward offered for the capture of the bad guy, cavalry charges, and a trigger-happy lawman with very bad aim.

It is not our intention, however, to make the case against the principle of armed intervention. Violence is never just, of course, but we all know that it can be necessary and that the decision to use force is one of a democratic government's weightiest responsibilities. In late 1992, the situation had deteriorated to the point where the deployment of an international force was justified. Many Somalis even saw it as their last hope. The violence, which was both a cause and a consequence of the collapse of the state, had engendered and sustained famine among the population. At this stage of social disintegration, there were few options left to choose from. As for whether the UN or the United States should have been in command, that was indeed an important question, but one we are not competent to judge.

Rather, what is at issue here is the military option initiated in the fall of 1992; the deliberate renunciation of any other strategy, as indicated by the fact that the UN's first special envoy, Mohammed Sahnoun, was bypassed and subsequently ousted; and the general acceptance of a caricatured view of Somalia as a tragic face-off between a swarm of starving children and hordes of drug-crazed looters, or as a wasteland where gangs of crazed teenagers and warlords-without-a-cause rampaged under the helpless, desperate eyes of relief workers. Admittedly, the Somalis did little to contradict this reductive view, but the point is that, apart from the interlude represented

by Ambassador Sahnoun's policy (to which we will return), the terms of intervention in their country were decided without the slightest knowledge of or concern for their society.

The UN intervention was not only desperately late in coming but scandalously weak when it did arrive. Oddly enough, the reasons given for this were exactly the same as those used to justify what seemed to become the UN's underlying objective: the creation of a permanent military intervention force. By incessantly pointing to lack of security as the cause of its failure to act, the United Nations laid the groundwork for achieving this aim, for which Somalia was to serve as the test case. Thus, paradoxically, the bureaucratic inertia behind this politically motivated hesitancy came to support a strongly interventionist plan demanding swift, decisive action. Although the principle of an international force is worth discussing and developing, the conditions under which this force was created – a blend of irresponsibility, indifference, incompetence, and cynicism – make one wonder what lies in its future.

From January 1991 to April 1992 – at the height of the war, when the international community was turning a deaf ear to the appeals of the few relief organizations present on the ground – Somalia slid gradually into horror. Civilians were driven from their homes and deprived of all means of sustenance by the war and its accompanying massacres, destruction, and looting. Hundreds of thousands in the centre and south were reduced to the status of refugees within their own country, while others sought a doubtful refuge in neighbouring Ethiopia and Kenya. In just a few months during the winter of 1991-92, the food shortages turned into famine and the country succumbed to a disaster that had been both foreseeable and foreseen.

A survey of this displaced population by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF – Doctors Without Borders) in the spring of 1992 showed that one child in four had died during the preceding months and that three-quarters of the survivors were severely malnourished. This was the time for action: a huge emergency relief operation should have been launched. The volunteers of the relief organizations had proved, by their very presence, that such an operation was possible at last. And yet, despite food and financial aid from the European Community and the United States, despite the appeals of Boutros Boutros-Ghali and a few quick forays by the UN's humanitarian agencies, the governments that possessed the resources to intervene on the required scale showed no inclination to do so.

As a first measure, however, the UN secretary-general decided to send a special representative to Mogadishu as a mediator. With trifling resources at his disposal, Ambassador Mohammed Sahnoun undertook the task of bringing the various factions to the negotiating table. But his mission was soon cut short: the United Nations bureaucracy resented his criticisms and judgements, which were expressed in public and were at times very severe. The reason why the UN initiative never really got under way, as this somewhat impolitic ambassador told me when we met in Mogadishu, was that the bureaucratic machinery was too cumbersome and its members' motives too frivolous. In other words, the paralysis of the UN was due not to the incessantly blamed obstacles on the ground, but to the organization's lack of determination to overcome them. Moreover, instead of convening the warlords and a few public figures from time to time in some capital or other for a "conference of national reconciliation", Mohammed Sahnoun wanted to establish negotiating forums in various areas of the country, bringing together traditional chiefs, religious leaders, factional representatives, and intellectuals. Losing interest in the endless series of immediately violated cease-fire agreements and meaningless communiqués, he set out on a course of grassroots diplomacy. As a former freedom fighter in his own country, he understood better than most the importance of this approach, while acknowledging its limitations. Talks with the warlords were to be only one aspect in a broader process based on civil society: a society that was in bad shape but quite real nonetheless, with its contradictions, its networks of power and influence, its traditions, and its own expectations. Siyad Barre had tried, with some success, to

