MULTI-NATIONAL RESPONSES TO HUMANITARIAN CRISES: A VIEW FROM THE FIELD

by
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INTRODUCTION:

In the aftermath of the Cold War, there was widespread hope that the world was embarking on a new era of cooperation that would lead to the end of many of the long-lasting conflicts in the Third World and would provide new impetus to multi-national efforts to contain and prevent the outbreak of new crises. The success of the international community in Kuwait in stopping, and then reversing, Iraq's international aggression and the subsequent success of an allied force operating under a United Nations mandate to halt and reverse Iraq's internal aggression against the Kurds further encouraged western political leaders and the international humanitarian community. With those successes in mind, the United States found ready backing for a humanitarian intervention in Somalia in December of 1992. The initial success in Somalia encouraged the advocates of military intervention in the Balkans and many were hopeful that the existing multi-lateral effort in Bosnia spearheaded by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) would be expanded and strengthened with U.S. or NATO troops.

Now, less than a year after U.S. Marines waded ashore in Mogadishu, U.N. Forces appear to be hopelessly entangled in a political quagmire and the humanitarian program has been devastated by continuing attacks by the warring factions on the humanitarian aid program. In Bosnia, the U.N. struggles alone with only minimal help from NATO and little more than humanitarian aid from the United States. Across the board, multi-national responses to humanitarian crises are being called into question.

LESSONS FROM SOMALIA AND BOSNIA:

A close examination of the field level problems that have occurred in Somalia and Bosnia can provide policy-makers with a better understanding of the limitations of multi-national responses at this point. Such a review is imperative; the international community cannot afford to lose the opportunities that the post-Cold War environment provides. Rather than shying away from collective responsibility when the going gets tough, we should renew our efforts to find workable means of forging international cooperation and action to resolve the myriad conflicts and crises that continue to plague many regions of the world. Nowhere is this more important than in the Balkans, for our response there will set the tone for what may happen in eastern Europe, Russia and the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union.

From the point of view of humanitarian services and assistance, there is really nothing new that can be identified by looking at Somalia and Bosnia. The problems are the same ones the international relief agencies, and particularly the United Nations, have been experiencing for years. These include imprecise mandates, a lack of realistic doctrines and poor preparation by the U.N. agencies; a lack of effective coordination of humanitarian assistance by the U.N.; ineffective cooperation between U.N. and non-governmental organizations; a shortage of resources; the application of inappropriate aid (often provided by donors more anxious to help their own economies than meet the needs of the victims); inappropriate aid programs; poorly focused targeting of humanitarian assistance; all compounded by improperly trained and experienced relief personnel. These are not new problems, though they are now more visible under the glare of widespread news coverage and, in the case of Bosnia, are more noticeable because they are happening to Europeans, not Africans, Asians, or Latin Americans. These problems have been around for years, but somehow seemed more understandable when they were happening in remote areas and in god- forsaken climes.

What is more noteworthy is the failure of the collective security system and the inability of the United Nations to successfully integrate military and humanitarian operations in both countries. In Bosnia, the failure of the collective security systems established in the aftermath of World War II and, in the case of Europe, the inter-governmental mechanisms that were designed to strengthen European cooperation and security is particularly disconcerting. The reason that the United Nations was founded was to prevent international aggression. Yet, neither the United Nations Security Council, nor its peacekeeping troops have had any significant impact on reducing the level of violence. Furthermore, the regional security systems have also failed, the Organization of African Unity has been hopeless in Somalia and the European selective security mechanisms of NATO and the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), have not been able to dampen the fighting in Bosnia. The European community which offered both recognition and economic assistance as incentives to peaceful dissolution of Yugoslavia, only seemed to make matters worse. As a result of these problems the international community appears to be disengaging. Instead of persevering and making collective security work thereby taking advantage of what could be a short window of opportunity to do, the West is running away. That the strongest economic region in the world cannot find a common and workable approach to resolving a conflict on its doorstep is extremely alarming. That the U.S. remains on the sidelines is unfathomable.

The inability of the U.N. to find a workable means of using military resources to reduce conflict and gain access to beleaguered communities has greatly undermined the effectiveness of the humanitarian operation and the prestige of the organization. This has left implementing agencies, especially the humanitarian organizations of the U.N. and non-governmental organizations, in a bind. They are expected to do with food, humanitarian assistance, and goodwill what the major powers and the collective security organs have failed to do with armies. This has not gone unnoticed by the warring factions. They quickly realized how faint-hearted the Western leaders are and now know that if they can kill or capture a handful of soldiers that the mighty allies which form the backbone of the

peacekeeping operations will quickly withdraw their forces. Thus, they operate with impunity, further threatening the humanitarian agencies and increasing the number of obstacles that must be overcome in order to reach the innocent victims of their actions.

To operate in this environment, the United Nations has been forced to make some awful, and often shocking, compromises. In Somalia, relief agencies were forced to hire local thugs to "protect" the relief workers and aid supplies. This quickly escalated into paying protection with humanitarian supplies.

