



## It's a Humanitarian's World

IN RETROSPECT, the readiness of so many sober politicians and intellectuals to treat the end of the Cold War as a miracle that would usher in a more glorious world seems more than a little bit baffling. But at the time it was understandable. Extrapolating from the history of Great Power competitions during the Cold War, most experts had direly predicted that the balance of terror between the Soviet Union and the United States would end in a major war, perhaps even a nuclear exchange that might presage the end of days. Yet the Soviets and the Americans amazingly ended their rivalry in a fit of cooperation and goodwill. Whereas once the belief was that the best way to prepare for peace was to prepare for war, the new sentiment in security thinking was that preparing for war only made war more likely and that the right mix of security institutions could produce dependable expectations of peaceful change. After decades of worrying about a nuclear Armageddon, the West discovered that it had become a zone of peace.

As the Cold War exited the global stage, international liberalism entered, and a greater contrast could hardly be imagined. Whereas the Cold War coddled authoritarian governments, the rise of international liberalism meant a new day for democracy. The third wave of democratization began in the 1980s, but it became a bona fide fad only

with the extraordinary rise in the number of new democracies during the 1990s. Whereas the Cold War had stunted the possibility of truly internationalized markets, international liberalism unleashed the simultaneous process of economic globalization and economic liberalization. Even the world's two major socialist countries, the Soviet Union and China, got market fever. Liberalism worked wonders. It was good for individuals. It was good for societies. Democracies and markets were the touchstones of human freedom, human freedom entailed human rights, human rights included the rule of law, and the rule of law was essential for economic and political liberalization. It was good for global security and prosperity. Liberal states are more peaceful toward their neighbors and their societies, are more trustworthy, and protect the autonomy and liberty of the individual through a culture of law and human rights. Democracy, markets, and the rule of law: if not the holy trinity then at least the troika of the liberal world order.

The Western powers led a campaign to try to extend and deepen international liberalism, and rather like the missionaries of the nineteenth century, they worked with the confidence of believers and the urgency of those who were racing against time. They were enjoying the benefits of liberalism and wanted to share those benefits with the have-nots. And, there was little time to lose, because at the very moment that the world was celebrating their new chapter of peace, it began to catch a glimpse of a darker future.

For all its benefits, the end of the Cold War seemingly unleashed a flurry of pent-up violence. For decades Washington and Moscow had tried to maintain and extend their power by gathering as many allies as possible in the Third World, and they paid handsomely for their support. These Third World governments, in turn, would keep most for themselves and then divide the rest among military and key domestic elites as they created a coalition for the status quo. With the end of the Cold War, the superpowers cut off their clients, leaving these regimes alone to face their long-suffering societies, and the results were deadly. These were not run-of-the-mill wars. These were "new wars." The simultaneous decline of the state's ability to provide security or perform basic governance tasks and the rise of paramilitary organizations led to wars with no "fronts," engulfing cities, towns, and villages. Civilians were no longer a tragic consequence of war but rather war's intended targets. New terminologies

were invented to try to capture these obscene developments, including “complex humanitarian emergencies” and “ethnic cleansing,” but the categories never did justice to the horrific realities.

These patterns of violence produced a shift in the meaning of international peace and security. Whereas during the Cold War international security implied militarized disputes between states, afterward—and in response to the growing perception that domestic conflicts had produced collapsed states and trigger-happy regions—policymakers and scholars gravitated toward an expanded understanding of security. Traditional military threats still existed, but now there was growing attention to economic security, environmental security, health security, food security, and terrorism. The state was once assumed to be society’s protector, but the once-overlooked reality that the state was often a major source of insecurity now became the newfound conventional wisdom. National security gave ground to human security.<sup>1</sup>

The UN became the focal point for discussing how to manage the new security threats. There *were* more civil wars, ethnic conflicts, and domestic meltdowns than ever before. Because neither the United States nor Russia felt that it had proprietary rights over these conflicts in godforsaken places, they now were making it onto the UN Security Council’s agenda.<sup>2</sup> In response to a request from the UN Security Council, the secretary-general’s office produced *An Agenda for Peace*, an ambitious and forward-thinking blueprint to give the UN the tools for conflict prevention, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding. This document foretold the UN’s about face—whereas once it focused on traditional threats to international security and dutifully observed sovereignty and the principle of noninterference, it now focused on violence within states.

There were two general conceptual lines of argument for securing lives at risk: protection and prevention. Whereas once the Security Council ignored the Biafras and the Cambodias on the formal grounds that they were not matters of international security and therefore not its job, it began redefining its mandate and looking into forms of humanitarian intervention. Humanitarian intervention had never been very popular with Third World states, who had frequently been the object of such “humane” gestures during colonialism, and the concept fell into greater disrepute during the Cold War, as the Soviets and Americans claimed that their military actions, by definition, were humanitarian and for the greater

global good. But now, with the end of the Cold War and in the face of successive assaults on the human conscience, there was a growing sentiment that the world could and should do something about them. Humanitarian intervention was no longer out of bounds. The first step occurred in response to the plight of the Kurds in northern Iraq following the 1991 Gulf War. In his farewell report to the UN General Assembly, UN Secretary-General Perez de Cuellar referred to the UN's creation of safe havens in northern Iraq for the Kurds as an example of "the collective obligation of States to bring relief and redress in human rights emergencies."<sup>3</sup> The UN's next major step occurred the following year and in response to the famine in Somalia; the UN Security Council, for virtually the first time in its history, cited the famine and the humanitarian emergency—and not its bailiwick of international peace and security.

It was not enough to protect vulnerable populations from the immediate threat of death. The world community also needed to think about preventing conflict, instability, and bloodshed. If those in the humanitarian sector liked to remind everyone about the virtues of teaching a man to fish, those in security studies were equally adamant that an ounce of prevention was worth a pound of cure. As stated in *Agenda for Peace*, the world needed tools to detect crises before they occurred and to stop crises from turning violent, and a veritable cottage industry emerged. In addition to wanting to act before it was too late, there was a growing desire to try to help states make that difficult transition from civil war to civil society. In the new nomenclature of the day, "failed states" needed to be saved.<sup>4</sup> Although most of these states had never worked all that well in the first place, at least not for the governed, there was a growing clamor at the United Nations and elsewhere that the international community had to do more than treat symptoms—it also had to address the "root causes" of conflict.

There were myriad reasons for a turn of events that bore an eerie resemblance to the Age of Imperial Humanitarianism. There were those who wanted to do more than provide the proverbial "bed for the night" or care for the "well-fed dead." As Kofi Annan wrote at the end of his tenure as secretary-general, "If states are fragile, the peoples of the world will not enjoy the security, development, and justice that are their right. Therefore, one of the great challenges of the new millennium is to ensure that all states are strong enough to meet the many challenges that they face."<sup>5</sup>

There also were compelling arguments linking failed states to international security. A running theme in many discussions of the post–Cold War order was that a stable international order is premised on a society of stable states.<sup>6</sup> Following up on his claim of an end of history, Francis Fukuyama wrote, “Since the end of the Cold War, weak and failing states have arguably become the single most important problem for international order.”<sup>7</sup> Stable states make stable neighborhoods.

The UN, states, and even once state-phobic nongovernmental organizations were now behind state-building. There was no single theory about what created a stable state or what the causes of conflict were, but international state-builders used Western states for their blueprint, as they develop new tools, techniques, and templates for helping states achieve the peace and prosperity enjoyed by those in the West. Humanitarianism and security collapsed under peacebuilding, which became known as “liberal” peacebuilding because of the emphasis on the importance of markets, democracy, and human rights for curing states of their ills and creating more peaceful and progressive societies.<sup>8</sup> Liberals might be identified with extolling the virtues of autonomy, independence, and liberty, but not when it comes to peacebuilding. Liberal peacebuilding is a highly invasive project; the expanded list of factors associated with a stable peace means that nearly all of the features of state and society have become objects of intervention. It would begin with democracy. But democratization cannot exist without a host of other elements, including a free press, an independent judiciary, an educated population, a strong middle class, markets, the rule of law, and basic respect for human rights.<sup>9</sup> Building states for peace and progress, a nineteenth-century motto, now had a late-twentieth-century rendering.

One last development in security affairs deserves mention: terrorism. Many parts of the world did not have to wait until September 11, 2001, to experience firsthand the traumatizing and destructive capacity of terrorism. Just because it had not affected the United States to the same extent did not mean that the threat did not exist. On September 11, the United States unforgettably joined the ranks of the terrorized and in one fell swoop moved terrorism to the top of the global security agenda. Yet the impact of this on humanitarianism is debatable. There are many who write as if humanitarianism was the first casualty of the global war on terror.<sup>10</sup> While there is no denying its effects, my view is that it did not alter but rather

accentuated already existing trends. The Bush administration's statement that the "United States today is threatened less by conquering states than we are by weak and failing ones" could almost have been written by the UN secretary-general's office.<sup>11</sup> The view from London and Washington that because failed states bred and coddled terrorist networks, the campaign against terrorism had to include trying to save failed states was simply restating the received view on the relationship between domestic and international order. When Washington began embedding humanitarian assistance in its foreign and military policy, it was continuing a venerable tradition practiced by Democratic and Republican administrations alike. In short, humanitarian organizations, well-intentioned states, and other well-meaning accomplices started a trend, and only when the Bush administration (and other governments) used similar rhetoric to justify their actions did they begin to worry about what they had wrought.

