Preface

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> Breaches of human rights and humanitarian law including mutilation, rape, forced displacement, denial of the right to food and medicines, diversion of aid and attacks on medical personnel and hospitals are no longer inevitable by-products of war. They have become the means to achieve a strategic goal.
>
> Sérgio Vieira de Mello 1999
> (quoted in Frohardt, Paul and Minear 1999:65)

The Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General in Iraq, Sérgio Vieira de Mello, was killed along with twenty-three of his staff on August 19, 2003, in an attack on the UN compound in Baghdad. He had told the UN Security Council only the month before that the mission might become a target. Some observers suggested, however, that the true target was the political reconstruction of Iraq under conditions of occupation.

Humanitarian intervention invariably rubs shoulders with politics, albeit awkwardly and sometimes, as in this case, with tragic results. Tensions between them take many forms, ranging from different assessments of the extent or even the existence of a crisis[1] to claims that humanitarian assistance is not saving innocent lives but sustaining politico-military forces,[2] or to the conclusion that the constraints upon aid agencies compel them to withdraw from the area of operation—whether to ensure the safety of their own staff[3] or because they believe

that their integrity is unacceptably compromised by staying.[4] Framing these operational issues are questions of the role of "military humanitarianism" (Slim 1995) and the political economy of "network wars" and the "securitisation of development" (Duffield 2001).

Clearly, providers of humanitarian assistance do not all share compatible mandates, analyses, priorities, or ways of working. But even similar or like-minded agencies may weigh up the situation, and their role within it, quite differently. One organization may judge that it can achieve more by closing down its mission in order to engage in "humanitarian advocacy," while another may stay because it prefers to continue providing assistance even if some of that assistance gets into the wrong hands. Or an agency may believe that simply witnessing violations of human rights may in itself offer a modicum of protection to civilians whose lives are at risk, by potentially raising the international political stakes of committing abuses. In other words, aid agencies may have equally valid justifications for choosing quite different courses of action. Since the question is usually one of judgment rather than of inviolable principle, then no single position is absolutely right.

To some extent, it may be argued that the challenges facing humanitarian agencies since the end of the Cold War, in particular since the declaration of the "global war on terror," are contemporary permutations of age-old problems—the apocalyptic predictions following the events of September 11, 2001, notwithstanding.[5] Although long-standing international covenants governing the treatment of civilians and enemy prisoners in situations of armed conflict may not be widely known or cared about, this does not in itself render them redundant. Nobody would suggest, after all, that the extensive use of torture invalidates the 1985 Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment or that because it is used in one country, that justifies its use elsewhere. The view that "humanitarianism is dead," as some "'back to basics' humanitarian Luddites" (Slim 2003: 3, his response to David Rieff on this point), seems as premature as the claim that the fall of the Berlin Wall and the breakup of the Soviet Union heralded "the end of history" (Fukuyama 1992). The phenomenal response to the 2004 Asian tsunami disaster also belies the argument that donors and the general public are suffering terminal "fatigue," although it is true that chronic tragedies—for instance, the number of lives avoidably lost each year to malaria, tuberculosis, measles, and diarrhea, let alone HIV and AIDS—fail to kindle the same spirit of compassion and global responsibility. Memories are short, a fact poignantly

illustrated by Mary Kayitesi-Blewitt (2006) in relation to the international oblivion surrounding the continuing tragedy of the thousands of women and girls who were raped during the 1994 Rwanda genocide.

That having been said, the greater willingness of some Western governments to intervene with military force in situations that they deem threatening to the local population or to global security makes it increasingly difficult for humanitarian actors to avoid furthering Western political agendas, irrespective of whether they endorse them. Many humanitarian organizations, including the specialized UN agencies, agonized over whether their contingency plans for post-invasion Iraq constituted in some sense an endorsement of the US-led military intervention. Even if they eschew government funding, humanitarian agencies may find it hard to adhere to the traditional principles of independence, impartiality, and neutrality when their access to people in need is mediated by armed intervention or political violence. Moreover, conflict and catastrophe interact in ways that complicate the humanitarian terrain. Thus, when the tsunami struck areas that were already in the throes of armed conflict, such as Aceh and Sri Lanka, the issue of who should control the relief and reconstruction programs in the affected regions necessarily responded to politico-military considerations as well as to "simple" humanitarian concerns. Similar dynamics played out in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans.