In Bosnia, the compromises are even more alarming. When he U.N. peacekeeping forces failed to force their way through the first Serbian blockade put across the road after their arrival, the scene was set for continuing harassment and interdiction of relief supplies. The next step was paying the Serbs, and later the Croatian defense forces (HVO), at each checkpoint to obtain permission to pass. Whenever they feel like it, the Serbs now demand a third, and sometimes even one half, of all humanitarian cargos passing through their checkpoints or the airport. To make this practice more palatable, the U.N. offered to give humanitarian assistance directly to the Serbs and a relief program, supposedly based on needs (though often unverified), was formulated. Many observers have likened this to providing the Nazi government with humanitarian assistance during World War II. Doubtless there are humanitarian needs on the Serb side, but the willingness of the international community to provide aid without adequate checks and with full knowledge that much of it is not only misused but is, in effect, breaking the U.N. sanctions and relieving pressures on the Serbian government and the Bosnian Serb authorities, make the effort practice highly questionable.

More alarming, some aid has been targeted for communities that have been ethnically cleansed and will be given to families brought in to colonize the areas to keep them from reverting to the original inhabitants. The U.N. argues that giving them aid makes it easier to reach the Muslims trapped in various Serb surrounded enclaves, but that is doubtful and even if it were true, it hardly makes the practice more palatable.

Perhaps the worst situation that occurred was in the winter of 1993 when the U.N. provided food to the Serb authorities who distributed with forced labor on frontline areas. Human Rights groups reported that Muslims were forced to hand carry packages of food to Serbs in the Serb-held part of Sarajevo, Grbavića, where they were exposed to intense firing from the Bosnian side.

The United Nations has also agreed to some rather dubious undertakings in order to ensure the delivery of relief supplies. In June 1992, the U.N. Security Council ordered UNPROFOR to take control of the Sarajevo Airport so that allied planes could deliver food and relief supplies to city. The Serbs outmaneuvered the U.N. and offered to turn over the airport to UNPROFOR in return for the right to examine cargos passing through the field. As a result, they can, and do, cut off aid any time they want by simply refusing a cargo. Most U.N. officials have accepted the Serbs' claim that they "gave the airport to the U.N." They forget that it was not the Serbs' to give.

The U.N. has made the situation worse by agreeing to police the airport and prevent people from crossing the field to enter or leave the city (the airport is the only way in or out for most Bosnians).[1] This has led to a horrible situation at the airport. Hundreds of people attempt to cross the airfield at night. At best, UNPROFOR intercepts the crossers and takes them back to where they started. But there are also many reports of people being harassed by UNPROFOR troops as they cross the field and of a thriving black market in human traffic run by unscrupulous U.N. soldiers. Far worse, however, is the fact that many people have been killed when UNPROFOR soldiers turned headlights on them, illuminating them for Serbian snipers at the edge of the airport. The United Nations should never have accepted the task of policing the airfield -- the first protection principle of humanitarian law is the right of people to flee for a "well founded fear of persecution" or death. If the Bosnian government or the Serb authorities want the stop the people, they should do it themselves.

The situation on the ground calls into question many long-held tenants of humanitarianism. The two most commonly criticized in Bosnia are: the neutrality of humanitarian agencies and the principle of equal access by all people to humanitarian aid. By taking a stance of strict neutrality, the primary victims of the war (the Bosnians) are being hurt. Neutrality in Bosnia has come to mean aiding all sides often proportionally. While aid to the Bosnians follows traditional lines and demonstrates remarkable accountability, the handing over of relief supplies, fuel, and other resources to the Serbs and, to a lesser extent, the Croatians, with far less controls over distribution, hurts the Bosnians in several ways. First it serves to legitimize their claims that they are the victims of the war, not the aggressors. Second, giving the Serbs fuel makes it easier for them to operate their military equipment. The fuel may not go directly into a tank's tank, but it certainly releases other stores of fuel for more sinister purposes. Likewise, food and other relief supplies provided by the international community frees funds that the Serb authorities can use for military purposes.

The concept of equal access should also be reconsidered. It has been estimated that the amount of humanitarian assistance and indirect economic aid provided to Serbia by the humanitarian effort is approximately $1.5 million per day. At the same time, UNPROFOR estimates that the value of the shells fired at Sarajevo alone during the last 18 months is the equivalent of approximately $1.6 million per day. Of course there is not a direct relationship between the food and economic benefits that Serbia receives and the cost of prosecuting the war. But certainly if Serbia were not receiving the aid and if the humanitarian agencies were not operating in Belgrade, President Milosević and Mr. Karadzić would have to find those resources somewhere else. Equal access should not be a given in all situations. The sanctions allow food and humanitarian supplies to be brought into Serbia, but that does not mean that the international community should give it to them. Rather, the Serb authorities should be forced to come up with the money, much as Iraq is expected to do.

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[1]Since March 93, more people have entered the city than have left it.

Bosnia and Somalia have taught us some hard lessons about the difficulties of providing and coordinating humanitarian assistance in conflicts. In the aftermath of the Gulf War there was a belief that the United Nations, especially the Security Council, would be able to issue stern warnings to belligerents that would be obeyed. It was felt that with the close relationship developing between East and West, local tyrants would no longer be able to play one block against the other and would be forced to succumb to U.N. mandates. If anything, the opposite has happened. Leaders like Milosević realize that the U.N. has no authority unless it is backed by the super powers and that, in practice, U.N. action represents the lowest common denominator of political will among the principals.