With the end of the Cold War also emerged the orienting concept of globalization. The heated debate over how to define, measure, and assess its benefits and consequences largely assumed that the world was being globalized, like it or not. Globalization, in Thomas Friedman's oft-repeated view, was "flattening" the world. It was creating winners and losers (or, at least in Friedman's view, some who really benefited and some who benefited but just not as much). And because it is better to be a winner than a loser, and because governments have no choice but to play the game of globalization, they needed to compete to be a winner. In order to win, the state that had become supersized after five decades of gluttony would have to become lean and fit. This downsizing was particularly evident in the general assault on the protections afforded society, often won after difficult political struggles. States began shedding their welfare "burden."<sup>12</sup> The state now claimed that basic protections and services were properly the purview of, and more efficiently delivered by, NGOs, faith-based agencies, and even the private sector. At the same moment that states were articulating that the international community had a responsibility to protect when the state failed in its responsibility, states were developing public policies that let their citizens know that in the new "ownership society," they owned their hardship.

In addition to these changes in the forces of destruction and production, there was an equally stunning change in the forces of compassion. It is

difficult to know exactly what accounts for the apparent surge of concern for distant strangers. Unlike previous moments that occurred in the aftermath of mass violence and the attempt by the living to atone for the dead, the peaceful end of the Cold War provided no comparable catalyst (although, four years later, Rwanda would). However, states did treat the wondrous end to the Cold War in nearly religious terms, particularly evident when they filed into the international community's church, the United Nations, and spoke of a new global spirit. More tangibly, the revolution in information and transportation technologies created a growing desire and opportunity to help the world's vulnerable. Personified by the "CNN effect," ignorance was no longer an excuse in a world of twenty-four-hour news stations, the World Wide Web, and satellite technology. In addition to knowing facts in real time, it was increasingly possible to act in real time because of radical improvements in transportation technology and logistical capacity. The combination of a growing awareness and capacity contributed to a growing sense of causal responsibility. Some argued that "globalization," namely, activities by the West, was contributing to the breakdown of societies; under these circumstances, its sins of commission compelled it to act. For others, because they possessed both knowledge and ability, the failure to act would constitute a sin of omission. The tremendous leap in the machinery was a consequence of newfound responsibilities and, once the machinery was in place, the pressure to do something increased.

These changes in the boundaries of the community were both a cause and a consequence of new interpretations of sovereignty and the ascendance of human rights. States were increasingly told that sovereignty was not a right but a privilege that depended on how it treated its citizens. In short, there were new standards of civilization. If a state did not live up to those standards, then its sovereignty might be suspended and it might become the object of intervention. There were, as Kofi Annan famously put it, two sovereignties: a sovereignty of peoples and a sovereignty of states.<sup>13</sup> Humanity, he and others were observing, was part of sovereignty.

The ascendance of a human-centered discourse was vividly evident in the area of human rights. For a good deal of the Cold War human rights had a very small following. Third World states disliked the concept because they wanted to keep the West's laws off its body, to protect sovereignty's soft underbelly, and to deal with their internal rivals as they

saw fit. And the Americans and the Soviets gave human rights a bad name as they supported violators around the world. Human rights organizations like Amnesty International were novel precisely because there were few of them, and Amnesty focused on political prisoners, a thin sliver of political rights. The human rights agenda got a shot in the arm in the mid-1970s from the Helsinki Process, which identified a basket of values that included human rights, and a further boost from President Ronald Reagan, who championed human rights not simply because of a self-interested desire to whip the “evil empire” but also because he genuinely believed that liberty, American-style, was a fundamental human value.

In the 1990s, however, rights talk seeped into every nook and cranny of world affairs. The UN Security Council began to articulate the importance of human rights, to link human rights and security, to invest peacekeeping operations units with human rights units, and to ensure that human rights were part of postconflict endeavors. Already existing humanitarian organizations more fully linked their areas of relief and protection to discourses of rights. Development organizations like United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) began to reformulate development as a “right.” Once limited to political rights, human rights expanded to include women’s rights, civil rights, religious rights, and even economic rights. Genuine security was redefined to include human rights. Human rights required both negative and positive liberty. The state had to be restrained from violating the liberty and life of its citizens, but individuals also needed capabilities to realize their potential as they defined it.<sup>14</sup> In general, the discourse of human rights was promoting the idea of universality, empowering individuals who could help to dilute the power and politics of states, creating a human-centered approach that dissolved traditional left-right divisions, and helping invest the international community with objective, universal, values.<sup>15</sup>

These changes in the forces of destruction, production, and compassion ushered in a new chapter of humanitarianism. A strong word of caution, however. Biographers writing the recent history of humanitarianism and today’s aid workers give the impression that the convulsive changes that rocked the world beginning in the 1990s forced aid agencies to confront, for nearly the first time, a series of questions, dilemmas, and controversies. There was, in this view, life before and after the end of the Cold War. The previous chapters have, with any luck, ended such sentimentality and



historical amnesia. Yet the end of the Cold War *was* a turning point, as the intensification of many already existing trends reshaped the governance of humanitarianism in two significant ways.

There was a shift in the purpose of humanitarianism, expanding from symptoms to root causes and becoming avowedly political in the process. Although certain branches of humanitarianism had always included a desire to do more than treat symptoms, ever since the ICRC's birth in 1863 humanitarian action became closely associated with life-saving relief owing to natural and humanly created disasters, and those who wanted to treat causes adopted other banners, such as development. But now the concept of humanitarianism was becoming associated with these grander goals. As early as 1992, UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali argued that there was a link between relief and development, and that relief must feed into development and the crisis of development caused the need for relief.<sup>16</sup> Aid agencies that were once oriented around a single goal were now becoming multidimensional, and these multidimensional agencies were searching to improve their coordination and coherence. Whereas once fields of activity such as emergency aid, development, human rights, and conflict prevention operated independently, beginning in the 1990s organizations and think tanks were making new connections between them and proposing new ways to integrate them, most famously the relief-development continuum. Then there came postconflict peacebuilding, which made it even more difficult to separate humanitarianism from other areas of life. Humanitarianism had always struggled to police the boundaries between itself and the world of politics and power, but beginning in the 1990s many aid agencies developed something akin to an open borders policy, operating with the assumption that they could humanize the world before the world politicized them.<sup>17</sup>

Given this rapidly changing world, it is no surprise that humanitarianism went through an identity crisis. Acting as the high priest of the community, the ICRC tried to keep the label of humanitarianism for emergency relief and fought against reformers who wanted to expand the concept to include all kinds of activities that might improve the world. The emergency and alchemical camps entered into a debate over the fundamental meaning of humanitarianism—including its basic purpose, its guiding principles, and its relationship to politics.

A humanitarian governance that was previously defined by a relatively

loose association of organizations that occasionally coordinated their activities and was bankrolled by shadow states yielded to a more centralized network of states, international organizations, nongovernmental organizations, and part-time members such as foundations and corporations. A century of growing involvement by states and international organizations in the delivery of assistance now came fully into view. Until World War I nongovernmental organizations virtually monopolized relief activity. Between the wars states exhibited some interest, though the demise of the High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Relief Union were proof of their lackluster support. After World War II, states became silent partners, prepared to provide funding but not much else and always trying to ensure that aid did not violate their interests. States had established an array of emergency and reconstruction agencies after World War II to tend to Europe, and these had all gone global over the next several decades. But there were certain lines these organizations would not cross, namely, the internal affairs of states, most notably when they refused to get involved in Biafra. There were momentary exceptions. In 1971 the UNHCR became a center of action during the Indo-Pakistani conflict, and that same year the UN General Assembly created the UN Disaster Relief Organization.<sup>18</sup> However, in a report delivered around this time, the UN confessed that “the United Nations system is not geared for action of this kind, nor is it realistic to suppose that given its structure, it could become so.”<sup>19</sup> Recoiling from new opportunities, the UN made it clear that while it would be willing to use its good offices during times of crises and to help negotiate access to victims during emergencies, the Red Cross movement and nongovernmental organizations remained the workhorses.<sup>20</sup>

With the end of the Cold War, the UN system and regional organizations became more deeply involved in all aspects of humanitarianism. In 1992 the UN passed Resolution 46/182, which pledged to strengthen the UN’s humanitarian capacities and created a Department of Humanitarian Affairs. Already existing international humanitarian organizations such as the UNHCR became increasingly visible, as they were working in emergency areas and bringing relief to people rather than waiting for people to cross a border to get to relief. International organizations that once limited themselves to development, including the UNDP and the World Bank, now joined the cause. Regional

organizations became players as well, including the European Community Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO), created in 1992. As the world became fonder of humanitarianism, it became too important to be left to the initiatives of loosely networked nongovernmental organizations and had to be centralized.

The trends in humanitarian governance toward a more ambitious agenda and a willingness to work more closely with states inflamed the tensions between humanitarian organizations and the powerful, on the one hand, and the powerless, on the other. Emergency organizations had always been concerned about their association with states, and so, too, had alchemical organizations, though to a much lesser extent; in both cases they huddled around the principles of impartiality, neutrality, and independence to ensure that they were not mistaken for states or others with political interests. However, the tumult of the 1990s and the growing willingness of states to support various forms of humanitarian action caused relief agencies to reconsider what kind of relationship they might and should have. The debates were particularly pronounced over the use of force. Because of the (apparent) growth in the number of possible candidates for an intervention, the growing willingness of states to use their troops to do the right thing, and the grudging acceptance by relief agencies that force might be a necessary evil to fight a greater evil, relief agencies found themselves trying to find a principled formula for deciding when and how to support humanitarian intervention. The problem was that states expected something in return for their kindness, and it was not always clear to aid agencies whether the cost to the victims (and to themselves) would be too high. Many aid agencies began to feel suffocated, and began crying “humanitarian space” to extricate themselves from this deathly embrace.

