



INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE - UK
2007 ANNUAL LECTURE
 25th June 2007
 at the Royal Geographical Society

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'The Politics of Humanitarianism After Iraq'

It was some 27 years ago when I first met the International Rescue Committee properly, so to speak, because it was a large group who came to see me on the Thai-Cambodian border; a stooped African-American civil rights activist, Jewish veterans of the Eastern European human rights and refugee causes, some nervous diplomats, a British MP, the young Winston Churchill and his wife, and Joan Baez. They were all part of a freedom march to the Thai border with Cambodia to appeal to the Vietnamese invaders on the other side of that border to let the people go – or at least let them come and get rice and medicine.

And there in a nutshell was the beginning of the new humanitarianism that we see practised by Bob Geldof, Medecins Sans Frontieres, Save the Children, IRC itself, Comic Relief or the Make Poverty History campaign. Astute use of the media to draw attention to a hidden crisis combined with a challenge to the involved government to protect the people in its territories. And in those days there was not I suspect a hot-blooded war correspondent in the whole of south-east Asia who would not have followed Joan Baez into Cambodia, land mines and all.

As it happened though, this well staged IRC project, because it was an IRC organised mission, got stopped at the border and its members had to pass their time in the UN High Commissioner for Refugees camps on the Thai side of the border that I was running before heading back to Bangkok. But the point had been effectively made and shortly thereafter, to blunt the criticism that they were denying civilians caught up in the fighting food and water, the Vietnamese allowed a so-called land bridge to be opened up. Cambodians could come to the border to a feeding point, collect a sack of rice and other food stuffs and take it back to their villages. A shrewd solution to a humanitarian problem. Yet I'll argue tonight that in humanitarianism nothing is quite as simple as it looks. Solutions beget new problems. And above all the neutrality that so vitally underpins humanitarian work is slipping from us.

Now in those days it was all pretty innocent. Some people worried that these feeding programmes would serve as a magnet to depopulate and destabilise Cambodia by drawing the population to the border and undermining the Vietnamese occupation. The most suspicious, and I know of at least one of them here tonight, suspected that this might be an American plot to do just that. But most of us accepted that it was an unintended consequence of trying to do the right thing: food and help to sick and dying people.

Back to the media point – today George Clooney is again playing that Joan Baez role, working with IRC and many other celebrities. and they've together done a great job of

shaming the Sudanese and their Chinese backers and oil customers into allowing more humanitarian access and more peacekeepers, we hope, into Darfur. When Hollywood threatened action against the Beijing Olympics, the Chinese authorities acted. Tinseltown proved momentarily better at the foreign policy game than London or Washington.

However, beneath these kinds of important wins are much deeper currents. For several years President Bashir of Sudan has faced down the calls for new peacekeepers to join the hard-pressed African Union force there by claiming that it's a Western plot to invade his country under the auspices of the UN blue flag. Tony Blair and George Bush have repeatedly called for the right kind of action in Darfur only to be rebuffed as the architects of Iraq. Bashir has tried at least to make them his best weapon.

However, it's not their loss of credibility that concerns me today but rather that of humanitarian workers. The trouble is the two are linked. As one who has long since hung up his relief worker's backpack and Timberlands, I've watched the work I used to do get steadily more dangerous as it is seen as serving Western interests rather than universal values. When I worked at the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, a handful of photos in a conference room in our headquarters building in Geneva recorded the colleagues who'd fallen in the line of duty. On one day in Baghdad in 2003, 23 of our colleagues, including the best known humanitarian official of his generation, Sérgio Vieira de Mello, lost their lives at the hands of a truck bomber.

Between 1997 and 2005, the number of relief workers lost annually had more than doubled to over a hundred. In 2006, 60 relief workers were lost in Darfur alone. Now some 80% of those who've died are nationals of the countries where they died and losses amongst international staff are, in general, not increasing. Also there's been a huge increase in the number of aid workers, some 60% over the last eight years to an estimated quarter of a million people. So there are a lot more people, if you like, in harm's way.

But the fact is most years we now lose more unarmed aid workers than military peacekeepers. And more and more of them die as a consequence of political violence rather than, say, their Land Rovers tipping over. Further, the success in holding down casualty numbers from being worse is because of security measures which have seriously impeded the international community's ability to bring relief where it's needed. Access to Somalia is on and off. Huge swathes of Darfur are at times closed to humanitarian access. There's almost at present no one to witness the victims of the current renewed war in Ethiopia's Ogaden Desert or the many victims in the Central African Republic. Work in Iraq is almost closed off. Northern Uganda and parts of Congo remain under-helped compared to Darfur. Parts of Colombia are hard to reach. Parts of Sri Lanka are sadly hard to reach. When I was overseeing from New York our UN operation in Lebanon last summer, as war flared between Hezbollah and Israel, security had to feature heavily in every decision the Secretary General or I made. We, for the most part, kept our people safe but at times at the expense of the speed and reach of our response.

When I started at the UN some 27 years ago, security largely meant sleepy building guards under the amiable direction of ex-bobbies and New York Police Department types, whose main job seemed to be ensuring that the Ban-the-Bomb protesters didn't deface our buildings. By the time I left I'd helped to choose an ex-British counter-terrorism chief as the UN's security head. Sir David Veness is fantastic at his job but it's a new world.