Some lessons related to the structure of humanitarian operations have also become apparent. Most U.N. officials have felt that humanitarian agencies should play the lead role in conflicts with peacekeeping forces subordinate. In Bosnia UNHCR is the lead with UNPROFOR providing military support. This hasn't worked well. UNHCR has only a small staff while UNPROFOR troops now number in the thousands. While UNHCR remains the titular head of the operation, UNPROFOR calls most of the shots. In many cases the UNHCR and UNPROFOR are not even co-located and coordination is minimal and often ineffective. The force has the logistics capability, communications, internal command and control systems, and most important, manpower. In emergencies, the agency with the most resources, rules.

The security situation leads to a key question: which should come first — humanitarian assistance or peacekeeping? In both Somalia and Bosnia, humanitarian operations proceeded the deployment of international forces. Only when it was clear that the humanitarian agencies could not function without additional security, were those forces deployed. This has led to the situation where the roles and mandate of the military forces were unclear. For example, in Bosnia UNPROFOR original mandate was only provide escorts for UNHCR convoys. Over the next eighteen months it was given many other assignments and grew in an *ad hoc* manner. Today the force is unwieldy, improperly configured for many of the missions it has been assigned and has an amorphous command and control structure that is questionable. In many areas, UNPROFOR needs to be protected itself.

The principal lesson here is that peace-making must proceed deployment of humanitarian agencies. In many cases it may be possible to deploy them simultaneously, but clearly peace-making must create an environment wherein humanitarian agencies can operate safely.

In Somalia, and to a lesser extent in Bosnia, humanitarian assistance has been seen as an integral part of broader political activities such as reconciliation and nation building. Diplomats saw food and other aid as a means of leveraging the belligerents and bringing them to the peace table. Aid, coupled with easing sanctions, was seen as a carrot to change the Serbs' behavior in Bosnia. In Somalia, this has clearly failed. In fact, in the current situation, the integration of humanitarian assistance with the nation building effort has led to

the humanitarian agencies being targeted as much as the peace-keeping forces. While humanitarian assistance can be an effective tool, it must clearly be used carefully lest it become discredited and vulnerable.

One final lesson should be mentioned. Humanitarian organizations cannot continue to provide aid oblivious to the environment in which they operate. To be blunt, many of the humanitarian agencies are asking for trouble by the way they operate. Many approach relief rather naively, using the same methods they would use in a country not at war. They seem unaware of the value that food and relief goods have amidst the enforced shortages that conflicts create. In cases where relief commodities are the only source of food, medicines, or personal items, they become a form of currency, and those that possess or control them have enormous power. Some relief agencies seem oblivious to the fact that conflicts bestow unwarranted power on the undesirable elements of a society and that smugglers, thieves and others that prey on relief goods congregate at borders and move easily in the lawless environment that accompanies conflict. Many agencies do little to decrease the risks. They often select items of high value, package them in such a way that they can easily be pilfered, and transport them with little consideration for security. Furthermore, they drive vehicles that are of high value to paramilitary forces — pickup trucks, four-wheel drive vehicles, etc. Donors must demand that relief agencies operating in conflict zones plan and configure their operations with security in mind.

CONCLUSIONS

The two current crises illustrate that there are many shades of gray in multilateral response to humanitarian emergencies. Operation Provide Comfort in northern Iraq was distinctly different from Operation Restore Hope in Somalia. The Somali operation is distinct from the operations in Bosnia, and Bosnia is likely to be very different from operations in the next crisis. One thing is certain, however, multilateralism *per se* has not been effective and still requires U.S. leadership. But far more than that, we need more sophisticated approaches than we've demonstrated thus far. Simply providing humanitarian aid in the same old questionable modes has run its course. We need to go beyond handouts. Market intervention strategies, such as monetizing food and forcing belligerents to deal with each other economically, must be developed. On the coordination side, we need a better understanding of when to integrate humanitarian and military activities and when to divorce them.

Where do we go from here? To begin with, the United States and the Western Allies should not disengage from these two conflicts. Instead, we should take a hard look at what is happening and find ways to make the multi-lateral system work. We can, and should, fine tune and hone our collective capabilities.

Second, we must start now to prepare for future crisis of this nature. We should begin by training an integrated cadre of soldiers, statesmen and aid workers to tackle these complex emergencies, as a team. The U.S. should take the lead, then include other key powers and providers of humanitarian assistance and peace-keeping troops.

Finally, we need to take a hard look at the lessons learned, especially the strategies and approaches we are using to provide humanitarian assistance in these emergencies. They must be tackled in the same manner as a military operation -- with combined planning, hard-nosed doctrines, and a portfolio of strategies and tactics for various contingencies.

By honing our skills and taking a much more sophisticated approach than we have in the past, the United States can firmly grasp the post Cold War opportunities that are still within our reach.

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