

Humanitarian Action and Military Intervention: Temptations and possibilities

Fabrice Weissman

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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.

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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.

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Monrovia, July 2003: the fighting between forces loyal to President Charles Taylor and troops belonging to Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), the country's main rebel movement, had already claimed hundreds of civilian victims. Lacking water, food and medical care, hundreds of thousands of Liberians sought refuge in the capital, where the terror induced by the hail of bullets and shells was exacerbated by the combatants' propensity for the worst forms of violence. Malnutrition threatened and a cholera epidemic raged. As so often in cities ravaged by war – Beirut, Mogadishu, Grozny – little help could be given. The few operational humanitarian teams on the scene were confined to tending to those of the wounded who managed to reach them and, thanks to the courage of local staff, to providing basic assistance in the displaced persons' camps.

While Britain opted for direct military action in Sierra Leone and France sent troops to Côte d'Ivoire in 2002, no foreign power seemed willing to commit troops to stop the carnage in Liberia. Some humanitarian organisations were strongly critical of this 'abandonment' and called for international intervention. In France, Action Contre la Faim (ACF) settled for 'deploring, once again, the international community's criminal wait-and-see policy'¹ and condemned the 'absence of any immediate and concrete measures to protect civilian populations living under threat of death'². British and American organisations were more explicit. The American Refugee Committee (ARC) urged President Bush to 'use our military strength to help create and sustain peace in Liberia'³. At the beginning of July, Oxfam (UK) welcomed the announcement that West African troops were to be deployed but also asked the US to lead a multinational force⁴.

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) refused to endorse these appeals. However, there was general outrage at the horror engulfing Liberia. This feeling was all the more intense given the stark simplicity of the facts: Liberians were suffering from starvation and lack of medical attention, but above all from the unbridled violence of the combatants. Should not a humanitarian organisation draw the obvious conclusion and call for armed intervention to protect them?

The Fog of War

The question had arisen before, when Charles Taylor launched his insurrection against Samuel Doe's bloody regime in December 1989, but the deployment of white helmets from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in August 1990 had put an early end to that debate. Concluding that Liberia was in the hands of 'contending factions which are holding the entire population hostage, depriving it of food, health facilities and other basic necessities of life', ECOWAS had decided to send an intervention force (ECOMOG) 'to stop the senseless killing of

¹ Action Contre la Faim: 'Libéria: Tandis que les tergiversations diplomatiques n'en finissent pas, de nouveaux fronts militaires plongent un peu plus le Libéria dans l'apocalypse' [While the diplomats prevaricate, Liberia plunges further into apocalypse], 30 July 2003.

² Action Contre la Faim: 'Libéria/Monrovia: La capitale du Libéria sombre dans le chaos' [Liberia's capital sinks into chaos], 22 July 2003.

³ American Refugee Committee: 'ARC urges President Bush to send troops to Liberia', 10 July 2003.

⁴ Oxfam: 'White House must give timetable for Liberia intervention – US indecision costing lives', 24 July 2003.

innocent civilians, nationals and foreigners, and to help the Liberian people to restore their democratic institutions.⁵

These humanitarian considerations obscured the principal aim of the Nigerian-sponsored operation, which was to prevent Charles Taylor from seizing power. Shortly after their arrival, the West African troops began to support factions hostile to the rebel leader, thus at the last minute preventing his taking Monrovia. They showed little interest in protecting civilians as fighting raged throughout the capital in August 1990, October 1992 and April 1996. ECOMOG fought an all-out war against Taylor and, from 1992 to 1993, imposed an embargo on humanitarian aid to the rebel zones, shelling the convoys and warehouses of aid organisations (Jean, 1993). Eventually, in 1995, after pillaging Liberia and indulging in widespread violence, ECOMOG made a strategic U-turn and allowed Taylor to seize power in 1996, six years after it had snatched imminent victory from him.

This precedent did not mean that all future 'protection' operations were doomed to inflict damage on those they were supposed to help. In Sierra Leone, the British government's 'ethical diplomacy' ended the violence against a population that had been subjected to a particularly brutal war since 1991. The 650 paratroopers who landed in May 2000 to support pro-government forces and the 11,000 United Nations blue helmets waged a war against the rebels of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), forcing them to sign and abide by a final peace agreement. The only drawback was that peace had been imposed at a heavy price: willingness to overlook the war crimes committed by pro-government forces, an embargo on vital humanitarian assistance to RUF territories and the transfer of the most intransigent combatants to Liberia, where some of them were encouraged to overthrow Charles Taylor (Weissman, 2004).