destroy Somali civil society by stirring up conflict between the clans, but for those who had eyes to see, it showed a determination to resist the forces that were trying to pull it apart.

This approach won Mohammed Sahnoun the trust and support of his Somali contacts and the humanitarian organizations – a success rare enough to be worth noting. But one man's energy and talent were not enough to overcome the inertia of the international system, which does not seem to understand that it is precisely when chaos and war break out that humanitarian aid becomes indispensable, before the peace of the graveyard sets in.

To enable themselves to stay in the field, the humanitarian organizations were forced to bend their principles substantially by hiring armed guards and leasing military-style vehicles. Some people, in a masterpiece of understatement, called these vehicles "technical cars", but most called them by the more accurate name of "Mad Maxes". These off-road pick-ups, with rear platforms designed to support a heavy machine gun operated by four or five armed men, gradually became part of the everyday equipment of the relief crews, provoking bitter arguments over the limitations and excesses of such protection. These guards were recruited from a powerful clan that was recognized as a provider of protection; before the arrival of the international troops, they acted, often with great composure, to deter the bands of looters.

The fact that the money spent on such protection fuelled the war economy raises once again, in a particularly spectacular fashion, the paradox of humanitarian activity. Received ideas to the contrary, such activity is not a factor that promotes peace. The purpose of humanitarian assistance, which is deployed within the lines of war but powerless to change its course, is to bring humanity back to places it had abandoned. We all too often try to forget that such an action comes at a price, with payment collected by the belligerents, be they the ruling group or the rebels. The international community proved incapable of breaking this vicious circle in both Somalia and Bosnia. Putting the country under international trusteeship was the only means by which this could have been accomplished, but the political and financial cost would have been prohibitive.

The long list of ongoing international interventions offers another possible model. In Liberia, the West African peacekeeping force – i.e. the Nigerian army – managed to grasp this harsh law and eliminate the above-mentioned paradox: to re-establish peace, it needed to eliminate the main cause of the war, namely the rebels led by Charles Taylor, and hence to isolate the entire territory under Taylor's control by means of an impenetrable blockade. In a climate of general indifference, and with the blessing of the United Nations, humanitarian aid was outlawed, aid convoys deliberately bombed by the aircraft of the peacekeeping force, and food shortages – or famine – deliberately maintained in large areas of the country. In contempt for the high-flown resolutions concerning "access to victims" that had been adopted unanimously by the UN General Assembly a few months before, the blockade was not lifted and convoys were not allowed to pass until after the cease-fire agreement was signed. Scandalous as it was in human terms, this strategy had at least the merit of providing a real-world demonstration of the second horn of the dilemma that arises in any conflict: trying to alleviate the human consequences will prolong the conflict, and trying to find a quick solution will intensify the conflict. In this distressing symmetry, it is easy to recognize the choices made respectively by Europe in Bosnia and by the allies in Kuwait.

Somalia is no exception to this rule – a fact that only the need to keep faith and a haze of official jargon have managed to obscure, even though it is blindingly obvious. As soon as the world became aware of what was happening in this country, the future intervention began to take on its warlike character.

The famine reached its height in August and September 1992, and television cameras from all over the world converged on Baidoa, the epicentre of the disaster, sending back footage that gave rise to the emotional reaction we all remember. As if governments' decisions were determined by

the television news, the United States, followed by France and other European countries, then decided to institute an emergency airlift of relief supplies. These decisions would have been more praiseworthy had they been made before Somalia received so much attention from the media; more to the point, they could have mitigated the disaster. But emergencies leave little room for regret, so these measures were welcomed. They made it possible, at last, to send food in quantities commensurate with Somalia's requirements, reflecting a desire to become involved in what was, unfortunately for many Somalis, no longer an emergency.

