

Military Humanitarianism: A Deadly Confusion

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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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On 11 June 2004, nine days after five MSF staff members were killed in Afghanistan, a Taliban spokesperson offered the following justification for their murder: "Organizations like Médecins Sans Frontières work for American interests and are therefore targets for us." As horrific as the crime is that this accusation seeks to legitimize, the statement itself is hardly surprising given the confusion that currently characterizes the symbol of humanitarianism.

Getting access to the battlefield from belligerents in order to provide impartial aid to non-combatants is a difficult and dangerous undertaking. Field armies are not comfortable with the presence of foreign actors, who are often suspected of serving the enemy's interests. Under these conditions, the safety of international aid workers, and their room to maneuver, is tied closely to the credibility of the humanitarian symbol under which they operate. That symbol says, "We refuse to take sides in this war. Our only goal is to provide aid to its victims." When all is said and done, the only protection humanitarian actors have is the clarity of their image. It must reflect their position as outsiders to the conflict and the transparency of their intentions. Both coalition forces and the majority of aid actors have seriously abused this image in Afghanistan, thus perpetuating a deadly confusion between humanitarian organizations and political-military institutions.

Camouflage and cooperation

In Afghanistan, the first aspect of this confusion was caused by camouflaging psychological warfare and intelligence operations as humanitarian action. Clear cut examples include the coalition's "humanitarian" food drops during the first aerial strikes in 2001, its deployment of special forces in civilian dress who claim to be on a "humanitarian mission," and threatening to suspend humanitarian aid to populations in southern Afghanistan if they refuse to provide information about the Taliban and Al Qaeda. Winning the hearts and minds of civilian populations and encouraging them to cooperate with military forces are classic and legal military techniques according to the Geneva Conventions. On the other hand, presenting a combat tactic as a humanitarian operation blatantly violates the humanitarian symbol, just as using a Red Cross vehicle to transport weapons clandestinely alongside a patient would be.

After the defeat of the Taliban, many institutional donors required NGOs and UN agencies to help stabilize and rebuild Afghanistan. The vast majority of humanitarian actors placed themselves at the service of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and of the interim government. Both of these actors receive varying degrees of support from coalition forces. NGOs and UN agencies thus abandoned the independence essential to providing independent aid and modeled their priorities on those of the new regime and its Western allies, who were still at war with the Taliban. This scenario constitutes the second element of confusion: making it impossible to distinguish between a subcontractor working on behalf of a warring party and an independent, impartial humanitarian aid actor.

Finally, the use of humanitarian rhetoric to justify going to war is another confusing element. Beyond retaliation for the 11 September attacks, the defense of human rights and international humanitarian law were presented as forceful arguments in favor of armed intervention in Afghanistan. The world was told that force and occupation were required to save an exhausted population from famine, to improve women's access to medical care and to ease refugees' return, among other goals. This martial and imperial use of humanitarian rhetoric contributed significantly to blurring the image of aid organizations. If an appeal to humanitarian considerations can justify

both a medical aid operation and a military campaign, doesn't that suggest that aid workers and international troops represent two sides of the same coin? Aid actors do not, of course, have a monopoly on the words they use. However, using the semantic and legal terms that aid workers rely on for military ends obscures the image of humanitarian organizations, making it difficult to determine whether those organizations are outsiders to the conflict or the vanguard of expeditionary troops of new "just wars".

War as a continuation of aid

It would be wrong to hold governments alone responsible for the confusion surrounding the humanitarian symbol today, as many aid actors are also confusing the situation. A liberal, universalist strain within the charitable aid movement and among human rights defense groups holds that war can be the continuation of humanitarian aid by other means. In the belief that the worldwide export of market democracy is the highest philanthropic calling, this movement considers any action to be "humanitarian" if it contributes to achieving that mission. Such actions include assisting and protecting "good victims" (those whose survival does not threaten the project's success), imposing economic sanctions, dropping bombs, and invading and occupying nations "guilty of massive violations of human rights". Consequently, organizations that take this position have no objection to supporting "just wars" and serving the governments that pursue them. From this perspective, the term "humanitarian action" is only a euphemism for a colonizing mission that imposes, by force, institutions whose every feature is supposed to embody a value system believed to be universal. This interpretation has terrible ramifications for aid workers who display that same humanitarian symbol to conduct their aid missions.