It is obvious from this brief summary that international military intervention does not equal protection of all affected populations. Like any political enterprise, these operations produce winners and losers, *including among non-combatants*. The precedents of Somalia and Bosnia are sadly revealing in this respect. In Somalia, the American and UN troops, who landed in 1992 and 1993 in order to 'secure humanitarian aid' in a context of generalised famine and insecurity, proved incapable of protecting civilians, rapidly became parties to the conflict and were responsible for many violations of International Humanitarian Law, including bombing of aid organisations facilities, torturing and murdering non-combatants and massacring civilians (Brauman R, 1993). In Bosnia, the populations who had believed the UN's promises of protection and had taken refuge in the Zepa and Srebrenica 'security zones' were deported and slaughtered while the blue helmets stood by and watched.⁶

In other words, the call for armed intervention to defend the populations of Liberia is fraught with risk, to say the least. Contrary to the claim made by the Irish relief organisation Concern, a claim which reflected the views of its pro-intervention counterparts, there was no unequivocal guarantee that a 'rapid deployment [of a peacekeeping force] would prevent further unnecessary civilian

⁵ ECOWAS Standing Mediation Committee, Banjul, Republic of Gambia, Final Communiqué of the First Session, 7 August 1990.

⁶ On the other hand, the international forces dispatched to Timor in September 1999 to put an end to the pro-Indonesian militias' policy of terror fulfilled their mission. They were certainly supported by a clear mandate, considerable means and a firm political will, the essential conditions for a successful operation. However, the main reason for their success stemmed from the local conditions of their deployment: they landed on a tiny territory that was rapidly abandoned by Indonesian troops and the militias and received total support from the vast majority of the population. See G. Gonzales-Foerster, 'East Timor: Better Late than Never' in *In the Shadow of Just Wars*, op. cit.

deaths and allow agencies such as Concern to deliver badly needed humanitarian aid.⁷ Whether the 'problem solvers' like it or not, there is no technical riposte to war crimes that will ensure that the populations we seek to help will actually receive protection and assistance. Anyone who lives in the real world is familiar with the 'unbridgeable gap between calculation and the manifold possibilities that make up reality' (Terray, 2003), as well as with the uncertainties and dangers that accompany the exercise of power, particularly in time of war.

Perhaps a robust international policing operation will save the lives of many Liberians. Perhaps it will result in an upsurge of violence against civilians, false promises of protection and a growing confusion between intervention forces and aid workers who would be judged to be complicit in the war crimes committed by the troops they have welcomed. Perhaps pumping massive resources into Liberia, whether in the form of bilateral or other aid, would offer an alternative to the economy of predation that sustains the warlords and combatants and would thereby contribute to the pacification of the country. Who knows? Humanitarian workers can be no more certain of the outcome than the actors on the international and Liberian political stages. But it is for the latter – governments, international institutions, political parties, thinktanks, and citizens – to establish a position on such issues, to 'cut through the fog of war' (Terray, 2003), take the gamble and accept its consequences.

The Autonomy of the Humanitarian Approach

In fact, gaining access to the battlefield and providing impartial assistance to non-combatants, whatever side they may belong to, implies that humanitarians have relinquished the right to express opinions about the legitimacy of the war aims pursued by the belligerents. There is no reason why an intervention conducted in the name of protecting civilians should constitute an exception to this rule. Aid workers cannot be for or against making war on the Liberian factions in order to 'protect civilian populations' any more than they could be for or against the war started by the US to 'put an end to the suffering of the Iraqi people'. This is an operational principle, a prerequisite that allows them to protect their neutrality and demand immunity from violence as they go about their relief work. What argument could humanitarian actors fall back on when Liberian factions refuse them access to the zones they control on the grounds that aid agencies support the international forces attacking them?