The first signs of a radical change of direction appeared at this time. In early September, Ambassador Sahnoun was negotiating the dispatch of a peacekeeping force of 500 "Blue Helmets" when he learned via the BBC of the imminent, non-negotiated arrival of 2,500 additional troops – a blunt indication that the operation was no longer being run from Mogadishu but from New York, and that the time had come for armed force rather than negotiation.

This contingent was initially so small that the soldiers, in their turn, soon hired armed guards for protection so that they could carry out their mission of protecting the aid convoys. But this was not important: what mattered was that the tone had been set, the UN's military involvement was on the right track, and the decision looked like a firm, suitable measure in the eyes of public opinion, which was beginning to call for action.

The second stage of this new strategy came with the ousting of Sahnoun and a press campaign on the theft of food supplies by armed bands, culminating in an announcement by the UN General Secretariat that 80% of these supplies was being looted. It is no coincidence that this figure was released just a few days before the announcement of the US intervention. What can we say in response to this fanciful statement, which meant in effect that all the aid sent to Somalia ended up lining the pockets of war profiteers and local thugs? Hijackings were occurring, of course, as in all situations of this kind, but it is estimated that the thefts amounted to 30-40% of food aid in the worst regions of the country, and only half of that amount elsewhere. When the UN released the 80% figure, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which was supplying food directly to 2 million people, estimated that it was losing about 10% of its relief supplies to plundering. The figure of 80%, which emerged from an office in New York and was accepted as fact, played the same triggering role in the Somali affair that the false reports of Iraqi troops murdering babies had played in the Gulf crisis.

The hijackings, which were unacceptable even though well below the reported figure, could have been fought by rebuilding a Somali police force, as was recommended by Andrew Natsios, the brilliant coordinator of the American relief efforts. According to the Americans, 2,400 of the 3,500 men who had made up the previous police force could have been re-engaged. This force, consisting of older men who were still respected because they had not come entirely under the control of Siyad Barre during his reign, could have resumed its role if it had received active support, but such support would have been forthcoming only if reliance on Somali society had been considered a priority objective.

Combating the hijackings meant first identifying the instigators of the looting, who were much more often haulers and merchants than faction heads. The United Nations never sought to have these predators punished. At the very least, it should have tried to convince those who laid a claim to political leadership to exert their authority in this matter. Although the warlords bore some responsibility for the hijackings, the fault lay more in a lack of desire to control their troops and representatives than in instigating the attacks. The result was that the violence spread wider and wider, looting and attacks on convoys became ever more frequent, and cargo ships were unable to enter Mogadishu and Kismayo, the country's main ports.

In this tense situation, the news of the massive intervention of American troops rang out like a message of deliverance. Announced on 24 November, the eve of Thanksgiving, an American holiday when the entire country gives thanks for life's blessings and bounty, it was broadly approved by American public opinion. Even Jesse Jackson, for the first time in his career, hailed the decision of a Republican president.

The marines therefore landed in Somalia in the guise of saviours, the standard-bearers of a new global solidarity. Then came the *Sea Pearl*, the first ship loaded with food to enter Mogadishu for five weeks. This magnificent symbol was only slightly dimmed by the arrival of the *Jack Lummus*, an immense freighter loaded with 45,000 tonnes of equipment and 1,400 vehicles, which nearly filled the port by itself. Still more significant, when "the first relief convoy escorted by the American army" left the port, headed north of Mogadishu, some 100 journalists accompanied the 20 tonnes of eminently newsworthy supplies – but no one followed the hundreds of tonnes that had been unloaded that day (and every other day) from the *Tadorne*, twenty kilometres away. Since it had been declared that no ship could unload without a marine escort, the *Tadorne* did not exist as far as the media were concerned.

