Humanitarian Assistance During War and Conflict

Weiss, Thomas G., and Cindy Collins. *Humanitarian Challenges and Intervention: World Politics and the Dilemmas of Help*. Boulder, CO: Westview, 1996.

Prendergast, John. *Frontline Diplomacy: Humanitarian Aid and Conflict in Africa*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Reiner, 1996.

The authors of these two books are among the most initiated observers in the area of humanitarian assistance during the kinds of crises that are now called "complex humanitarian emergencies": situations of mass migration, hunger, disease and need integrated in circumstances of wartime combat and conflict. Thomas Weiss is the Co-Director of the Humanitarianism and War Project at Brown University in the United States, and has co-authored or edited no less than a half dozen earlier volumes on the subject since 1991.[1] Prendergast has been in and out of the Horn of Africa for a decade, directly involved in humanitarian assistance work.[2] Prendergast's book is essentially a manual intended for practitioners in the field, members of the staffs of NGO's, PVO's and international agencies. Weiss describes his volume as "a chance to synthesize" the subject "for student readers."

In their own description, the purpose of the Weiss and Collins volume is to show ". . . how institutional concerns within the international system - combined with the domestic contexts of armed conflicts - often yield policies that do not serve the immediate requirements of victims for relief, stabilization, and community reconstruction. Based on case studies of the post-Cold War experience in Central America, northern Iraq, Somalia, the former Yugoslavia, and Rwanda, the authors make recommendations for a more effective and efficient humanitarian system." Weiss and his project collaborator, Larry Minear, have also been responsible for a series of individual case study monographs on humanitarian assistance in many of the above-mentioned conflict areas, as well as several others.[3]

Prendergast's book addresses three issues: ". . . how emergency aid can exacerbate conflict, how to minimize aid's fueling of conflict, and how humanitarian assistance might contribute to peace building." Prendergast focuses entirely on "the Greater Horn" of Africa, which he defines as including the Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda and Burundi. Since Prendergast's first and the second issues are the obverse of one another, it is the dominant theme of his book: "Increasingly, questions are being raised about the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance and the extent to which it sustains or prolongs conflict. Whether aid actually lengthens conflict beyond its natural course is debatable; but it is indisputable that aid affects the course of conflict and has become integrated into conflict dynamics." Prendergast develops a professional code of conduct for humanitarian relief agencies in his book which insists that short-term decisions on the type or manner of delivering emergency assistance in a combat or conflictual setting be explicitly incorporated into a plan to resolve that conflict. Difficult as this may be in practice in particular instances, such as Angola or Rwanda, it is an excellent idea, and can be seen as an evolution of earlier concepts of bilateral and

multilateral aid "conditionality" and other forms of enhanced donor leverage in the early 1990's. It can also be seen as a natural evolution of Fred Cuny's concept, extensively developed in practice following the 1976 earthquake in Guatemala, that humanitarian assistance following a natural disaster in an underdeveloped country should be very consciously tailored to aid local development programs and most particularly to aid the poorest and most disadvantaged in those countries.[4] It is an idea that also dovetails with the increasingly emphasized suggestion that non-emergency development assistance to post-conflict societies be specifically designed to aid "peace building."[5]

Since Weiss and Collins' book also highlights what they call a ". . . controversial dilemma: When does humanitarian action do more harm than good? When is doing nothing preferable to doing something?," presumed negative outcomes are the overwhelming concern of one of the books, and an important consideration in the second.[6] It is easy to identify quite specifically what both authors refer to often obliquely in the following cases. In Angola (although outside of Prendergast's designated area of concern), after a nine month siege of Kuito by UNITA forces which resulted in 25,000 deaths by starvation, UNITA demanded a 50-50 split of all aid delivered to the city. The UNITA "beneficiaries" were solely, or very largely, the UNITA military besiegers. The UN's Department of Humanitarian Affairs and World Food program totally understood the situation and the trade-off, which they considered it necessary to accede to. In Bosnia, Serb forces demanded almost as large a proportion of all UN food, medical and fuel deliveries to the airport of Sarajevo, one of the six Bosnian cities that the UN Security Council had designated as protected areas. Serb artillery surrounding Sarajevo controlled the ability of aircraft to land on the airport runway. The UN Secretary General's Special Representative, Yasushi Akashi, and the military commanders of UNPROFOR, Generals Rose and Morillion, successively accommodated Serbian demands, and let the fighting and the killing - and the misapplication of humanitarian assistance - continue. In Somalia, UN food and supplies were brazenly stolen by contending militia groups for the entire year of 1991 until UNITAF arrived under Chapter 7 provisions in December 1992. In Rwanda, the UNHCR decided against returning Hutu refugees from the Goma and other camps in Zaire, and instead provided food to them through a camp system openly managed and dominated by the Hutu *Interahmwe* who had carried out the genocide. These military camp guardians even confiscated much of the food for their own use. International aid thus *maintained* those who had perpetrated the Rwandan genocide. The decision was knowingly made by UNHCR despite a public warning only the month before by the Director of *Médicins Sans Frontières* not to repeat the same pattern of behavior that had maintained the Khmer Rouge in Thailand based camps for years.[7] The UNHCR then repeatedly asked the UN Security Council for two years to provide forces to separate combatants from non-combatants in the refugee camps, commensurate with all refugee assistance guidelines, and an operation that the UNHCR could not itself carry out, having neither the mandate nor the capability to use force. The UN Security Council, and those powers which were capable of doing this - the US, France, Belgium - refused the repeated UNHCR requests. However, when faced with the same situation in Goma, several major private humanitarian assistance organizations understood directly and pulled out of the camps by August 1994, including the International Rescue Committee. In other words, they clearly

understood the problem that Prendergast emphasizes, and they saw its solution as well. Fred Cuny had understood these problems a decade earlier, and had quite a different answer to them: "We are dealing with the problems, not with the solutions," and he bemoaned the "wasted lives" resulting from ". . . dealing with the problems . . .."[8]

There are two basic questions that follow from unquestionably mistaken policy choices. First, is it correct to lay the fault with "humanitarian intervention," rather than to say that these particular chosen policies were at fault, and that instead other approaches to delivering the same humanitarian assistance should have been taken? Not the least of these would have been the international application of force under Chapter 7 of the United Nations Charter, and the rapid eradication of the situations described, an alternative which the authors of neither book discuss.