Yet humanitarian agencies appeared to be rather oblivious to the fact that while states were encroaching on their space, they were doing much the same thing with respect to their recipients. As they were becoming more “political,” they were attempting to change more areas of life—and thus accumulating more power over the vulnerable. Yet this breach of politics also was accompanied by a form of anti-politics. After a series of horrendous experiences, most importantly the failure in Rwanda, aid agencies undertook an inventory of all that had gone wrong and began to introduce a series of reforms that were intended to improve their capacity

to protect and prevent. But these reforms were largely driven by the international experts and rarely included the views of the “victims.” To be sure, aid agencies knew that there were various normative and practical reasons to include local populations in decisions that were supposed to be for their benefit; the discourse of stakeholders, local knowledge, and participation were reactions to the belief that the failure to be inclusive was besmirching their democratic credentials and had become a primary reason for program failure. Yet, even the forgiving members of the sector acknowledged that there was a major gap between what they said and what they did. Or, to put it in slightly more worrying terms, the paternalism became buried in the machinery of humanitarianism.



## Armed for Humanity

VIOLENCE IS part of humanitarianism's history. The violence we usually associate with humanitarianism is the violence that causes humanitarian action. But there also is the violence deployed in the name of humanitarianism. As famously observed by Hannah Arendt, the first signs that humanitarianism could legitimate bloodshed occurred with the French Revolution, when proclamations of humanity, fraternity, and liberty inspired beheadings, riotous behavior, and mass killings. Some of the greatest crimes of the last few centuries have been carried out in the name of alleviating suffering and improving human welfare. Violence also has been justified for protecting those whose lives are at immediate risk from malevolent forces, a notion closely associated with humanitarian intervention. Not everyone who claims to be a humanitarian shares the same views regarding the use of force for protecting lives. Some see humanitarian intervention as a necessary possibility. Others ridicule the idea of humanitarian war as an oxymoron or insist that if war must be waged in the defense of human rights, it should be called anything but humanitarian.

These debates regarding the relationship between humanitarian action and the use of force are as old as humanitarianism itself, but in the last decade of the last century they became a point of controversy among

humanitarian organizations. This is not the place to review the legal, political, and ethical debate about the legitimacy of humanitarian intervention, but the growing acceptance of humanitarian intervention brings to the surface various tensions inherent in the relationship between states and humanitarian organizations as well as other dilemmas that aid agencies confront when they feel that they cannot live with and cannot live without states.<sup>1</sup>

There was no single position among the aid agencies, or even much consistency within an agency as it moved from one emergency to another. Instead, their reaction depended on the specifics of the situation, how they defined “humanitarian” and whether they viewed the principles of neutrality and independence as commandments or guidelines; whether they believed military force for the protection of human rights was an oxymoron; and whether they thought that force might produce a good outcome.<sup>2</sup> For emergency agencies of the old school, military force might sometimes be needed, but it was probably wrong-headed to classify any use of force as humanitarian and it was probably best to disassociate humanitarianism from any act of war.<sup>3</sup> For other agencies, mainly in the alchemical camp, the fundamental goal was to deliver relief and protect civilians, and the application of force might be both expedient and principled. Although various events over the 1990s reflected the meandering and momentary reactions of aid agencies to the use of force during emergencies, Somalia, Bosnia, Rwanda, and Kosovo were the most consequential. Over the course of the decade, a silent pattern developed: whereas at the beginning of the decade aid agencies tried to recruit states for their cause, by the beginning of the next decade they had discovered that states had already co-opted humanitarianism for their interests.

## Somalia and Armed Protection

Beginning in the late 1980s a power struggle erupted in Somalia. At the outset, the contest was between the Ethiopian-funded Somali National Movement (SNM) and the Somali government of Siad Barre, but it took a violent turn in 1988 when the SNM launched a guerrilla war against Siad. An increasingly unpopular Siad began to retaliate severely and indiscriminately, and soon thereafter it seemed as if every clan had its own

militia and was vying for political power. The greatest military threat, however, came from General Mohamed Farah Aideed, and he successfully defeated Siad in 1991, resulting not in his coronation but rather in an increase in clan-on-clan violence. Their war destroyed most urban centers, political institutions, and the economy, and left upward of twenty thousand civilian casualties, a million displaced people, and the specter of mass starvation.<sup>4</sup>

NGOs wandered into a situation unlike anything previously encountered. There was no central government, not even in name only. There were dozens of militias, each answering only to themselves. Nor were they fighting the familiar ideological goals of the Cold War. Instead, they seemed to be motivated by a strange mixture of longstanding grudges, new power plays for political power, turf protection, and revenge. Aid organizations confronted a bewildering maze of violence and politics as they attempted to negotiate access to the hundreds of thousands of Somalis who were on the verge of starvation. In order to have the privilege of delivering assistance, the militias extorted food aid from the relief agencies. If they did not comply, then either they would not be allowed to pass or they would be attacked.<sup>5</sup>

Aid agencies had several alternatives, none of them good. They could decide to withdraw, but with fatal consequences for those in the camps. Or, they could hire “protection” from the local clans. MSF’s James Orbinski captures the moment well: “The needs were overwhelming. Some of the old humanitarian rules of neutrality and independence seemed to be falling apart, and it wasn’t clear what the new rules would be. For the first time ever, the Red Cross, MSF, and other aid agencies were paying armed guards from various clans to protect aid workers and food supplies.”<sup>6</sup> But, still, the militias were able to make out like the bandits that they were, confiscating, according to various estimates, anywhere from 20 to 80 percent of the food, depending on the time and place.<sup>7</sup> The only way to secure aid from the poachers was to be protected by a local clan. Once a group did that, though, its neutrality became suspect. Nevertheless, aid workers could operate in relative safety, captured by the following exchange. One worker asked another whether they were at risk of being shot. No, the other replied. “Because if we get shot, then the NGOs leave, and there’s nobody left to pay protection money or salaries. They want us afraid and alive. So you should be afraid and happy, because it means you

can work. It's a little fucked up, isn't it?"<sup>8</sup> In any event, the aid agencies quickly realized that they were contributing to the famine because the militias had every intention of keeping it alive in order to keep the aid flowing. Given the unprecedented nature of the challenge—or, at any rate, the belief that Somalia had no precedents—aid agencies had no ready-made answers for how to provide relief without also fueling the war.

One possible escape from this nightmare was an international force. Various NGOs, alongside a growing number of UN officials and human rights activists, began campaigning for a humanitarian intervention. After a gun battle ensued when a CARE convoy refused to give a pay-out to the militias, killing five relief workers, CARE's president Philip Johnston began to call for armed protection, appealing to the United States, the UN, and anyone else who would listen; in his judgment, this was the only way to save starving Somalis. Unlike years before when no one would have bothered to listen, in this early post-Cold War moment the UN was beginning to consider various forms of armed intervention in the defense of human life. In 1991 the United Nations established Operation Provide Comfort to provide aid to the Kurds who were fleeing Saddam Hussein, and the following year it began playing a role in Bosnia. For a mixture of reasons, including a desire to demonstrate that the UN also cared about emergencies in Africa, the UN Security Council decided to provide armed protection for the relief convoys, which proved to be the first step on a slippery slope toward an all-out war between UN forces and Mohammed Farah Aideed. Not only did most aid agencies go along with a new arrangement that they helped to create, which some later sarcastically dubbed "Operation Shoot to Feed," but many American NGOs, operating under their umbrella organization, Interaction, began pushing Washington and New York to up the ante.<sup>9</sup> But not everyone was thrilled by this; the European NGOs in particular were generally unified that this was a bad idea.<sup>10</sup> MSF had reluctantly agreed to seek the protection of local militias, but the situation became intolerable when the UN began doing "peace enforcement." As Rony Brauman reflected, it became impossible to contemplate humanitarian neutrality when licensed defenders were firing into crowds and delivering aid directly to the very people who were the executioners of the population. "For the first time in Somalia, they killed under the banner of humanitarianism."<sup>11</sup> MSF closed the mission and walked away, leaving other agencies to deal with the dilemmas. Asked



whether he has any regrets, Johnston said, “Hell no. Hell no.”<sup>12</sup> While armed force might now be possible, aid agencies relied on their instincts, often fueled more by passions than by well-honed ideas.