When the American intervention began, the mortality rate had already fallen from about 25 per 10,000 to 5 per 10,000 per day in many places. This was still very high – the critical threshold is 2 deaths per 10,000 people per day – but the trend showed that the worst of the crisis was over. In the following months, the tremendous logistical and military resources deployed made it possible to transport supplies to isolated areas and to save many lives; the return of the rainy season and the partial resumption of farming did the rest. Traumatized and exhausted, Somalia emerged from emergency status and, in the spring of 1993, entered what was supposed to be a long-term reconstruction phase – on condition that the country managed to shake off its demons and avoid sliding back into war.

Although this recovery was fervently desired, it was compromised by the refusal to give a hearing to those who had never had a chance to express their views in public – headmen, intellectuals, and sundry other leaders. On 11 December, two days after the landing, an agreement was signed between the two masters of Mogadishu, Ali Mahdi and Aidid. It repeated, as if they were brand new, most of the points that the two rival chiefs had agreed upon several times over the preceding months and that had had no effect whatsoever: cease-fire, opening up the "green line", and withdrawal of the Mad Maxes. Moreover, this agreement – signed on the premises of the American oil company CONOCO, which was at the time the residence of the US ambassador Oakley, who was running the intervention – annoyed France considerably: the historic handshake, already photographed under the American flag, caused the last-minute cancellation of an identical meeting scheduled for the next day on a ship loaded with rice.

It is understandable that the imminent visit of President Bush required a symbolic gesture, but in rushing to make a deal the United States restored the warlords' legitimacy, which had been seriously undermined by the endless conflict. They could not have been ignored, of course, but it is regrettable that, once again, the international community helped to restrict rather than broaden access to power. The conferences held by the United Nations subsequently confirmed this institutional conferral of legitimacy, even though other groups – women, religious leaders, and intellectuals – were invited to participate. Furthermore, the Regional Councils, to which substantial powers were devolved, became another political rent: with the blessing of the international community this time, the factions used the councils to extend their hegemony, despite bitter local criticisms that nobody wanted to hear.

These political errors can probably be explained – though not justified – by the need to respond to media pressure through high-profile measures and simple declarations. As soon as the TV cameras were in Mogadishu to stay, events moved to a different beat as a new imperative

superimposed itself on the earlier objectives. The aim was no longer to manage a local crisis but to manage the indignation of world public opinion. What was needed was results that looked good on television, results that could fulfil the expectations of the public, and hence such results were produced in profusion. The crisis became a sort of Hollywood blockbuster, with an obligatory happy ending to each episode.

There is truth to the saying, “No TV camera, no news”. One may add that the camera does not simply reproduce the event, but also helps to shape it. The camera requires immediacy and visibility of subject, and these constraints are not easily reconciled with the complex requirements of an action that must do more than skim the surface of events.

It might be objected that, even if all this is true, the presence of foreign troops considerably improved security and allowed the relief organizations to get rid of their unwanted protectors. But here again, matters were not so simple.

Let us take the example of the city of Kismayo. When the MSF team arrived there in June 1992, they found a scene from Armageddon: violence and arms were everywhere, the surrounding villages were devastated, thousands of emaciated children were packed into makeshift shelters, and the survivors were stifling under the constant threat of looting.

In these apocalyptic conditions, the American and Belgian troops were welcomed when they arrived on 20 December – if not as liberators, at least with relief. However, their first gaffes, which were not long in coming, quickly disenchanting all concerned. Before turning over control of Kismayo to the Belgian troops, the Americans required Colonel Omar Jess, who controlled the town, to move his heavy weapons 150 kilometres north. This immediately opened the door for the troops of Siyad Barre’s son-in-law Morgan, known as the “Butcher of Hargueisa”, who was waiting for an opportune moment to take over this coveted port. Morgan’s troops had taken up positions in the country behind the port, and his intentions were known to the entire city, including the relief workers – but not to the Blue Helmets, who considered this “unfounded rumour” to be of no interest whatsoever.