Beyond this operational principle lies an even more fundamental reason that precludes the call for armed intervention: humanitarian action, as we understand it, rests on a logic which is fundamentally distinct from the reasoning employed by supporters (or opponents) of the recourse to force. Indeed, anyone who defends a political project – and especially a military undertaking – cannot avoid the following question: which citizens may live and which of them can or must die (Bradol, 2004). In reality, the imposition of peace, like the creation of all political order on an international, national or local scale, inevitably generates its quota of 'victims'; 'excluded' and 'powerless' people who are either doomed to violent death or deprived of elements essential to their survival (water, food, medical care and shelter). The Sierra Leoneans and Liberians sacrificed to the pacification of Sierra Leone, like the Afghan prisoners of war massacred during 'Operation Enduring Freedom', are testimony to this process. The logic of power either denies the existence of the people it has sentenced to death or justifies their sacrifice in the name of a 'lasting peace' and the well-being of the greatest number: 'you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs.'

⁷ Concern: 'Deploy peacekeeping forces in Liberia now', 23 July 2003.

Humanitarian action, however, is precisely the 'revolt of the eggs' (Finkielkraut, 1996). In our view, relief action is addressed in priority to those who form 'the silent residue of politics',⁸ the men and women whose very existence is called into question by the indifference or open hostility of their contemporaries. Adding speech to action, the humanitarian challenges power by asking it if all the deaths it decrees or tolerates are legitimate. Through aid and discourse, he disputes the logic that justifies the premature and avoidable death of a part of humanity in the name of a theoretical collective good. By doing so, he marks out the limit beyond which the destruction of human life can no longer be perceived as necessary but must be regarded as a crime or a scandal.

In this sense, the humanitarian actor has a duty to demand *autonomy*, a crucial separation from all forms of power and politics, however respectable they may be. In the interests of consistency, he cannot both adopt *and* contest the logic of a power that imposes a choice between those who may live and those who must die. Let us be clear that this is not a matter of defending a radical pacifism and even less about opposing the 'cynicism of politics' with alleged 'humanitarian virtues'. We simply wish to stress that the two approaches are entirely separate and have everything to lose if they are confused. The former is necessarily concerned with the resolution of conflicting interests and will produce losers among combatants and non-combatants alike. The latter resolutely sides with the losers; it tries to save their lives and questions the reasons for their sacrifice. When seen from this angle, the call for armed intervention in Liberia amounts to renouncing the logic specific to humanitarian thought and action.

Hubris and Utopia

Because aid workers are condemned by definition to a particular form of frustration – assisting the victims and exposing the violence inflicted upon them does not bring about the end of that violence – they are strongly tempted by politics. The slogan 'doctors cannot stop genocide', launched by MSF in 1994 as part of the appeal for a war against the Rwandan militias who were pursuing a policy of extermination, can be adapted for any of the crises that are bathing the world in blood. Doctors cannot stop the violence in Liberia or the destruction of the Chechen and Palestinian peoples any more than they can stop the massacres of civilians in Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo or Burundi. This also applies to situations like the forced displacement of populations in Sudan and the recurrent famines in Ethiopia.

Now, if humanitarian action is not a response to war crimes, aid agencies cannot call for the deployment of a 'protection' force without *appealing to references outside their practices*. Indeed, *any* campaign for armed intervention is a political act in its own right. It entails expressing a view about the recourse to force – why it should be necessary in Liberia but not in Sudan or Chechnya, for example. It also raises questions of an operational nature – *who are the targets of the intervention? Who are its partners? What price should be paid?* In Liberia, should the troops charged with the task interpose themselves between all the existing factions or should they take sides, as the UN and UK forces did in Sierra Leone? Should the intervention force be composed exclusively of West African contingents? Should the US, the European Union and other countries get involved? How many soldiers should they be prepared to sacrifice – ten, a hundred, a thousand? Should this force give priority to securing Monrovia, at the risk of displacing the fighting to the camps in the interior, or should it take possession of the entire country? If the latter hypothesis is favoured, do we then intend to place Liberia under UN trusteeship or turn it into an American or West African protectorate?