## Bosnia, the Humanitarian Alibi, and Indifference

The war in the former Yugoslavia lasted four bloody years, from 1991 through November 1995, leading to the deaths of over one hundred thousand civilians; the displacement of millions of people; the destruction of towns, villages, and communities; and war crimes, including rape, ethnic cleansing, and genocide. Although the Western response to the gravest humanitarian crisis in Europe since World War II was half-hearted until the very end, it nevertheless looked impressive on paper—the UNHCR led the world’s largest relief operation, the UN had thirty thousand peacekeepers, and NATO engaged in active military operations for the first time in its nearly fifty-year history. Yet humanitarianism was less of an answer to the conflict than its alibi. As David Rieff, in his characteristically provocative way, suggested: “The deeper question is whether Bosnia was a major humanitarian crisis at all.”<sup>13</sup> Whether it was or was not, it forced aid agencies to choose between competing principles. By the end the UN and the UNHCR had their principles turned inside-out until it was rarely clear whether they were bending their principles because they had no choice or because they believed it was the right thing to do, bouncing between victims of a situation not of their own making and willing participants.<sup>14</sup>

Various factors contributed to the eventual dissolution of Yugoslavia, though many mark 1988, when President Slobodan Milošević introduced constitutional reforms that tipped the delicate balance of power among the federations toward Serbia, as the point of no return. This action encouraged the growth of nationalist sentiments and separatist movements, leading to the quick succession of declarations of independence by Slovenia and Croatia in 1991. A war soon broke out between Croatia and Serbia, causing sectarian violence, massive displacement of the Serbian minority in Croatia, and the arrival of the UNHCR to provide relief for the refugee populations, with the added hope that it might deter future flight. In September 1991 the UN Security Council declared an arms embargo, and

in February 1992 it created the United Nations Protection Force, which was mandated to deploy to those parts of Croatia that had a significant Serbian minority and to monitor the ceasefire between Serb and Croat forces.

In April 1992 Bosnia-Herzegovina proclaimed its independence, leading to clashes between its three principal communities, Muslims, Serbians, and Croats. Immediately thereafter, the Serbian forces initiated a campaign of ethnic cleansing, rape, and terrorism, leading to tens of thousands of dead and the displacement of nearly 2.6 million Bosnians. The West's claim to care was betrayed by its anemic response, and the gap between its words and its deeds widened to the point that it had to do something. Perhaps the tipping point came when *Newsday's* Roy Guttman published a series of articles in July and August 1993, complete with chilling pictures of emaciated Bosnians cowering behind barbed wire fences, all too reminiscent of the Nazi concentration camps. Guttman, who eventually won a Pulitzer Prize for his reporting, was working on a lead given to him by the ICRC's Patrick Glasser, who had stumbled onto the camps weeks before and then debated with others at the agency about how to get the news out without compromising the ICRC's neutrality. Apparently, though, the Serbs were using the ICRC and then the journalists. They allowed them to visit the camps, anticipating that it would stir memories of the Holocaust and cause the Europeans to accept the Bosnians—thus playing directly into Serbia's plan to cleanse Bosnia.<sup>15</sup>

From this point on, the UN and the West wanted to do something, but not too much—and humanitarianism became the perfect vehicle.<sup>16</sup> After watching helplessly as the UNHCR and the aid community struggled to deliver supplies while being shelled by Serbian forces, on July 13, 1992, the Security Council, operating under Chapter VII, mandated the UN force “to ensure the security and functioning of Sarajevo airport and the delivery of humanitarian assistance.”<sup>17</sup> A few months later and in response to ethnic cleansing and further attacks on civilian populations, the UN created six “safe areas,” which might be more accurately called penal colonies. The UN responded to every violation with another resolution, which only increased the gap between what it had pledged to do and what it was actually doing. Eventually the UN's mandate included various actions, including instituting no-fly zones, defending the safe areas, delivering humanitarian assistance, making Sarajevo free from heavy weapons, and

much more, in the over one hundred Security Council resolutions over four years. Although the UN could use “all necessary means” to enforce these resolutions, they rarely did, as Serbian forces carried out ethnic cleansing and other atrocities in full view of the UN. While the Bosnian leaders explicitly preferred military assistance to humanitarian assistance, arguing that they needed a fighting chance to stay alive, the UN Security Council and Western states “decided for them that they should be fed and not armed.”<sup>18</sup>

Neither the UN nor the UNHCR were prepared to handle the demands of a civil war they knew had been tossed into their laps. Indeed, UN Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali’s first response was to oppose the UN’s involvement, a position that not only was based on a sensible reading of the situation but also was consistent with a UN that had avoided all civil wars ever since the operation in the Congo in the early 1960s. Ignoring his objections, the Security Council established the UN Protection Force in Yugoslavia, best known as UNPROFOR. Now the UN had the impossible task, in the words of one former UN senior political adviser, of “trying to hold back the tide with a spoon.”<sup>19</sup>

Although the UN operated under a Chapter VII mandate, allowing it to use force and operate without the consent of the parties, it clung to peacekeeping’s principles of consent, impartiality, and neutrality, preferring negotiation to saber-rattling. The UN’s position, in fact, represented a return to the traditional interpretation of its principles after a brief period of experimentation. With the end of the Cold War and in response to the new kinds of security conflicts and protection demands, Boutros-Ghali and other UN officials championed a more muscular UN that would use force to discharge its responsibilities and keep the peace. Somalia and other peacekeeping setbacks sent UN officials back to basics.<sup>20</sup> After watching the Somalia operation descend into a war between the UN and U.S. forces and the Somali militias, UNPROFOR Commander Michael Rose vowed not to cross the “Mogadishu Line” and become “helpless.”<sup>21</sup> A few months later, and in response to President William J. Clinton’s suggestion that the UN enforce the peace and battle the Bosnian Serbs, Rose said, “If someone wants to fight a war here on moral or political grounds, fine, great, but count us [the UN] out. Hitting one tank is peacekeeping. Hitting infrastructure command and control, logistics, that is war, and I’m not going to fight a war with painted tanks.”<sup>22</sup>

The UN's well-known preference for avoiding a fight meant that the Bosnians Serbs had the upper hand, could frustrate the UN's basic activities, obstructing its use of the Sarajevo airport and the delivery of food to the safe havens, seemingly enjoying every opportunity to increase the hardship and pile on the humiliation. At stake, though, was more than the UN's pride—lives were hanging in the balance. One MSF worker summarized it well: "The UN troops were instructed to protect the aid supplies—but they were prevented from using force to protect people."<sup>23</sup> The predictable, violent, and sad conclusion of this culture of impartiality was the passivity of the Dutch peacekeepers in response to the genocide committed by the Bosnian Serb forces in Srebrenica in July 1995. Years later Secretary-General Kofi Annan bravely acknowledged that the United Nations was suffering from "an institutional ideology of impartiality even when confronted with attempted genocide."<sup>24</sup>

The UN's desire to cling to its principles owed not only to creed but also to self-interest. To become more fully involved in Bosnia, particularly when it doubted the diplomatic and military backing of the Security Council and NATO, might leave the UN vulnerable politically and militarily. By insisting on these principles, the UN could avoid further involvement and—it hoped—provide some cover from future criticism. When the media and the international aid community castigated the UN for failing to defend civilians, Boutros-Ghali and others responded by emphasizing the centrality of the humanitarian mission, transforming a moral failure into something of an organizational victory: if UNPROFOR was judged according to how well it protected civilians, then its activities were a failure; if, however, it was judged by its delivery of humanitarian relief, then it could be judged a qualified success. And by emphasizing the delivery of humanitarian relief rather than the protection of civilians, UN officials could shift responsibility from themselves to the participants of the conflict. The UN could not be blamed for what the parties brought on themselves.

There were occasional instances when the UN and NATO backed up their threats with force, but such instances typically occurred when their bluff had already been called many times or when peacekeepers were in danger. For instance, the UN rejected NATO's recommendation for air strikes in response to the Serb assault on the safe haven of Goražde in the spring of 1994. In defending its decision, Kofi Annan, at the time the

undersecretary-general for peacekeeping operations, argued that air strikes are “to protect lives—not just of the handful of UN soldiers who might be threatened by a given attack but the thousands of lightly armed peacekeepers and hundreds of unarmed relief workers, military observers and police monitors whose lives could be threatened by precipitous military action.”<sup>25</sup> Missing from Annan’s list of groups to be protected were the residents of the safe havens. NATO was not much better, as it declared that the aim of the air strikes was to protect UN personnel, not the sixty-five thousand residents of Goražde.<sup>26</sup> The UN and NATO disagreed on whether force should be used to protect peacekeepers; the Bosnians apparently were not part of the moral calculus.

The UN designated the UNHCR the “lead agency,” a logical choice given the centrality of the refugee crisis, a title that gave it responsibility for overseeing humanitarian activities. Although the UNHCR had been in the limelight over the years, it was now the centerpiece of the largest relief operation in the world, coordinating over 250 aid agencies.<sup>27</sup> More spectacularly, it was now delivering relief during a civil war and trying to bring relief to people so that they did not have to wait until they crossed a border. Unlike the High Commissioner’s response to the prospect of getting involved in Biafra, there was very little hesitation; the times had changed, the refugees needed protecting, and Bosnia represented a platform for the UNHCR to demonstrate its continuing relevance at a time when some states were asking whether the refugee agency was a luxury.<sup>28</sup> The UNHCR’s move into areas once defined as taboo caused it to become even more emphatic about its neutrality and impartiality.<sup>29</sup> However, it had a harder time maintaining the appearance of independence because it was widely understood to be acting on behalf of a UN Security Council under the control of the West. The UNHCR found itself squarely in the middle of several dilemmas.<sup>30</sup>

Although the UNHCR initially saw its presence as buying time for a political solution, not as a substitute for it, it became the de facto substitute for a political response.<sup>31</sup> An incident in February 1993 captures the situation. Serbian forces had little incentive to cooperate with the UN operation or the delivery of relief, so they began a policy of harassing, obstructing, and attacking the aid convoys. High Commissioner Sadako Ogata had been bitterly complaining about the agency being placed in an impossible situation. The UNHCR was expected to negotiate with Serbian

militias that were making the delivery of aid a highly dangerous game, and whenever the Serbs did allow the convoys through it was always after they had “lightened” the load. Nor did the Bosnian government necessarily appreciate a “humanitarian” policy that seemed to be guaranteeing a slow death for its people. The UN peacekeepers were supposed to facilitate the delivery of aid, but they seemed more interested in protecting themselves than the aid shipments. Feeling pressure from all sides, Ogata began threatening to withdraw the operation unless she got more cooperation from the Serbs, the Muslims, and the peacekeepers. Then in February 1993 Serbian forces stopped the UNHCR from delivering aid to eastern Bosnia, with Serbian President Radovan Karadžić who has since been convicted of war crimes at the Hague, graciously offering to let the Muslims leave their enclaves in Serbian territory. In response to a proposal that was ethnic cleansing in the guise of humanitarianism, the Bosnian government banned all aid deliveries to Sarajevo, hoping to pressure the UN to use force against the Serbs.