This *Reader* is based mainly on articles selected from a special issue of the international journal, *Development in Practice* (Volume 16, Numbers 3 and 4) that was guest-edited by Tony Vaux, for many years one of Oxfam GB's senior humanitarian directors and previously a development worker in India. The contributions gathered here seek to address some of these concerns and the dilemmas that they pose for aid agencies and their frontline staff in interpreting the principles of humanitarianism in contexts in which they risk being manipulated by one or another political agenda. He asks: "How should Western aid agencies manage their connections with Western governments? How should they relate to local organizations? Should they extend their functions from humanitarian relief to protection and address the political causes of conflict and disaster? If so, how will they remain independent?" (pp. 1–2).

The first section of the book looks at the politics of violent confrontation, whether this takes the form of conflict between sovereign nations, conflict between governments and opposing groups operating within national borders, or the use of troops in bilateral or multilateral "humanitarian intervention"—or, as Slim (2003:5) refers to it, "the deeply

regrettable phenomenon of humanitarian invasion"—either to prevent mass killings or to enforce a peace plan, as in the cases of Bosnia, Côte d'lvoire, Haiti, Kosovo, Liberia, Sierra Leone, or Timor Leste (Roth 2004). Vanessa Pupavac sets the scene, arguing that while humanitarian advocacy has traditionally underlined the causal relationship between state policies and situations in which people's lives are endangered, the recent tendency to challenge national sovereignty helps to legitimize the erosion of equality among sovereign states and the reassertion of international inequalities. A recent report by the World Bank (World Bank 2004) reiterates the widespread belief that large commitments are made in the immediate post-conflict phase—the so-called CNN effect—soon tapering off to more "normal" levels. The report criticizes such "front-loading," claiming that it damages the prospects of the economic growth that is needed to secure peace. Astri Suhrke and Julia Buckmaster argue, however, that this analysis and the assumptions upon which it is based are critically flawed. The report, they allege, fails to distinguish between commitments and disbursements or to take sufficient account of other factors that influence aid patterns, and that it vastly overplays the importance of the link between official aid and postwar economic performance.

Drawing on the case of a group of renegade soldiers from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) who claimed refugee status in Rwanda, Volker Schimmel illustrates how the artificial separation of political and humanitarian considerations, reinforced by the fact that the two areas were managed by different agencies, had the perverse (albeit unintended) effect of foreclosing on a political outcome that would have been acceptable to all parties and would have helped to consolidate the fragile DRC transition process. Furthermore, the differences of emphasis among the different types of agency, official and nongovernmental, that were focused on the humanitarian aspects of the intervention undermined the possibility their taking more robust concerted action. He calls for agencies involved in humanitarian operations to be proactive in seeking to understand and complement each other's mandates and insights, and in particular for all parties relevant to aid and postwar reconstruction to cross the political-humanitarian divide.

The second section of the book examines the issue of protection in situations of war or sustained violence, whether politically motivated or not. Andrew Bonwick challenges the widespread assumption that the "protection of civilians" depends on international intervention, arguing that humanitarian action should support and strengthen the rational decisions that people themselves take to try to ensure their own "safety"

in situations of armed conflict, rather than focusing exclusively on lobbying governments and other powers bearing a legal responsibility to protect civilians. While the protection of civilians has recently assumed prominence in the advocacy agendas of some Northern NGOs—possibly fired up by the apparent success of recent international campaigns on land mines or small arms-this approach risks casting all those living in situations of conflict as "helpless victims" rather than political and humanitarian actors in their own right. Based on their experience of working in Central America during the height of the counterinsurgency wars of the 1980s and 1990s, Martha Thompson and Deborah Eade draw out some of the lessons of policy and practice regarding security and protection from the ways in which Salvadoran peasant women developed their own "protection capacities" and leadership potential, even in the face of brutal aggression.