⁸ The term used by Michel Foucault

It is impossible to answer these questions without resorting to a political vision of the present and the future that substantially overrides the issue of protecting Liberian civilians, an issue on which humanitarian organisations have diverging opinions. It is rare for pro-intervention agencies to agree on the nature and composition of such a force. In the Liberian case, every NGO had a preference, either for a UN intervention or an American and West African operation, yet none could say why their choice would have been in a better position to guarantee the security of the Liberian people, nor against whom and at what price it should fight. All these considerations were brushed aside in the pressure to address a 'humanitarian emergency'. In the name of the suffering of the Liberian people, ARC stressed the need for unilateral action by Washington, adding: 'The administration should appoint a civilian humanitarian response coordinator to oversee relief efforts in Liberia. That way, humanitarian assistance will play a more significant role in the planning and execution of US involvement'⁹. Oxfam (UK), on the other hand, advocated the deployment of a multinational UN force that should nonetheless include a US element: Washington should issue a 'concrete and non-negotiable timetable for its support for the deployment of peacekeepers to Liberia, including US troops'¹⁰. The Irish organisation Trocaire rejected the idea of US participation and favoured a strictly UN intervention in the light of the 'critical importance of promoting multilateral approaches to global conflicts.'¹¹ These differences shatter the harmony of victim-centred rhetoric – and demonstrate that the call for armed intervention is a political affair par excellence – while the posture of infallibility that accompanies the adoption of 'humanitarian' positions remains intact.

Other organisations like ACF and MSF were more aware of the stakes involved in the call for military force and were not so reckless: they preferred to take refuge in utopian or consensual generalities. In substance, they explicitly condemned the 'lack of protection' available to the populations of Liberia and the 'inaction of the international community'. Such a position implicitly demands the deployment of an international police force to protect Liberian civilians. If we read between the lines we can distinguish the call for a powerful and determined force to stand in the path of all the war criminals, a force that rigidly adheres to the principles of international humanitarian law and has no motive other than the enforcement of respect for the Geneva Conventions. In other words, when faced with an emergency, these organisations fall back on utopian scenarios.

It is quite understandable that aid workers should feel frustrated in their humanitarian role in Liberia and seek the comfort of ideal solutions. Deploring the 'lack of protection' for civilians or calling upon the international community to shoulder its responsibilities allows them to believe they are breaking out of the confines of aid action. Such rhetoric mimics the adoption of a political position which, because it is utopian, does not jeopardise their autonomy and eludes the dilemmas that accompany political action. It does nothing to relieve the frustration, for everybody realises its futility given the urgency of stopping the carnage.

The Rehabilitation of Politics: Giving the Powerless a Voice

In Liberia, as elsewhere, aid organisations can only do their best within the confines of their role, which consists of providing victims with vital assistance and *contributing to ensuring that their fate becomes a stake in political debate by exposing the violence that engulfs them*. Humanitarian actors cannot supply answers but they are in a position to ask questions. Obviously, no measures

⁹ ARC: 'ARC urges President Bush to send troops to Liberia', 10 July 2003.

¹⁰ Oxfam: 'White House must give timetable for Liberia intervention – US indecision costing lives', 24 July 2003.

¹¹ Trocaire: 'Trocaire has called on the Irish Government to take urgent action on Liberia', 29 July 2003.

to address the crime will be undertaken if it is not named, if it is not made visible, and if the victims are concealed from their contemporaries. Investing the intolerable with a political visibility and refuting the discourse that presents it as a 'natural evil' to which we should resign ourselves, are essential stages in the transformation of the unacceptable into a political problem that demands a political response.

In Liberia, this process of politicisation needs to begin by deconstructing the clichés that analyse the conflict in terms of 'tribal savagery', thus exonerating the West of all responsibility while exhorting it to keep the 'new barbarians' at a distance if they cannot be 'civilised' (Jézéquel, 2004). But above all, the general public and those who condemned 'the country's abandonment by the international community' should be reminded that this community has been in the business of intervention for some years. Indeed, destabilisation was the price Liberia paid for the pacification of Sierra Leone and the containment of the crisis in Côte d'Ivoire. In order to put a stop to the depredations of armed groups backed by Charles Taylor in eastern Sierra Leone, south-eastern Guinea and western Côte d'Ivoire, the neighbouring states and their international partners decided to carry the fight onto Liberian territory. To this effect, they armed the two guerrilla groups who, along with Taylor's troops, were ravaging the country and reducing its population to slavery¹². This regional policy was supported by the Security Council and western powers,¹³ which had plainly decided to drive out Taylor whatever the cost. Although experts commissioned by the UN Security Council revealed the link between Guinean and Ivoirian authorities and the rebels, the Council enacted sanctions only against Taylor. Moreover, at the very moment when peace talks between Liberian factions opened in Ghana in June 2003, David Crane, chief prosecutor for the Special Court for Sierra Leone (and former director of national security at the Pentagon), decided to indict Taylor on the basis of his support for the RUF, a move which drove him back to Monrovia. 'These negotiations can still move forward, but they must do so without the involvement of this indictee',¹⁴ Crane told the press, thus excluding an intractable interlocutor from the peace talks.