Ogata had had enough. She suspended the UNHCR’s operations until the parties stopped making a “mockery” of the UNHCR’s efforts and honored their pledge to permit the deliver of relief. “No decision that I took in my ten years as high commissioner,” she reflected, “caused as much havoc.”<sup>32</sup> She was blasting the Serbs for their cruelty. She was insinuating that the Bosnian Muslim leadership was aggravating the situation for its own political advantage. And, most alarming from the standpoint of the UN, she was threatening to withdraw the international community’s symbol of concern. If the UNHCR departed, it would trigger a humanitarian and political chain reaction: the departure of the UNHCR would increase the pain and suffering of the Bosnian population; UNPROFOR’s primary mandate would be null and void because there were no aid convoys to protect, thus potentially encouraging its departure; and the West’s strategy of using humanitarianism as a substitute for concerted political and military action would be exposed. Boutros-Ghali overruled Ogata the following day, forcing the UNHCR to remain.<sup>33</sup>

Bosnia was a humanitarian crisis not only because individuals were forced to flee their homes but also because neighboring countries refused to let them cross their borders to safety. Under international refugee law, individuals are allowed to seek asylum, but European states refused entry to thousands, preferring to ask the UNHCR to bring relief to the people

trapped in Bosnia. The UNHCR agreed, moving beyond its traditional mandate for “bona fide” refugees to help “internally displaced peoples” and others in “refugee-like” circumstances, including those who did not want to flee but were nevertheless affected by the war. Putting the best face on an ugly situation, the UNHCR stated that it was giving the Bosnians a “choice.” But it was not much of a choice, and there was not much that the UNHCR could do about it. Occasionally the UNHCR protested to European governments, but they were unmoved. There is no evidence that if the UNHCR had upped the ante and threatened to withdraw, it would have caused Europe to comply with existing international refugee law. So, in the words of one UN official, the UNHCR was reduced to helping the Europeans with their policy of “containment through charity.”<sup>34</sup>

The UNHCR called this policy “preventive protection,” which, according to the UNHCR’s Working Group on International Protection, operated on the “overriding principle in Bosnia and Herzegovina [that UNHCR] should be to bring safety to the people, rather than to bring people to safety.”<sup>35</sup> Yet this policy of preventive protection exposed the Bosnians to danger. The UNHCR and UNPROFOR were not necessarily bringing safety to the Bosnians. They were bringing supplies—not protection. The false equation between aid and protection was well understood by many UNHCR officials, who privately acknowledged that preventive protection was not protecting refugees but rather exposing them to harm.<sup>36</sup> This policy also became implicated in the Serbian campaign of ethnic cleansing. If they helped populations flee to “safe areas” and other “protected zones,” then they were facilitating ethnic cleansing. If they did not, then Bosnians might die. Ogata summarized the moral dilemma in the following way: “If you take these people you are an accomplice to ethnic cleansing. If you don’t you are an accomplice to murder.”<sup>37</sup>

Humanitarianism, many aid agencies concluded, had become an alibi for the West’s inaction in Bosnia. The initial position of many humanitarians was that providing assistance was a reasonable response until a solution could be found, only to discover that the more effective humanitarianism became, the less pressure the West felt to do what needed to be done. In the context of French President François Mitterrand’s lightning-quick visit to Sarajevo, MSF’s Rony Brauman wrote an incendiary article in *Libération*. Under the title “Humanitarianism, Modern Name for Cowardice,” he castigated France’s inaction and

Mitterrand's theatrics. Comparing Europe's response to Bosnia to Europe's capitulation to Hitler in 1938, he wrote that "behind our medicines and our humanitarian convoys, the first racial State in Europe since the Third Reich is in the process of forming itself, now that a planned, announced, then realized 'ethnic cleansing' is nearly achieved."<sup>38</sup> Writing with Bosnia at his back, Alain Destexhe, the former secretary-general of MSF, wrote:

All over the world, there is unprecedented enthusiasm for humanitarian work. It is far from certain that this is always in the victims' best interests.... In dealing with countries in ongoing wars of a local nature, humanitarian aid has acquired a near monopoly of morality and international action. It is this monopoly we seek to denounce. Humanitarian action is noble when coupled with political action and justice. Without them, it is doomed to failure and especially in the emergencies covered by the media, becomes little more than a play thing of international politics, a conscience-solving gimmick.<sup>39</sup>

If humanitarianism was an alibi—and therefore prolonged suffering—then what good was humanitarianism? Perhaps humanitarianism needed to give war a chance.

## Rwanda

The genesis of this tragic chapter of Rwanda's history can be briefly told. Until Rwandan independence in 1962, the minority Tutsis ruled, favored by the Belgian colonialists. Rwandan independence catapulted the majority Hutus to the top and reduced the Tutsis to an intermittently tolerated minority population. A wave of Hutu-on-Tutsi violence from 1959 to 1963 led to the flight of hundreds of thousands of Tutsis to various neighboring countries, though mainly to Uganda, situated directly to the north. Beginning in the late 1980s, refugees who had fled Rwanda to neighboring Uganda in the 1960s, mainly Tutsis, established an independence movement, the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF). From Uganda they launched a civil war in 1990 against the Hutu-led Rwandan government; in response to the RPF's battlefield successes, a French-led force intervened to support its longtime Hutu allies, which led to a temporary lull in the civil war, but the fighting never ended. After intense negotiations between the government and the RPF in the summer of 1993, they concluded the Arusha Accords, which pledged to end the civil war



and usher in a new chapter of national reconciliation, inter-ethnic cooperation, and democracy.

On October 5, 1993, the Security Council, albeit with some concerns over whether peace was possible, authorized a peacekeeping operation, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Rwanda (UNAMIR), to oversee the Arusha Accords. The pessimists turned out to be prophetic. The parties were unable to implement the basic elements of the agreement, and violence increased as a consequence of this stagnation. UNAMIR Force Commander Roméo Dallaire was the most clear-eyed of the UN command, as he predicted widespread bloodshed if the UNAMIR force was unable to demonstrate some muscle to back up the mandate and give the political moderates the ability to compromise.

On April 6, 1994, hell came to Rwanda. The plane carrying Rwandan President Juvénal Habyarimana, who was returning from Tanzania, where he was rumored to have agreed to the transitional government, was shot down as it approached Kigali International Airport. Although there remains considerable debate about who downed the plane, with evidence pointing to both the RPF and Hutu extremists, the plane crash immediately led to the extremist forces spreading out across Kigali, erecting road blocks and executing moderate Hutu and Tutsi politicians. With only 2,500 lightly-armed peacekeepers scattered throughout Rwanda, UNAMIR was ill-prepared to confront the wave of terror unleashed by Hutu extremists against Tutsis and Hutu moderates. Any question regarding the ability of the UN peacekeepers to protect Rwandans, or even themselves, was answered on April 7 when extremist forces brutally murdered ten Belgian peacekeepers.

There has been considerable debate over why the UN decided to do nothing in the face of the genocide; my previously published conclusion is that states and UN officials largely followed their principles and their interests to the exit. Several points, though, are particularly germane here. There was a growing belief at the UN that its survival and the effectiveness of peacekeeping depended on honoring the principles of consent, neutrality, and impartiality, which fed directly into a policy of non-use of force, even in the face of civilian killings. Peacekeeping was only effective when there was a peace to keep, and if there was no peace to keep, then there was no reason for the UN to be there.

The juxtaposition of the UN Security Council voting to withdraw

nearly all of the UN peacekeepers at the same time that the rate of killing appeared to accelerate led a surge of states, international agencies, and world leaders to call for a military intervention to stop what was now widely recognized as a genocide.<sup>40</sup> Even MSF, which had once refused to take an official position on the question of humanitarian intervention either in principle or in any single instance, supported the use of force. Its decision to act was driven not only by the daily images of carnage but also by a fear that humanitarianism might become, just like in Bosnia, a “fig leaf” for action—and MSF wanted to avoid resembling the ICRC during the Holocaust. MSF-France launched a campaign proclaiming, “You don’t treat a genocide with doctors; you don’t respond to a humanitarian crisis with a stethoscope.” By early May the UN appeared to be the only opponent of intervention. Finally the UN did authorize two interventions, the first with considerable trepidation and the second with considerable insincerity. In the first instance, in late June, after weeks of endless debate on whether there should be an intervention and who should lead it, France proposed to enter Rwanda and create a “safe zone” for civilians. The UN reluctantly gave its blessing to a state that had a history of giving support to the very same rogues now accused of perpetrating genocide. The results were decidedly mixed, with some crediting “Operation Turquoise” with saving thousands of lives and others for saving thousands of genocidaires. The second intervention was, in fact, authorized in May—before Operation Turquoise. Specifically, the UN authorized UNAMIR II, which was to provide an additional 5,500 troops for Rwanda; the problem was that no government was willing to send its troops into a theater of killing; the UN troops rolled into Kigali only once they were in no danger of having to do anything.