This theme is taken up by Gretchen Alther, who sets out how national and international agencies might best support Colombian grassroots "peace communities" in their own efforts to create nonviolent solutions to Latin America's longest contemporary armed conflict. While material assistance may help such communities to sustain themselves economically, living alongside or accompanying them and bearing witness to their struggle may be equally or more important in ensuring their survival.

The third section highlights the difficulties of providing humanitarian assistance in highly complex or contested terrains in ways that most of the parties involved agree should promise to do more good than they risk doing harm. This outcome can be equally difficult to achieve, whether the aid agency in question runs its own programs or channels its assistance through local organizations. These chapters therefore focus in particular on the relationships among the long string of agencies typically involved—from official donors to international NGOs, to national governments, to local NGOs, to the affected communities. Udan Fernando and Dorothea Hilhorst examine three types of response to the 2004 tsunami in Sri Lanka, arguing that the real way to understand humanitarian aid is to focus on what happens in practice and how those who are directly involved navigate their way through the challenges and dilemmas facing them. Jonathan Makuwira describes the problems experienced in trying to balance the accountability demands and the political and operational priorities of three "partners"—an official donor, an intermediary agency, and a local organization—in the case of postconflict and subsequent conflict prevention programs in Bougainville. He concludes that

formal accountability frameworks are a poor substitute for the mutual trust that will make relationships between such partners effective. Frank James Tester describes an innovative (though problematic) project that sought to combine disarming the civilian population in Mozambique with providing them with agricultural and other tools, and using the former weapons to create artistic sculptures to highlight the proliferation of arms and munitions among civilian populations. Again, the conclusion is that well-intended programs designed by external agencies that do not match local perceptions not only risk failure but can undermine other successes. With reference to its work in Kosovo, Suzanne Williams explores the difficulties faced by Oxfam GB in integrating gender equity goals into the institutional structures and policies that govern its activities in conflict and its aftermath. Despite organizational policies that assert the universal importance of gender power relations in shaping the gendered outcomes of aid interventions, in practice many humanitarian aid workers assume that gender analysis and gender-sensitive progamming belong to the "nonconflict" field of reconstruction and development and do not fall within the scope of urgent interventions. Effectively, there are two institutional cultures, each with its own norms and values. Williams argues that addressing gender equity is in and of itself essential to overcoming these divisions.

A final section includes a brief review by Martha Thompson of recent literature on the political economy of conflict and feminist writing on women in conflict. She argues that the former tends to be gender-blind, while the latter generally fails to take the wider political issues into account. Both perspectives need to be integrated in order to understand how women and men survive conflict and the ways in which their experiences of war and the survival strategies they adopt affect subsequent gender power relations. The volume concludes with a listing of current resources selected and annotated by Deborah Eade.

Recent years have seen a proliferation of standards and systems designed to increase agencies' accountability to donors and to their intended beneficiaries. As Tony Vaux argues, the impetus for this trend was the 1994 Rwanda genocide, but the enormous expansion of the emergency relief industry had already led to concerns that the resulting competition within the sector could depress rather than raise standards. The problem with the insistence on technical and measurable standards—such as the size of food rations for refugees in enclosed camps—is that they tend to foster a "checklist" mentality that can seduce aid workers into believing that a good job is being done simply because the boxes

on the form have all been completed correctly. Standards and frameworks are not, after all, political compasses or navigational tools: they will not tell you where you are, why you are there, or where you are headed. While humanitarian action is invariably political, so too is the failure to act or, more insidiously, the "'cleansing" of the humanitarian ethic from politics that wants neither humanitarian norms nor humanitarian workers in a given political arena (Slim 2003:5). As is clear from the contributions to this volume, and from the wider literature covered in the resources list, it is quite possible to do a good technical job within an overall context that is far from positive in its impact—for example by being part of a particular political or economic agenda, whether as a willing party or as a stooge. As Vaux points out, "[t]he awkward reality is that providing relief aid . . . can create new threats to human life."

