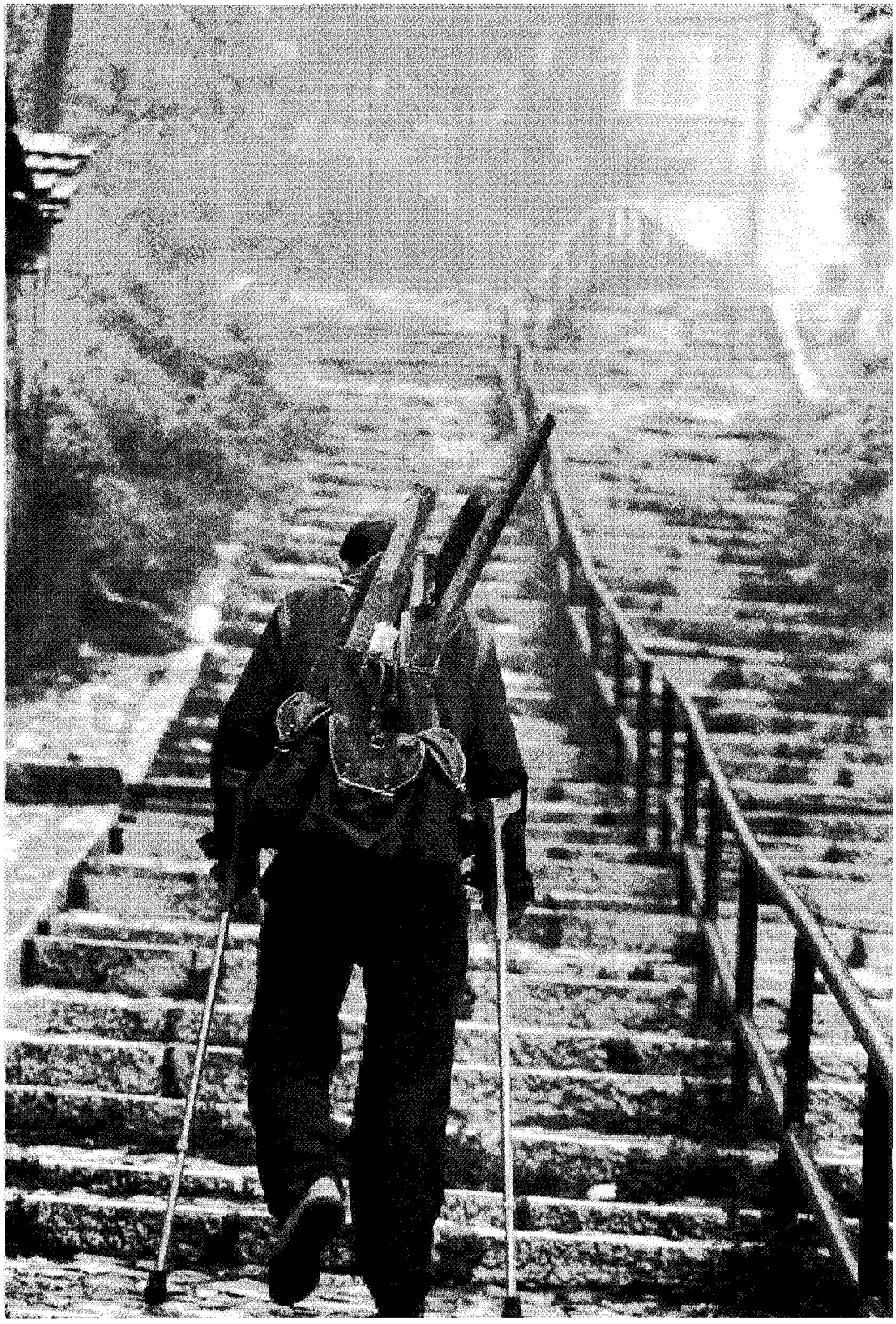

Whether in flood, famine or war, meeting the basic needs of food, water and fuel becomes the daily imperative in disasters. International organisations often provide the resources, but before, during and after disaster operations it is the efforts of individuals caught up in disaster which determine whether they, their families and their communities survive or succumb to the stress laid upon them
Bosnia, 1993. Abbas/Magnum

by other European governments with the costs of resettling refugees in their country.

The weather has also created another new challenge for agencies operating in the former Yugoslavia through the needs of refugees, displaced people and millions of social cases for fuel for both heating and cooking that they cannot afford, especially since war, sanctions and exchange shortages have either damaged energy systems or limited fuel imports and domestic supplies available for civilians.

In rural areas, traditional sources of fuel are still available at an obvious environmental cost, but many are going cold in towns and cities, with a further impact on physical and psychological health. It has even led the Federation, with the assistance of the Austrian Red Cross, to organise entire trains of Christmas wood supplies to be brought in across the border for distribution to villages and refugee centres in Croatia.

Austria has also been the base for an inspiring response to the crisis, with the launch by the Austrian Red Cross, Caritas and ORT, the Austrian state television company, of an appeal dubbed Nachbar in Not, or Neighbour in Need, which has expanded across Europe and as far as America.