After having sat out the genocide, the UN and the international community leapt into action when the next humanitarian emergency unfolded. Beginning on July 1, 1994, nearly two million Hutus began emptying out of the country, fearful of the approaching Rwandan Patriotic Front and the possibility that the Tutsis would give as good as they got. They settled into makeshift camps the size of small cities but without shelter, water, or medical assistance—cameras captured images of suffering and the spectacle of widespread disease. These were some of the first sustained images Western populations had of the genocide. Until this moment, the few Western media outlets that covered Africa were in South

Africa to report on the expected election of Nelson Mandela in late April, and when the election ended and they discovered what was happening in Rwanda, they trekked thousands of miles north, only to find that it was unsafe to enter the country and that they were reduced to waiting on the Rwandan border for pictures and stories. At this point, the horrors of the refugee movement tumbled into view. Seemingly tapping into the mounting guilt for having done nothing during the genocide, those countries that were unavailable to stop the killers unleashed an impressive relief operation. It did not matter that the killers were among the refugees. In the media's coverage, all were victims, though the Hutu refugees got preferential treatment.

As the UN, the UNHCR, hundreds of relief agencies, and a supporting cast of thousands, including the American military, began to distribute relief, they soon discovered that they were doing more than feeding innocent refugees—they also were feeding the genocidaires. The camps were quickly controlled by the Hutu extremists and the remnants of the Rwandan army who took control of the camps that offered protection, fresh recruits, and international aid. The aid workers were, once again, in a moral no man's land. When they threatened to remove the genocidaires from the distribution network, they were physically threatened. When they began encouraging refugees to leave these camps for the new camps being prepared in Rwanda, they discovered that the refugees who thought about leaving were threatened with death if they did. Aid agencies, including the UNHCR, began appealing to the UN and states to provide a military force to give them protection and evict the criminal elements from the camp, but states were no more keen for this task than they were for intervening to stop the genocide. This left aid agencies with a stark choice: stay or get out. Most chose to stay, though a few, including MSF-France, left because they could not accept the price of doing business.

The genocide in Rwanda in 1994 has been extensively covered in books, memoirs, documentaries, and even an Academy Award-nominated feature film. That it has found a place in the world's ranking among the great crimes of the twentieth century, arguably second only to the Holocaust, is certainly an outcome that the few who saw what was happening in Rwanda at the time could have predicted. Its place in our collective memory is nearly as much of a surprise as the actual genocide. Why it should rank so highly is, on first blush, something of a mystery.

Unlike the Holocaust, which occurred in “civilized” Europe, Rwanda happened in a place few Westerners knew anything about (except for maybe the mountain gorillas), even fewer have met someone from Rwanda, and only a tiny handful have visited. It happened in Africa, where violence on this scale, at least from the perspective of many in the West, is part of its tidal rhythms. Indeed, a few years later, in neighboring Congo even more people died, and it is difficult to find anyone, outside of a few NGOs, who seems to care or is troubled by the lack of a response. Yet Rwanda haunts.

If so, it is because “our” complicity is undeniable. It was not only the killing that was shocking. So, too, was the West’s apparent indifference. There certainly have been many other moments when the West has chosen to ignore mass killings, but never before when there were 2,500 UN troops on the ground. The Security Council knew of the spiraling violence and it decided to do the unthinkable—it first ordered its UN troops to not take risks to save or protect Rwandans and then decided to reduce its presence from 2,500 to 200 troops with a mandate restricted to helping the parties try to negotiate an end to the killing. In other words, the West had blood on its hands. Choosing not to act when it had knowledge and opportunity to stop a genocide, according to many, was tantamount to contributing to the genocide itself. It was not only outside critics of the UN who leveled this charge, eventually many who were responsible for making life-and-death decisions harbored similar thoughts.

Atonement cannot begin until there has been an admission of having sinned, and it took a while for anyone in the West in a position of responsibility to place the blame on themselves. At first the international community blamed the United States, a reasonable conclusion given that it had spent most of the genocide adopting the position of “see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil.” Soon the U.S. claim to not knowing what was happening, as Bill Clinton insisted after the fact, became exposed for the fabrication it was. A few years later it became more widely known that others in positions of responsibility could get medals for moral cowardice. Other Security Council members also had been cautious about recommending an intervention, scared away by the deadly anarchy on the ground and the recent experiences in Somalia. And then the UN Secretariat’s equivocation came to light; neither Boutros-Ghali nor Annan had recommended an intervention during the first, critical weeks and, in

fact, did their best to muzzle those UN officials, including Dallaire, who did.<sup>41</sup>

It took a while, and considerable outside pressure, before those who had reason to know and the power to end the genocide began to acknowledge how little they had done. Once they did, though, they frequently found themselves overcome with grief. Nearly everyone I have talked to that was even remotely involved has expressed a profound sense of loss and has wondered what they might have done differently. Those who refused to abandon their posts, the Rwandans, or their conscience, including Dallaire and a handful of relief workers, remain haunted by what they saw and what the international community failed to do. Also disturbed were those who either could or should have known better. If it was possible to feel justified in ignoring a genocide that left eight hundred thousand dead and a whole country traumatized, an event that happened while there were troops on the ground, then what did that say about one's humanity?

The acts of atonement by states and UN officials took various forms. Having been absent during the genocide, the UN was quick to establish an international tribunal in Arusha, Tanzania, to try the architects and executors of the genocide. Only after a few years were the bystanders made to answer for their lack of action. Although there were various factors that caused Western leaders to act in Kosovo in 1999, certainly the memories of having done little to stop genocide in Bosnia and Rwanda supplied emotional fuel. Later that same year, Annan's UN General Assembly speech on the need for a doctrine of humanitarian intervention was widely interpreted as part of his public confession for having done too little, too late in Rwanda. And, memories of Rwanda are widely credited with having motivated the eventual principle of a "responsibility to protect." The living were atoning for their sins and trying to keep the dead among the living.

The aid community proved more willing to look critically at itself, and the result was a sustained reform effort. An immediate issue was how to reduce the negative consequences of aid. Mary Anderson's appropriation of the Hippocratic oath, "do no harm," proved to be easier said than done—or measured.<sup>42</sup> Still, it reframed the terms of the debate, creating a greater willingness to examine how aid becomes sandwiched between underlying causes and political outcomes. Many questioned how they

could not have seen the genocide coming and indicted a technocratic orientation that had seemingly blinded them to the politics of the place. Rwanda had been something of a darling of the aid world, routinely touted as the Switzerland of Central Africa. Aid agencies had rushed into Rwanda, engaging in various forms of community development, providing technical assistance, building schools, and organizing coffee cooperatives. As they did, they willfully ignored politics.<sup>43</sup> It seemed, recalled a high-ranking official of Catholic Relief Services who had served in Rwanda, that they were fixated on technical aspects of development at the expense of everything else, including ethnicity. And when the genocide erupted, it took them a while to see it for what it was. MSF's initial reaction, for instance, was to interpret the violence as a return to civil war, with the horrific but quite expected casualties. As MSF legal adviser Françoise Bouchet-Saulnier put it, "Sometimes there are those at MSF who think it normal that people die without our knowing why. In Burundi [which saw ethnic killings in October 1993], a lot of people were dying, but it was as if the MSF people thought it was normal because there was a war."<sup>44</sup> Moreover, MSF's medical and emergency room mentality led it to concentrate exclusively on effects to the neglect of causes, which, once again, obscured the politics of the place. For those agencies, mainly in the alchemical camp, already moving in a more political direction, Rwanda provided genocidal proof of the necessity of their direction. For those who had not yet gone through the debate, Rwanda demonstrated the need to recover from the past and to insert the language of human rights and social justice into their humanitarianism.

## Kosovo and Humanitarian War

Kosovo was an autonomous province of the Yugoslav Republic until 1990, when Yugoslav President Slobodan Milošević formally abolished its autonomy.<sup>45</sup> From here on out, Belgrade steadily took control of its political, economic, and cultural affairs, and the Albanian population, which formed the vast majority of Kosovo's population, began to see their lives diminished. In response, Ibrahim Rugova, a well-known Albanian writer, advised passive resistance and established the Democratic League of Kosovo; soon thereafter, in September 1991 an underground plebiscite

voted overwhelmingly for independence.

