

Deng, Francis M., and Larry Minear. *The Challenges of Famine Relief: Emergency Operations in the Sudan*. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1992.

Scenes of malnourished and starving children and adults are daily fare on the television news. Equally frequent are scenes of UN or NGO personnel responding to or being stymied by the conditions that gave rise to the lack of food. The underlying causes of these conditions, environmental degradation, economic collapse and multi-faceted conflict, are on the increase as the "new world order" is being formed in this era of transition. It is in this context that the expanding role of the UN and the increasing militarization of humanitarian assistance need to be evaluated with considerable care.

Francis Deng and Larry Minear provide a reasoned, well-researched and helpful analysis of the causes of and responses to famines, with specific chapters on the 1983-86 drought induced famine and the 1987-91 conflict-related famine in Sudan, followed by a prognosis of the coming decades. They are well qualified for the task: Deng as a senior fellow of the Brookings Institution and former Sudanese diplomat, and Minear as co-director of the Humanitarianism and War Project and former NGO administrator. They offer nuanced descriptions of the context of the famines, a detailed grasp of the logistics of the relief efforts, and critical yet compassionate understandings of the immensity of the human tragedy involved.

The text outlines the multiple and reinforcing causes of famine: inadequate national agricultural policies and systems; malfunctioning marketing, transportation and distribution mechanisms; growing populations; inadequate resources to import food; increasing drought; expanding conflicts; all compounded by the indifference of political authorities. They correctly suggest that "famine today is a function of the conscious strategies of governments and opposition groups," and as such, are tragedies "that did not have to happen."

While the assistance of the international community is described in some detail, the authors provide a needed "insiders'" perspective of how this aid looked from the vantage point of the recipients. It was seen as a national humiliation for a government that couldn't cope with its own problems and was trying to forge a national identity after a lengthy war. It totally overwhelmed local structures in its magnitude and style of operation. It had the appearance, if not reality, of advancing the political and religious agendas of the donor countries and agencies. Long-term sustainability and institution building were sacrificed for short-term results.

Thus it is not surprising that in evaluating the two major international responses to famine in Sudan the authors arrive at ambiguous and at times contradictory "bottom-lines." Relief assistance is seen as both impeding and advancing peace. While on the one hand international assistance is seen as a "triumph of humanitarian idealism and global solidarity that is rightly a cause for appreciation by the recipients," on the other hand questions are raised as to whether "the efforts of relief agencies are contributing, indirectly or even remotely, to an escalation of the war."

Several challenges are posed to multi-lateral and NGO agencies, as well as recipient governments, if the relief enterprise is to be useful in the future: greater cooperation between donor and recipient is necessary to reduce the worst intrusive elements of the process; local and global strategies for confronting major crises are necessary to reduce the inadequate “emergency” nature of these short-term efforts; much greater coordination of donor agencies and institutions is needed to reduce competition. To effect these changes the authors call for a series of institutional reforms that will ensure: high-level political review of humanitarian emergencies; a code of conduct for greater professionalism by aid providers; greater emphasis on building local capacity; and clearer authority for UN agencies to deal with armed insurgencies in the midst of humanitarian efforts.

The extensive experience of the authors compels them to recount “the continuing imperfections of human society” that allow famines to occur in a world of plenty. Yet they remain basically optimistic: “Rising moral expectations that now influence international responses to such tragedies and the increasing globalization of humanitarian action mean that suffering which might have been ignored in the past can no longer be tolerated today.” Would that the current situations in Somalia and Bosnia could prove them right!

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Reske, Charles F. *MACVSOG Command History, Annexes A, N, & M (1964-1966)*. Sharon Center, OH: Alpha Publications, 1992.

Of the many unusual things spawned by the Vietnam War, none was as mysterious as the Special Operations Group (SOG) of the US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV). Founded in 1964, SOG’s original function was to carry out clandestine, cross-border operations against what was then North Vietnam, as mandated by the so-called Operation Plan (OPLAN) 34A, a strategy handed down by the Joint Chiefs of Staff.¹ Officially known under the cover name “Studies and Observations Group,” SOG — or “MACVSOG,” as some insist — has received little attention, despite the growing intensity of Vietnam War studies as a whole. Early coverage by the *Washington Post* failed to inspire much interest elsewhere in the American press, and other sources tend to involve brief sections in such works as memoirs, semi-journalistic exposés, and unofficial histories of specific commando formations.²

Single-handedly rectifying the above situation is Charles F. Reske, whose background is of no small interest by itself. A holder of degrees in history and archaeology, Reske spent the Vietnam War years with the Naval Security Group,