The fighting for the town was fierce, and the relief facilities and nutrition centres were destroyed and looted. A group of 300 Somalis who gathered around the MSF premises had to be smuggled out to Mogadishu: as relatives or friends of MSF employees, they were now in the “wrong” clan.

The arrival of the Blue Helmets was preceded by a bloody purge along clan lines, perpetrated by the men of General Omar Jess. Dr Sean Devereux of UNICEF witnessed these atrocities, in which hundreds died, and when the UN contingent arrived he courageously decided to testify in public, in the belief that he, as well as the population of the city, was now safe. A few days later, he was killed in his home by two bullets fired by Omar Jess’ killers. The only explanation that the UN peacekeeping force would entertain was that the crime had been committed by the doctor’s guards following a dispute over their pay. Officially, the killings witnessed by Dr Devereux were only a rumour: there had admittedly been problems with security, many of them serious, but the UN had heard nothing of any organized massacre. Moreover, until he was driven out by General Morgan, Omar Jess was someone to be accommodated; after all, he was supposed to be participating in the United Nations conference in Addis Ababa.

Not surprisingly, the oppression resumed under his successor. Something vaguely resembling a police force was set up, composed exclusively of men from the clan in power and including some of the best-known assassins in the area, now armed and given an official status by the international community. Their patrols terrorized refugees and extorted tribute from passing pedestrians and vehicles. The victims had not the slightest chance of asking the UN for justice or

protection against the gang it had placed in power, since this “police force” controlled the entrance to the UN troops’ compound.

The outrage felt earlier by relief workers in the face of the daily atrocities was now compounded by despair as they witnessed the paralysis of the soldiers sent to right these wrongs. Their feelings were accentuated by the fact that the thuggish behaviour grew more unbearable every day. On the orders of the UN, the humanitarian organizations had been forced to dismiss their Somali security guards, who were replaced by paratroopers. Establishing themselves in the premises of the NGOs, these “peacekeepers” presented the dumbfounded volunteers with the spectacle of often-drunk men urinating from the rooftops, whistling at women, bullying children, and beating people up for no reason other than a passing whim or bad mood. It reached the point where the doctor of the MSF team was not unduly surprised to hear a para confess that he could no longer bear to hear his colleagues brag about the number of Somalis they had killed. In point of fact, several dozen people at the very least were killed during “inspections” and at roadblocks, without causing any apparent concern on the part of the United Nations administration. Sexual assault and overtly racist violence had become the daily lot of Kismayo under the “protection” of the Blue Helmets. It therefore comes as no surprise that during the first months of the year over one-third of the surgical beds in the hospital were occupied by victims of the peacekeeping force. After being wounded by humanitarian soldiers, they were treated by humanitarian doctors – an interesting experiment in recycling good intentions.

It may easily be imagined that for the NGOs – even though they were aware of only a fraction of the abuses occurring at the time – the protection of the paratroopers was rather undesirable, their proximity unpleasant, and the political cost of security increasingly high. Moreover, the military command soon announced that the mission of the Blue Helmets would not last, that their mandate did not include safeguarding relief workers, and that the NGOs would have to find another form of protection. One of the military commanders even suggested, unofficially of course, that MSF might call upon the services of a privately owned security company, and went so far as to offer a list of specialized firms.

In Mogadishu, meanwhile, Morgan’s capture of Kismayo did not go unnoticed. Aidid, the head of the most powerful faction and the prime mover in the fall of Siyad Barre, had immediately seen the international intervention as an obstacle to his own seizure of power. In offering the second-largest city in the country to the son-in-law of the hated former dictator, the UN offered Aidid an un hoped-for opportunity: he had no trouble in stirring up the very real anger of the people of Mogadishu, and did not trouble to conceal his pleasure at the first violent demonstrations against the United Nations, which was accused of wanting to restore Siyad Barre to power. Tension was still running high when, in early June, 23 Pakistani Blue Helmets were killed in a series of engagements, followed by retaliatory strikes that cost the lives of 34 Somalis. This triggered a series of reprisal raids against the strongholds of Aidid, who was held responsible for the “savage, premeditated attacks” before the investigation ordered by the Security Council on 6 June had produced any results whatsoever.