Britain (whose military advisers in Sierra Leone were in contact with LURD fighters),¹⁵ the US (committed to training the Guinean army, which itself supported the rebels) and France (which turned a blind eye to Ivoirian government support for the Liberian combatants) had obviously opted for war in Liberia. Instead of calling for armed intervention or condemning the 'inaction of the international community', humanitarian organisations would have done better to confront the Security Council, France, Britain, the US, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire and ask them: as you have opted for a military solution in Liberia, what measures do you intend to take to relieve the suffering of the Liberian population, for which you are partly responsible? What do you intend to do about the war crimes perpetrated by the forces you encouraged to overthrow Taylor?

¹² Rebels versus Rebels in *Africa Confidential*, vol.43, n°4, 22 February 2002, 5; Liberia: Horse-trading, Arms-trading. The New UN Resolution misses an opportunity to tackle the regional conflict from all sides, *Africa Confidential*, vol.44, n°10, 16 May 2003, 4-5, 8.

¹³ Report of the Panel of Experts appointed pursuant to paragraph 4 on Security Council Resolution 1468 (2003), concerning Liberia (S/2003/498), 24 April 2003, particularly pp. 17 and 30.

¹⁴ 'Le Président Libérien inculpé de crimes de guerre' [Liberia's president charged with war crimes], *Libération*, 5 June 2003.

¹⁵ These contacts were confirmed by many Lurd fighters. See W. Reno, 'La Sale petite guerre du Libéria' [Liberia's dirty little war] in *Politique Africaine*, n°88, December 2002, 64.

It is essential that we draw public attention to the behaviour of the Liberian warlords – who all claim to be fighting for 'democracy' – and contrast it with the photographs of the inhabitants of Monrovia, decimated by cholera and indiscriminate gunfire, and the stories told by the people who managed to escape from Bong province, accounts of rape, torture, murder, looting and forced enrolment perpetrated by the 'freedom fighters'. But it is equally important to expose the link between these tragic events and international management of the West African crisis. Such a challenge, supported by objective and verifiable evidence, would have the merit of framing the debate in political rather than moral terms, and would not force humanitarian organisations into providing answers they are in no position to give. Did the stabilisation of the Sierra Leonean and Ivorian crises require the overthrow of the tyrannical but relatively stable Taylor regime at the risk of many civilian casualties? Perhaps it did, but that was not for aid workers to decide. Whatever the case, the people who took the risk must take responsibility for the consequences. In this respect humanitarians are entirely justified in asking what the belligerents and their foreign sponsors intend to do about the war crimes for which they bear varying degrees of responsibility. It is the duty of aid agencies and other organisations to reveal the extent to which the current deployment of international forces is leading to a significant reduction in violence against civilians and to establish whether or not the promises of protection are effectively being kept.

Finally, reframing the political debate presupposes that humanitarian organisations stop acting as the voice of the victims. An aid agency is often tempted to absorb the anguished cry of the populations it assists – reduced as they are to the status of animals that can only express suffering – and recycle it as a *discourse* that demonstrates a conception of what is just and what is unjust. Although it is quite normal that humanitarians should point to perceived violations of the Geneva Conventions and turn them into a political issue, they still cannot substitute their own voices for those of the victims. In accordance with the analysis of the philosopher Jacques Rancière, the task of the humanitarian actor is to 'reveal the formerly unseen' (Rancière, 1995). But he must also contribute to ensuring that what was 'audible as a noise becomes audible as a discourse'. In other words, he must break the symbolic order that relegates those damaged by politics to 'the darkness of silence or the animal sound of voices expressing consent or suffering.' To put it another way, when institutions like the UN Security Council approach aid organisations and ask what can be done for the Liberian people, these organisations would be better advised to refer them to the parties most affected by the conflict – the Liberians who have attempted to express their grievances, by piling up bodies in front of the US embassy in Monrovia, for example. The victim's protests should not be idealised as the reflection of an infallible truth; he should be accorded the same status as any other human being who is called upon to decide the fate of 'ordinary people'.