NOTES

[1] The case of "famine" in North Korea is a recent example of this kind of standoff. Specialized UN agencies, such as the World Food Programme, claimed that food shortages were leading to extensive and chronic hunger and malnutrition, while the Pyongyang government initially denied that the situation was critical. A report written for the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) referred to "[a]n acrimonious policy debate . . . within humanitarian organizations about the severity of the famine—indeed, its very existence-and the role of international food assistance in ending it" (Natsios 1999:2). The report admitted that these questions were not new, but that in this case they reflected "legimate concerns about the effect of food aid to a country where those with political authority may have objectives very different from those of humanitarian agencies trying to reduce death rates" (ibid.). The interlinked nature of humanitarianism and politics was underscored by the passing of the 2004 North Korean Human Rights Act, which simultaneously provides US humanitarian assistance and allows North Koreans to be granted asylum in the USA (Amnesty International 2005).

[2] The definition of "humanitarian" aid is often bitterly contested. During the twelve-year civil war in El Salvador, for instance, the military authorities persistently maintained that any assistance to civilians in areas outside government control, including to refugees, was part of the FMLN guerrilla war effort. As Martha Thompson, who was a humanitarian worker in Central America for almost fifteen years, notes, "Counter-insurgency is about militarising politics, and politicising the military. Humanitarian aid to the war-displaced becomes a military issue. . . . In counter-insurgency, where the state must control everything, 'non-government' means 'anti-government'" (Thompson 1996:327). Meanwhile, in 1985 the Reagan Administration requested US$ 14 million in

military aid for the Nicaraguan Contras, promising to restrict this to "humanitarian" assistance if the Sandinista government agreed to a cease-fire. In 1998 a further US$ 47.9 million was granted, again for "humanitarian" purposes, despite the exposure in 1986 of the Administration's acquiescence in smuggling arms in the so-called Contragate affair.

[3] For instance, in January 2006 the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) withdrew from the southern region of the Republic of Congo (RoC; Congo-Brazzaville) after threats made against its staff by so-called Ninja fighters loyal to rebel leader Frédéric Bitsangou (International Relations and Security Network 2006). In July 2004, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) withdrew from Afghanistan after five of its staff had been murdered while serving there. Only weeks before the killings, MSF had criticized attempts by the US-led coalition forces "to co-opt humanitarian aid," arguing that this was "endangering the lives of humanitarian volunteers and jeopardizing the aid to people in need." In particular, it condemned "the distribution of leaflets by the coalition forces in southern Afghanistan informing the population that providing information about the Taliban and al Qaeda was necessary if they wanted the delivery of aid to continue" (MSF 2004).

[4] Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), for instance, withdrew from the Rwandan refugee camps because it judged that humanitarian assistance was doing more to strengthen the *génocidaires* than to relieve suffering. Though MSF has sometimes been accused by other humanitarian agencies of being utopian, Fiona Terry, formerly MSF's Research Director and now an ICRC delegate in Myanmar, counters that it is utopian to imagine that aid can be given without causing any harm and that such a pretense makes it harder to assess the relative good and harm of a specific humanitarian intervention and act accordingly (Terry 2002).

[5] Fiona Terry (2002) argues that too much emphasis is placed on changes in the post–Cold War context to explain the difficulties encountered in assisting victims of conflict, and that some aid agencies invoke such changes as a pretext to avoid responsibility for the consequences of their actions. The intertwining of aid and conflict has always been complex, and Terry maintains that some of the dilemmas faced in the past—for instance, the case of assistance for Cambodians along the Thai–Cambodian border and inside Cambodia in the 1980s—were probably more difficult than those being confronted today.

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