The situation in Kosovo remained fairly stable during the Yugoslavian wars, but once they ended, it deteriorated. In response to continuing repression by the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, a previously unknown organization, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), carried out a series of attacks in April 1996. In response to a deteriorating and violent situation, international involvement increased beginning in late 1997. In March 1998 the Security Council adopted Resolution 1160, which called on the KLA and Belgrade to negotiate a political settlement, imposed an arms embargo on both parties, and warned of the “consideration of additional measures” in the absence of progress toward a peaceful solution. In response to further violence, including many civilian deaths and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of individuals, in April 1998 the Contact Group for the Former Yugoslavia agreed to impose new sanctions on Belgrade (Russia, a member of the group, objected). In June, UN Secretary-General Annan informed NATO of the possible need for the Security Council to authorize military action. In September the Security Council adopted Resolution 1199 declaring that Kosovo was a “threat to peace and security in the region.” Although Russia permitted this resolution, it served notice that it would oppose any authorization of military force by the Security Council.

Because of the Russian impediment, the Western states shifted their attention to NATO. Citing “humanitarian intervention” as the legal justification for any possible use of force, on October 9, 1998, NATO Secretary-General Javier Solana warned of future military action if Belgrade did not comply with international demands.<sup>46</sup> Apparently because of this warning, on October 25 Belgrade agreed to a ceasefire to be monitored by NATO from the air and by unarmed peace monitors from the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe on the ground. The humanitarian and security situation improved, but only temporarily; in the absence of a political agreement, the KLA and the Serbian authorities continued to maneuver for war. A particularly grisly incident in January 1999, when Serbian troops killed forty-five civilians in the city of Račak, led NATO to threaten air strikes. Indeed, at this point NATO became more fully committed to coercive diplomacy to force Belgrade to accept various principles about Kosovo’s future status, including the restoration of its autonomy and international protection by NATO.<sup>47</sup>

Against the backdrop of the threat of force if there was no negotiated settlement, beginning on February 6, 1999, the combatants and outside parties held a series of talks at Rambouillet, France, but they collapsed on March 19.

Following through on its threat, NATO launched air strikes on March 24, its first active military encounter in its fifty-year history. Many world leaders, from Czech President Václav Havel to U.S. President Bill Clinton, offered the decision to bomb Kosovo as evidence of cosmopolitanism and a growing sense of international community. Among the many statements, perhaps most famous was British Prime Minister Tony Blair's "doctrine for the international community," which argued that a more interconnected world requires a more interconnected set of foreign policies that consider not just interests but also values.<sup>48</sup> Although it is easy to dismiss the thoughts of politicians, who are hard-wired to invest all military action with a higher meaning, that some of these statesmen, including Václav Havel, had never before taken such a position gives some credence to the claim that world leaders were making a direct connection between the possibility of global solidarity and the need to defend the lives of the weakest members of the community.

That said, President Clinton might have provided a more accurate set of reasons for this unprecedented action: prevent a humanitarian emergency, preserve European stability, and maintain NATO's credibility.<sup>49</sup> Given the Bosnian precedent and Serbian violations of the basic human rights of Kosovar Albanians, Western officials had good reason to fear the worst, both in the immediate and the medium-term future. As Michael Reisman observed: "The facts were alarming. As always, information was imperfect, but enough was available to indicate that bad things were happening, things chillingly reminiscent of some earlier as well as, lamentably, more recent events in this century; and it was reasonable to assume (and, to some, irresponsibly naive not to assume) that, given the people involved, worse things were in store."<sup>50</sup> And the West's inaction in Bosnia and Rwanda cast a long shadow of shame.<sup>51</sup> Consequently, NATO proclaimed Kosovo to be a "humanitarian war" that would protect the Kosovar Albanians.<sup>52</sup> There also were security considerations. The Bosnian conflict always threatened to expand beyond the Yugoslavian borders, and while the violence was quarantined, the political and security effects were not. Kosovo's implosion might invite intervention by Greece, Italy, Turkey, and



other European countries. Finally, NATO was concerned about its own future. As NATO debated its response to Kosovo, others were using the occasion of NATO's upcoming fiftieth anniversary to debate NATO's relevance and future. Kosovo potentially gave NATO an opportunity to answer its critics and demonstrate its continued relevance.

NATO's bombing campaign, however, seemed to trigger the very humanitarian emergency it was designed to prevent. Milošević responded by unleashing a torrent of ethnic cleansing, causing hundreds of thousands of Kosovar Albanians to flee. Within two weeks, a half-million Kosovars had crossed into Albania and gathered at the Macedonian border, producing the largest refugee flight in Europe since World War II. This spectacle—mass displacement caused by a humanitarian war—was quickly becoming a major public relations disaster for an organization that had initially seen this operation as a public relations savior. Although few charged NATO with being directly responsible for this turn of events, it was heavily criticized for its failure to anticipate Milošević's move. But NATO was not the only organization overwhelmed by the flood of refugees. So, too, were the UNHCR, the lead humanitarian agency, and most relief agencies. In any event, it was NATO that was accused of creating the situation, and it was NATO that was expected to do something about it. Given all of this, NATO decided that relief was too important to be left to the relief agencies.<sup>53</sup> It began holding immediate discussions with the UNHCR.

On April 3, 1999, one day before NATO's fiftieth anniversary, UNHCR High Commissioner Ogata requested NATO's assistance. This was an unprecedented and highly controversial decision because never before had the UNHCR approached a combatant for direct assistance. Many at the UNHCR objected on the grounds that whatever temporary benefit the UNHCR might receive from NATO's assistance would be outweighed by the cost to its independence and ability to work in the field. Ogata overruled these objections on the grounds that the UNHCR needed NATO to help overcome Macedonia's unwillingness to permit entry of refugees (the government feared destabilizing the ethnic balance) and logistical problems in Albania.<sup>54</sup> NATO stepped in and acted as a "surge protector."<sup>55</sup>

NATO made a critical contribution at the outset of the refugee crisis but then transformed what was supposed to be a temporary and

supporting role into a permanent and commandeering role throughout the war and long after its assistance ceased to be needed.<sup>56</sup> The agreement between NATO and the UNHCR, as one evaluator observed, was a “Trojan Horse that allowed NATO to effectively take over the humanitarian operation from the inside.”<sup>57</sup> NATO became a “full-service” relief agency, helping to build camps, distribute relief, ensure security, coordinate the actions of relief agencies—and set the agenda.<sup>58</sup> Its decision to overstay its welcome and extend its activities into unauthorized areas had relatively little to do with the needs of the refugees and everything to do with NATO’s need to maintain support for the air campaign.<sup>59</sup> By continuing to play a coordinating role, NATO was able to cast its actions as humanitarian and thus continue to legitimate the war. For instance, the leaders of AFOR, NATO’s Albanian force dedicated to relief, commanded: “All activities undertaken by AFOR should contribute to the enhancement of NATO’s public image and the undermining of critics of the NATO air campaign.”<sup>60</sup>

Although most agencies resented the hit to their autonomy, the surprise was that there was little outrage or outright rebellion. After all, the same agencies that had strenuously guarded their humanitarian space—their independence, impartiality, and neutrality—in places like the Congo and Sudan were now working alongside, getting assistance from, and being directed by a combatant—and doing so with relative ease.<sup>61</sup> MSF was one of the few organizations that refused to participate on the grounds that doing so violated basic principles of humanitarian action and placed refugees at risk.<sup>62</sup> In general, while some NGOs attempted to distinguish themselves from governments, one observer concluded that “most were happy to go along with these arrangements.”<sup>63</sup>

Why? Certainly some relief organizations believed that they had little choice. MSF’s financial independence might allow it to walk away, but those agencies that relied on Western funders could not be so high-minded. To criticize NATO’s heavy-handed presence in the humanitarian operation overtly or to refuse to work in camps run by their own governments would have cut against their short- and the long-term interests.<sup>64</sup> And, Kosovo was not some forgotten emergency in the middle of Africa; instead, it was a media-saturated crisis in Europe, providing a showcase for many agencies to demonstrate to the world and their donors what they could do.

Yet their willingness to ally themselves with NATO also owed to their

perception that they were on the same side. Many openly supported NATO action because they had watched the lack of a response to Bosnia and now were desperately worried they were about to see indifference redux.<sup>65</sup> In the months leading up to the war, many agencies had continuously reminded Western powers of what their impotence had wrought in Bosnia and how the end game required the threat and use of military force, urging the West to apply these lessons learned to Kosovo. InterAction, the association of American NGOs, wrote to the U.S. National Security Council as early as June 1998 to encourage a military intervention to protect Kosovar Albanians.<sup>66</sup> As the violence continued with no political settlement in sight, more agencies made increasingly urgent appeals for a more forceful response. Accordingly, once the diplomatic talks collapsed and the bombing began, they saw themselves as allied with NATO as part of a humanitarian operation designed to protect civilians.<sup>67</sup> Oxfam appeared so enthralled with the idea of a NATO intervention that one journalist called the British army “a bit like Oxfam’s military wing.”<sup>68</sup> In general, human rights organizations and relief agencies that had integrated a rights discourse into their operations turned out to be humanitarian warriors.