Second, are even the mistaken policies ever worse than doing nothing? Obviously, I do not think that it is "humanitarian intervention" per se that is at fault. As for the second question, millions died in Sudan between 1955 and 1972, and between 1983 and the present time, roughly one million in Mozambique between 1980 and 1988 and 1993-94, perhaps 800,000 in the Rwandan genocide, 350,000 starved to death in Somalia, and estimates were that perhaps 2 million additional deaths might follow without the intervention that began in December 1992. There is no evidence, from any source, that indicates that humanitarian intervention produces greater mortalities than the enumerated debacles of international inaction, or that ". . . military support seems to have caused more problems than it has solved," as Weiss suggested in another recent publication.[9] What does the ". . . slippery slope into humanitarian intervention . . ." produce worse than these? Unquestionably, others have argued that, in the Bosnian case, "humanitarian aid" delivered under the cover of a UN force did nothing more than permit the Serbs to continue killing for four years, and that it was functionally a policy that the European powers chose so as to avoid forceful action to stop the carnage, but that is certainly not a position that either of the authors of the books under review have chosen to argue.[10] In short, Prendergast, Weiss and Collins lay the blame for the wrong problem at the wrong door: it is not "humanitarian assistance" that has exacerbated or fueled conflict in particular instances. Conflicting political interests of the major states, and a weak, reluctant and ineffectual United Nations Security Council have impeded the actions which would have prevented the continuance of conflict, only one consequence of which - and not the greatest one - was the misapplication of humanitarian assistance.

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Endnotes

1. L. Minear and T.G. Weiss, *Mercy Under Fire: War and the Global Humanitarian Community* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1995); T.G. Weiss and L. Minear, eds., *Humanitiarianism Across Borders: Sustaining Civilians in Times of War*.

2. In the same year Prendergast also authored an incisive monograph on the conflicts in the area: *Multi-Layered Conflict in the Greater Horn of Africa* (Washington, DC: Creative Associates International, April 1996).

3. There are also a substantial number of other book-length studies in the past few years which review the same substantive questions, and for the same conflict areas. Several of these are: S.D. Murphy, *Humanitarian Intervention: The United Nations in an Evolving World Order* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996); *Managing Conflict in the Post- Cold War World: The Role of Intervention, Report of the Aspen Institute Conference* (Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute, 1996); Greg Hunt, "A Precarious Balance: The Role of the International Community in Weighing Self-Determination Against Ethnic Conflict," *JPIA*, 5 (Spring 1994); T.B. Seybolt, *Coordination in Rwanda: The Humanitarian Response to Genocide and Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Conflict Management Group, 1997); Francois Jean, ed., *Life, Death and Aid: The Médicins Sans Frontières Report on World Crisis Intervention* (London: Routledge, 1993); David Smock, "Humanitarian Assistance and Conflict in Africa," Peaceworks #6, (United States Institute of Peace), February 1996; and, Franca Brilliant, Fred Cuny, and Victor Tanner, *Humanitarian Intervention: A Study of Operation Provide Comfort* (Dallas, TX: Interect, undated).

4. Frederick C. Cuny, *Disasters and Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

5. Nicole Ball, *Pressing for Peace: Can Aid Induce Reform*, Policy Essay No. 6, (Washington, DC: Overseas Development Council, 1992); Nicole Ball, "Development Aid for Military Reform: A Pathway to Peace," *Policy Focus*, no. 6 Overseas Development Council (1993); Nicole Ball, "Levers for Plowshares: Using Aid to Encourage Military Reform," *Arms Control Today*, 22, no. 9 (November 1992), pp. 11-17; Nicole Ball with Tammy Halevy, *Making Peace Work: The Role of the International Development Community*, Policy Essay No. 18 (Washington, DC: Overseas Development Council, 1996); and, "Making Peace Work: Lessons for the International Development Community," Conference Report (Washington, DC: Overseas Development Council, 1996).

6. The same basic concern is dealt with in Ben Barber, "Feeding Refugees or War? The Dilemma of Humanitarian Aid," *Foreign Affairs*, 76, no. 4 (July-August 1997), pp. 8-14, and in John Pomfret, "Aid Dilemma: Keeping it from the Oppressors. UN Charities Find Crises Make Them Tools of War," *Washington Post*, 23 September 1997.

7. Alain Dexteche, "Genocide and Justice," *The Economist*, 331 (23 July 1994), p. 7873.

8. "The Lost American," PBS/Frontline documentary, 14 October 1997. At the time of the massive exodus of starving Ethiopians in 1985 into Sudan, and their concentration in Sudanese camps, Cuny recommended and carried out a successful return of large numbers of the refugees to their home areas in Ethiopia. Starvation in Ethiopia at that time was caused at least in part by food denial programs of the Ethiopian government as

part of its war policies. The withholding, confiscation, or denial of food figured as major factors in the wars in Biafra, Ethiopia, Sudan and Angola.

9. Thomas G. Weiss, "A Research Note About Military-Civilian Humanitarianism: More Questions than Answers," *Disasters*, 21, no. 2 (1997), pp. 95-117.

10. James Gow, *Triumph of the Lack of Will: International Diplomacy and the Yugoslav War*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).