Weakening the meaning of humanitarian language has had the effects we feared it would. On the Afghan political scene, international aid actors are perceived as back-up troops to the Western intervention forces—if not to the Crusaders. How can aid groups make a convincing claim that they are outsiders to the conflict when the symbol they display is used to justify an armed offensive and, subsequently, an occupation? And when it is used to consolidate the institutions of one party to the conflict and to provide cover for psychological operations? With this in mind, it is no surprise that the Taliban could believe that we "work for American interests". More than 30 Afghan humanitarian aid workers and 9 international volunteers have been killed in recent months by forces hostile to the coalition, leading to a significant reduction in aid activities and to MSF's withdrawal from Afghanistan after 24 years.

Let us be clear, however, that the murder of our colleagues cannot be reduced to "a terrible misunderstanding". Forces hostile to the interim government and to the coalition intend to conduct a total war, one that accepts no compromise with the adversary, including the saving of lives as part of independent and impartial aid operations. We are not so idealistic as to think that a clear understanding of our action principles would be enough to dissuade anyone from attacking us. However, the confusion between occupation forces and humanitarian organizations undoubtedly has encouraged acts of violence against aid agencies. The clarity of the humanitarian symbol may not guarantee absolute security but it is, nonetheless, an essential precondition.

Aid workers' safety at risk

The blurring of the humanitarian symbol and its disastrous consequences for team safety and aid activities are not limited to the Afghan theater. They may be found in most places where international forces are deployed. Those include, of course, Iraq, where many perceive—even more so than in Afghanistan—aid actors as mere auxiliaries to occupation forces. They have been targeted for bloody attacks to such an extent that there is little room for humanitarian action in Iraq.

This is also the case in countries like Liberia, where the humanitarian symbol encompasses UN peacekeeping operations, including combat actions and influences operations against groups hostile to the peace process. Those groups then consider anyone who claims to be a humanitarian as a potential enemy.

Whatever their legitimacy, armed interventions intended to assist and protect civilian populations put aid workers' safety at risk from the moment they are deployed under the humanitarian banner. If a protection operation is to be serious, it necessarily involves the use of force against the enemy and, creates a risk of non-combatant victims. How can a humanitarian organization provide aid to victims if it is equated with the "humanitarian" protection force doing the fighting? This is the danger that threatens aid organizations in Sudan today. By brandishing the threat of armed intervention in Darfur in the name of humanitarianism, the Security Council and certain Western nations are including humanitarian actors in their camp. In so doing, they are designating those actors as enemies in the eyes of Khartoum's authorities.

We should remember the obvious: international aid workers have no enemies. The Revolutionary United Front in Sierra Leone, UNITA in Angola and the Taliban in Afghanistan are not their enemies. Neither are the Sudanese pro-government militias. These armed groups are parties to a conflict, just like a potential international intervention force. If the latter claims a humanitarian role—or worse, if it appeals to aid organizations to provide military intelligence—then humanitarian organizations' position as outsiders to the conflict is discredited. How long until an aid worker in Sudan is killed because he or she "works for the interests of the intervention force"?

It may be good for the UN or Western powers to intervene in Sudan to assist and protect civilians in Darfur. However, that is not a question for aid actors to decide. But conducting a "just war" in the name, and with the participation, of humanitarian organizations poses a deadly threat to aid organizations and the people they assist. After the Iraqi and Afghan populations, will the Sudanese people on the wrong side of the front line become the newest victims, abandoned by humanitarian organizations forced to evacuate the country after their symbol has been militarized?