Clearly, such a crime could not go unpunished, but by lashing out in repeated punitive expeditions the American troops were in effect re-introducing the notion of collective responsibility, thus becoming a faction like all the others. They also deliberately undermined an Italian initiative: the Italians, considering it highly unlikely that Aidid would be captured and knowing that these raids were having a calamitous effect on the population, had been negotiating with his representatives for the surrender of the perpetrators.

After having been the UN’s preferred contact, to the point where all change in the political scene was blocked, Mohammed Farah Aidid was suddenly accused of crimes against humanity and declared guilty of the deaths of 300,000 people. A reward of \$25,000 was offered for information

leading to his capture, and the manhunt began under the mocking gaze of the other faction leaders, who saw their main rival forced to live more or less in hiding.

Day after day, the combat helicopters and counter-insurgency aircraft hit their targets: arms storage sites, a tobacco mill, and the Radio Mogadishu station, which had ties to Aidid, were attacked from the air, then surrounded and destroyed by ground forces. Sometimes the sophisticated arms systems – infrared sighting, computer-targeted cannon, etc. – vented their fury on a vacant lot, an abandoned warehouse, or the hulk of an automobile, demonstrating both the formidable precision of the weapons and the equally formidable confusion over targets. During this spiral of increasingly random violence, the premises of AICF (Action Internationale Contre la Faim), which also housed the MSF team, were attacked by two Cobra helicopters, which fired two missiles and then raked the building with machine-gun fire, despite the Red Cross flags and the emblems of AICF and MSF. The outcome: one foreign worker killed, one seriously wounded, and six Somali staffers wounded. Apparently, the vehicle of some journalists from the television channel France 2 had seemed suspicious to the aircrew. These airborne gunners next headed for a nearby hospital sheltering 300 ill and wounded people. To dislodge a few snipers, the helicopters machine-gunned the building, and as this was evidently not enough to restore law and order, the hospital was then surrounded by UN armoured vehicles so that no one could get in. It would certainly never have occurred to innocent wounded people to enter a den of terrorists for treatment! Will no one protect us from protectors like these?

As in the preceding days, the air strikes were carried out by the American troops, the ground offensives by the Pakistanis, and the blockade of the hospital by the Moroccans. Did this division of risk reflect the division of duties in this new international order for which Somalia had become one of the testing grounds? It cannot be mere chance that the Pakistanis were assigned to surveillance of hostile demonstrations when 23 of their soldiers had been killed in similar circumstances ten days before. The demonstrators, even when unarmed, would inevitably be perceived as threats and targets, and fired upon by the Blue Helmets. Once again, women and children died from shots fired blindly in the name of the international community.

With the repetition of this murderous scenario in September 1993, when during the repression of demonstrations dozens of civilians were cut down by the machine guns of international peacekeeping troops, the UN continued to pursue a tension-filled strategy that seemed to fulfil the grim promise of the early days after the landing. These events were less a deviation than the logical result of this strategy, in all its brutality.

Not so very long ago, humanitarian relief had its detractors, its avowed enemies who waved the standard of justice and decried that of charity. At the time, the “morality of emergency relief” served a useful purpose by unifying all those who did not seek to justify their failure to act by promises of a brilliant future. Today, the humanitarian movement needs to be wary of its many supporters who have become the apostles of armed solidarity: with friends like these, it will soon no longer need enemies.

In Somalia, for the first time, people were killed under the banner of humanitarian relief. They were not killed by accident, but during operations conducted by professional armies, and not killed in self-defence, but rather in raids conducted for the sake of vengeance. Bosnia showed us what the law is reduced to when one tries to enforce it without using force: a formidable illusion. Somalia shows, if such an illustration were needed, what becomes of force when it forgets the law: a criminal injustice.