NATO’s commandeering of the relief effort, the alliance between aid agencies and NATO, and the general politicization of humanitarianism had several consequences for the provision of relief and protection of civilians. It contributed to a bilateralization of the relief effort. Once NATO took charge of the relief effort, it quickly delegated different zones to different governments and their militaries, bypassing the UNHCR, which was increasingly starved for funds, and favoring their “national” NGOs to work in their “national” camps.<sup>69</sup> Although NATO insisted that this organization would improve the efficiency of the relief effort, it also would allow them to take credit for the relief effort.<sup>70</sup> As one aid worker reflected, “NGOs from particular countries were often selected to work in particular camps where ‘their’ army was in control—not necessarily because that NGO was the most competent.”<sup>71</sup>

More problematic, the bilateralization of relief by NATO did not necessarily benefit the refugees. Notwithstanding NATO’s boast that it was more efficient than NGOs, its lack of experience showed, as it made various mistakes, including choosing sites that had been previously rejected by NGOs because of their unsuitability.<sup>72</sup> Bilateralism also led to varying

standards, inequalities across camps, the failure of NATO's troop-contributing countries to meet the basic needs of the populations, and the attempt by beneficiaries to play one national authority off of another in order to get the best aid package.<sup>73</sup>

Now that humanitarian agencies and NATO were on the same side, many agencies felt the need to censor their views regarding its conduct of the war. They had lobbied NATO to use force, if needed, and thus implicitly or explicitly viewed the start of hostilities as an unfortunate but necessary development. Consequently, once the war began and they began to fear that NATO's wartime conduct might be increasing civilian casualties and violating international humanitarian law, the aid agencies did not feel free to speak their minds.<sup>74</sup> NATO's decision to avoid ground troops and to fight the war from the air made it easier for Milošević to execute ethnic cleansing; that is, how NATO fought the war in the name of protection actually led to a protection crisis. MSF had a pointed debate over whether or not to call for ground troops, and while there was considerable sympathy for the need, ultimately it refused to say one way or another, because it was worried about giving sanction to a "humanitarian war."<sup>75</sup> Accordingly, when the consequences unfolded, MSF felt poorly positioned to criticize NATO for delivering exactly what it had wanted.<sup>76</sup> Aid agencies also were remarkably quiet when rumors began circulating that NATO was dropping cluster bombs; Human Rights Watch was one of the few rights-based agencies to speak out against their purported use. Although some agencies protested NATO's bombing of Belgrade and targeting of non-military facilities, again, the decibel level was noticeably low. Oxfam, for instance, muted its concerns in order to avoid confronting Western governments at a critical moment during the war.<sup>77</sup>

This politicized humanitarianism also shattered the sacrosanct principle of impartiality.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, it revealed the extent to which these principles rested on a functionalist and interest-based logic. Relief agencies developed and defended these principles because they facilitated their access to populations at risk, gave them a measure of security and operational freedom, enhanced their legitimacy and funding, and enabled them to work virtually anywhere in the world.<sup>79</sup> Yet in Kosovo, impartiality served no immediate purpose, as these goals were already assured. Indeed, in Kosovo the traditional incentives for impartiality reversed course. As Nicholas Stockton wrote, "There were neither security concerns nor

difficulties negotiating access to the refugee populations with parties to the conflict. There were no donors insisting on strategies to minimize the incorporation of aid into the dynamics of the conflict. On the contrary, working in the camps actually required agencies to set aside impartiality. That they were prepared to do so with such dispatch creates the strong suspicion that the value of humanitarian principles for many agencies is a means more than an end.”<sup>80</sup>

The willingness to forgo impartiality, however, was not without costs. From Serbia’s perspective, NATO’s humanitarian and military activities were one and the same.<sup>81</sup> Indeed, because NATO had militarized the camps, it became a legitimate target in Serbia’s eyes. And because relief agencies were allied with NATO, they also could be treated as combatants.<sup>82</sup> There also was relatively little attention to the humanitarian situation in Serbia. Serbia had been hosting a very large refugee community, many of whom had fled the Croatian province of Krajina in the last stages of ethnic cleansing during the Bosnian war. It then experienced civilian casualties as a result of the NATO bombing. In response to these perceived humanitarian needs, in May 1999 a UN interagency needs assessment mission called for more assistance to Serbia, but none came. Although impartiality-guided aid agencies should have shown up on both sides of the border and attempted to treat all those in need according to the same allocation principles, “political considerations seem to have given rise both to humanitarian excesses on one side of the conflict, and a equally dramatic shortfall on the other.”<sup>83</sup>

Kosovo offered no conclusions, only further uncertainties, about the legitimacy of humanitarian intervention, and the UN-sanctioned intervention in East Timor a few months later only added to the confusion. In an attempt to prod further debate, in 1999 Annan delivered a speech at the UN General Assembly outlining two sovereignties, one defined by the sovereignty of states and the other by the sovereignty of peoples, and calling for the UN to debate how it should respond when states violated the sovereignty of their peoples.<sup>84</sup> Recognizing that the UN has a remarkable capacity for talking to death all good ideas, the Canadian government helped to create the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty. As fate would have it, the commission delivered its report just days after September 11, 2001, ensuring that one of the year’s most anticipated reports received a minimum of media attention.

The process that led up to the “responsibility to protect” has been much discussed, but several features capture some broader trends regarding the relationship between humanitarianism and international community.<sup>85</sup> Perhaps most famous was the very idea of a “responsibility to protect,” which suggested that if states fail to honor their responsibilities to their peoples, then the international community inherits that responsibility. In many respects, this statement was both revolutionary and evolutionary: it was revolutionary in terms of its crystallization of the claim that sovereignty is not sacrosanct but instead is conditional on how states treat their people, and evolutionary because it was a logical outcome of decades of statements regarding a right to relief. In short, it represented a concise articulation of the longstanding claim about the relationship between the sense of international community and the obligations of that community to protect its weakest members. But a responsibility to protect was not limited to using military force to protect lives. The international community also had a responsibility to act before the crisis erupted into violence. And it also had a “responsibility to rebuild,” tying protection to prevention, and humanitarianism to state-building, in a rebuilding exercise opening the door to forms of Western intervention to an extent that would make the nineteenth-century imperial humanitarians blush.<sup>86</sup>

The responsibility to protect represented a logical conclusion of a series of important developments about the relationship between humanitarianism and the international community, and the U.S.-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq represented the logical conclusion of decades of transforming humanitarianism from the private into the public. Although U.S. officials did not initially justify the campaigns on humanitarian grounds, preferring to anchor their actions in more traditional national security discourse, humanitarianism colored these invasions in various ways. While the United States did not read these interventions through the language of a responsibility to protect, others did, including Michael Ignatieff, a prominent member of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty; both the Taliban and Saddam Hussein had bludgeoned their peoples, and Hussein had committed genocide against the Kurdish minority, thus offering fairly persuasive arguments that they were not worthy of sovereignty.

After the invasion, the United States turned to humanitarianism for justifying the war. The United States tied the language of failed states to

international security, running with the claim that domestic stability (namely, democracy), markets, and the rule of law are critical for international stability.<sup>87</sup> From the U.S. perspective, humanitarianism was now part of military strategy, integral to winning over “hearts and minds” and thus instrumental for furthering American goals. Much to the horror of aid agencies, Colin Powell called NGOs “force multipliers” and part of the U.S. combat operations.<sup>88</sup> Rumors ran wild among the aid community that if American NGOs did not get on board in Iraq, then they would have their funding cut. The United States engaged in various actions that blurred the roles of the military and humanitarian organizations, including parachuting relief boxes in packages that resembled those that carried ordinance, and having combat troops shed their uniforms in favor of civilian clothing as they delivered relief. Perhaps most controversially, the United States assembled Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), units that combined military and humanitarian objectives.<sup>89</sup>

But this blurring was not a consequence of the American military strategy to appropriate humanitarianism only; it also occurred because humanitarianism had become more clearly political in its objectives. Although one aid worker recalls many agencies complaining bitterly about the “mixing of military and humanitarian mandates,” the simple fact was that the two were becoming indistinguishable. Both sides wanted to strengthen law and order, weaken the warlords, combat corruption, and support human rights. These were all worthy objectives, and it is difficult to see how Afghanistan can attain a reasonable future without them “but they were also clearly political, which meant that we were taking sides in what was turning into a bitter conflict.”<sup>90</sup> Agencies, the aid worker continued, had become “part of the front line in what the liberal interventionists now regard as a global war to bring a radical transformation to these conservative and traditional societies.”<sup>91</sup> Whereas in the beginning of the 1990s the controversy was whether aid agencies should seek military assistance, a decade later it was the military that sought aid workers for their objectives.<sup>92</sup>

According to many aid agencies, this blurring of boundaries jeopardized the ability of aid agencies to reach those in need and endangered the lives of aid workers, who might now be mistaken as enemy combatants.<sup>93</sup> Although there remains considerable controversy regarding the motives of those who attack aid workers, few suggest that the merger of

humanitarianism and combat operations makes life easier for them.<sup>24</sup> After the brutal killing of five MSF workers in northern Afghanistan in the summer of 2004, MSF announced its withdrawal after twenty-four years in Afghanistan and blamed the U.S. government for politicizing aid and thus making aid workers part of the U.S. coalition. And in another war also being fought in the name of humanitarianism, on October 27, 2003, the ICRC headquarters in Baghdad was bombed, killing two ICRC staff and wounding many others outside the gates of the compound. Although the causes of these attacks are still debated, most aid agencies concluded that a primary reason was because of the mixing of aid and war.<sup>25</sup>

Humanitarian organizations are used to being vulnerable, it is an occupational hazard, but they want that vulnerability on their own terms. It should be a vulnerability that owes not to the assumption that they have a unity of purpose with armed forces but rather a vulnerability that owes to their lack of armed protection. It is a vulnerability that is rooted in their being armed with nothing other than good intentions and solely interested in the needs of the population. It is this form of vulnerability, according to many, that provides the basis of trust and their ability to work where they are needed.<sup>26</sup>