While generating thousands of trucks full of food, clothes, medicines and other supplies, the appeal had another crucial role: successfully combating the growing anti-refugee sentiment in Austria by humanising the disaster, motivating public opinion to support those in need and channelling concern into well-organised assistance.

While governments are frustrated by their inability to resolve the conflict, many communities and individuals in Europe have wanted to take practical steps to help those affected, and have organised their own convoys of aid supplies, since for once the disaster on their television screens is just a few hundred kilometres of easy driving away.

This has put professional aid workers in a quandary; grateful for the compassion, such freelance efforts represent yet aware that without careful coordination and planning this generosity can fail to reach those in real need, use precious resources on unwanted gifts when the cash could have better spent by the agencies themselves, and even put lives at unnecessary risk.

Aid agencies are fully aware that they cannot solve the crisis in former Yugoslavia; indeed, that is not their role. But while fighting continues and political negotiations fail to find any solution, they are confronted by millions of vulnerable people - refugees, those displaced, social cases, host families, pensioners, the unemployed - in deepening need and no end in sight.

If any republic in the former Yugoslavia were to abandon its responsibility for its own citizens and refugees in the pursuit of war, and States outside refused to pick up the burden, all that would remain are the international and national humanitarian agencies, which are expected to fill the humanitarian gap between needs and resources.

These agencies are also increasingly being expected to take on new roles involving responsibility without power - from being proxies in what should be political or military actions to the risk that they may be asked to become surrogate governments, providing most of the services that citizens expect from their State.

Focus 7 Politics, conflicts and aid: the great experiment

Like Somalia, the former Yugoslavia is a laboratory for an experiment in the new world order, an unholy alchemy of war, aid and politics whose product has been a grinding stalemate of failed efforts, lost opportunities and missed targets during months and years of conflict. In both the Horn of Africa and the Balkans, the post-cold war concept of "the West" - through Nato and the United Nations - as the world's policeman has been stopped in its tracks.

In conflicts, three activities often occur side by side: politics, humanitarian assistance, and violence or the threat of violence - "legitimate" and "illegitimate" - through military forces. The larger potential conflict of the cold war suppressed the regional and local conflicts now erupting across the world. The end of the cold war removed the stand-off role of the massive forces in Nato and the Warsaw Pact, and for the first time in decades opened up vast areas of their former "empires" for multilateral military forces.

It has not been an easy transition from cold war standing armies to military forces unclear of their ultimate role, which then become part of UN-controlled peacemaking or peace-keeping operations. And while armies have always included some assistance to civilians as a very secondary role, today's immensely-costly use of soldiers to carry out or support humanitarian operations, not military ones, is another transformation which neither governments nor their troops have fully understood or mastered.

Equally wrenching has been the changing use of humanitarian operations and personnel, and their implicit politicisation. As the extension of politics by other means, the denial of food to civilians or the murder of aid workers violates all possible standards of human behaviour. The use or threat of force to ensure passage for humanitarian supplies as an extension of or, more frequently, a substitute for politics is given the justification of more honourable motives, but it is still a misuse of humanitarianism.

On both a principled and practical level, it is not enough for humanitarian organisations to cite the needs of the "ends" to justify the use of military and political "means", or to accept - on the grounds of a greater good - the way military forces or political groups have used humanitarian operations to serve their own objectives. Principled, because once the precedent is set by any agency, how can that organisation or any other draw and keep a clear line between the acceptable and the unacceptable? Practical, because of the immediate and long-term impact on the expectations of the people assisted and of the politicians and soldiers involved on all sides. Neutrality and impartiality, once abandoned, even for the best of motives, are hard to recover.

Indeed, there is a growing case that agencies would be wise to consider carefully how much space to put between themselves and both politicians and soldiers. The component parts of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement - National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, and the International Committee of the Red Cross - are well aware that they are in a particularly difficult position. The realities of international aid operations, in war and peace, create an increasing number of military, political and humanitarian situations where tough and imperfect decisions will have to be made.

The new international order is also one shaped by global media, particularly television, whose mere presence in a disaster can influence political, military and humanitarian priorities towards the media's short-term, simplistic and narrowly drawn news agenda. This can have a positive or negative impact. Coverage of disasters, from war to famine, can raise attention to real needs. There have been many instances in which the media has both helped to raise money and awareness of situations of desperate need, and prompted governments to respond.

However, television's inherent tendency to turn the particular (one injured child in Sarajevo) into the universal (hundreds are dying) allows it to be satisfied by the gesture-politics of a single air evacuation. Meanwhile, its daily demand for change, and conflict makes the world's most powerful communication medium ill-suited to make any contribution to the slow and careful political resolution of a situation as complex as the Balkans or Somalia yet, for most of the world, television is the principal source of the foreign news from which the voters may draw opinions and have an influence on events through their politicians.

While the media undermines the understanding of their public constituencies, many relief agencies have faced increasing difficulties in maintaining their independence from political influence. The massive costs of the world's deepening disasters, pulling ahead of generally-stagnating official aid flows, are widening the humanitarian gap between need and response. Yet governments - aware of their own failings and limitations - increasingly look to private relief agencies to fill that gap, and are supplanting the public as the agencies' biggest paymasters.