The political content of humanitarian action consists of the following duties: to remind states of their commitments and responsibilities; to challenge the 'order of things' by emphasising that it is also – and above all – the order of men; to remind the protagonists that they cannot support injustice while ignoring its consequences; to stress the historical contingency of the division between winners and losers, included and excluded, rich and poor; to help the 'powerless', the sacrificial victims of the production of the 'order of things', to express their concerns in the public arena. These are the means by which humanitarian action can avoid the drift towards charity and transform pity into a demand for justice.

The Singularity of Genocide

Contrary to appearances, this minimalist but radical profession of faith is not a definitive condemnation of the appeal for armed force. We believe there is at least one situation in which aid workers can call for military intervention: when they are confronted with genocide and consider that there is a realistic possibility of it being stopped by military action. This exception involves a temporary renunciation of humanitarian logic and full participation in the political arena and is

justified for at least two reasons. First, because food and medical aid are of little use to civilians who have been marked out for extermination by a state that is mobilising all its forces to this end. Second, because it is impossible to remain a humanitarian without taking sides in the event of genocide. The crime's singularity derives from the fact that the massacre of civilians is not regarded as a 'military necessity', a way of achieving a strategic advantage, but has become an end in itself, a project that requires the assiduous application of military strategy and logic. Under these circumstances, emphasising the obligations to distinguish between combatants and non-combatants and to preserve the lives of the latter amounts to taking a stand against a power that has resorted to arms purely in order to perpetrate genocide. The principle that aid workers adhere to, the refusal to express a view on the legitimacy of war aims so they can relieve the suffering of all non-combatants, is rendered *de facto* null and void when the extermination of non-combatants is the precise goal pursued by one of the belligerents.

There is also a more opportunistic reason that justifies the call for military action in this particular case: the request for armed intervention against a genocidal power is simply a request that the law be applied. Indeed, the 1948 Convention for the prevention and curtailment of the crime of genocide enjoins the 129 signatory states to take all appropriate measures, including military action. In other words, by designating extreme violence as constitutive of genocide, the signatories are automatically committed to using all available means to combat those who organise, facilitate and perpetrate this crime against humanity.

The obligation to 'put a stop' to a particular crime is surely as political as it is judicial. From a legal point of view, it also applies to 'serious violations' of international humanitarian law such as indiscriminate attacks on civilians and combatants. But we are forced to accept that this prescription, set out in Article 89 of Protocol 1 Additional to the Geneva Conventions 1977, does not carry the same moral, symbolic and political weight as the one established by the Convention against genocide (although this was ratified by fewer states than Protocol 1 Additional, which was signed by 154 parties). However, it is worth asking why the call for armed intervention is not also justified in certain other circumstances. These would include massive war crimes inflicted with the aim of 'cleansing' territories or reducing populations to total submission, crimes so lethal that they can attain genocidal proportions (as in Timor, where the repressive policies of the Indonesian army led to the deaths of between 35% and 43% of the population).

In fact, the singularity of genocide does not automatically resolve the question of armed intervention. When should the organised destruction of civilian populations be classified as genocide? When the victims are counted in tens, hundreds, thousands, or hundreds of thousands? Once again, prompt and carefully considered responses depend on independent political judgement. They cannot be expected from local political protagonists who, in the hope of attracting the support of the international community, use the political and legal resources of the word genocide to tarnish their adversaries. It is also dangerous to put one's faith in international bodies like the United Nations Security Council, which refused to acknowledge the existence of genocide in Rwanda for more than six weeks because of the legal and political implications of such a qualification. While autonomy is essential if the crime is to be given its proper name, it is no guarantee of clear-sightedness: it was some weeks before Médecins Sans Frontières teams working in Rwanda in April 1994 realised that the massacres they were witnessing were actually part of a genocidal process.

Last but not least, the call for military action to stop genocide, if it is to be anything other than a vain posturing designed to salve the consciences of aid workers, must be based on political and military assessments that clearly indicate that an armed intervention is not only necessary but also actually possible. This is not always the case. For example, can we imagine that aid organisations should have called for the US, which had barely emerged from the Vietnam War, to invade Cambodia in order to stop the Khmer Rouge killing machine?

Conclusions

In conclusion, there are only very few situations in which humanitarian actors can call for an armed intervention without renouncing to their own logic: when they are confronted with genocide or a process of organised destruction of civilian population.

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