Perhaps the assault on neutrality and impartiality that's my main theme here is best illustrated by what's happened to journalists who are not so well protected. In Iraq 108 journalists have been killed since the war began, along with 39 drivers and translators. By contrast four journalists were killed in the first Iraq war and seven in Kosovo. Even in the bloody internal events in Algeria in the 1990s only about half this number died; and in

Colombia, going right back to 1986 in an extremely bloodthirsty internal conflict, right up till today, the number of journalists who've died is just 54.

The world is simply a much more dangerous place for those who cover conflicts, whether as journalists, relief workers or, for that matter, peacekeepers. We or they have become targets. They're not hurt because they happen to be in dangerous places but because people want to hurt them for political reasons, to punish the West or to drive the relief workers away. From the land of statistics, the USA, comes the macabrely comical statistic that its aid workers are the fifth highest category of civilian work-related deaths but the highest for politically motivated reasons.

And the brutal truth is politics is making it harder and harder to serve victims needs by reaching them with assistance or bearing witness to their suffering, and thereby staying the hands of those who would harm them. I'd watch glumly last year as the UN's humanitarian chief Jan Egeland laid out maps of Darfur on Kofi Annan's conference table showing the widening yellow circles that marked the no-go areas for humanitarian workers. And if you think relief workers or journalists have it tough, consider the civilians we're trying to help. 50 years ago one civilian life was lost in wartime for every nine soldiers. Today it is nine civilians for one soldier. War has become nasty, brutish and local and happens inside states and targets civilians. In the 1990s, IRC reports that there were 56 wars in 44 countries – more than 90% of those in countries of the developing world. Probably barely any of the combatants knew or cared about what the Geneva Conventions were.

Now Iraq is, in that sense, just the latest stage of this and 9/11 the preceding trigger. Both came at the end of a longer and more complicated process that has knocked humanitarian work off the straight and narrow of non-political, impartial help, where every government and party to a conflict, be it rebel movement or other, accepted us at face value as bringing help to the needy.

When I headed for the Thai border in 1979 I, like everybody else, went with a clean and simple humanitarian impulse. It wasn't complicated, we just felt we had to help. Vietnam had proved a tragic mistake and whatever one's political conclusions – whether one had backed the war or not – we all wanted to help repair the aftermath.

Now that same impulse in different forms has buoyed up, and indeed bulked up, the UN and NGO humanitarian agencies in the subsequent years. Since the early 70s, and going back even before Thailand to Biafra and Bangladesh, there's been frankly a growth industry of humanitarian work. And it was partly because the UN, which could have dealt with a more political agenda of its own, was blocked from doing so by the Cold War and development, the other area it was very engaged in, was very ideologically divided and in many ways much more costly to achieve results in. So even in a polarised Cold War, there was some limited agreement and space to help the victims of famine or conflict. So the work grew and grew and grew.

Soon the impact of multi-million dollar operations on poor countries had much wider effects than just keeping people fed and well. It became a dominant part of the GDP of a Cambodia or the Horn of Africa or Central America. So willy nilly it became part of politics. At the same time, those of us involved saw that if there were to be any solutions to the problems we were grappling with, politics mattered.

But, of course, the bigger you are, the harder neutrality is and in the case of the UN, arguably anyway we multitask; and so nobody was quite sure when we were doing politics and when we were doing humanitarian and relief work. And that meant that we ended up being seen as taking sides, and by doing so, endangered the very impartiality which is our defence. Let me just take the example now of Gaza and the West Bank – the United

Nations is almost the only official international presence in Gaza. It's been there for the Palestinian people, particularly through UNRWA and also through UNDP and now other agencies as well, really for a very, very long time; in the case of UNRWA since the very beginning. But nevertheless, last August as things blew up, Palestinians demonstrated angrily outside those UN offices in Gaza as they did in Beirut, Damascus and Cairo, because the UN was seen as one-sided. The Red Cross and its international arm, the ICRC, the gold standard of humanitarian neutrality, also came, like the UN, under physical attack in Baghdad. For all my colleagues, hardened to being unfairly criticised in the US and parts of Europe for being anti-Israel, our low standing in the Arab world was a hard pill to swallow. At best we could try to shrug it off as showing that neutrality sometimes means all sides being angry with you.

But the situation in Gaza and the West Bank, then and now, doesn't allow for such an easy answer. For the political side of the UN, the refusal of Hamas to recognise Israel is a fundamental show-stopper. No organisation can do anything but stand in solidarity with a member state whose very existence is challenged. Nevertheless, on the humanitarian side, there is plenty to do. And even on the political side, plenty to explore in terms of possible solutions. A population denied work and income, whose basic services have been cut off from finance, represent as dire a humanitarian need as it gets. Yet politics has stopped the helping hand. Gaza is under siege and the humanitarian effort has been reduced to the barest and most tentative of ones. Now with Western support to Fatahland and a political-economic blockade of Hamastan, as one journalist put it, sides are being taken. The humanitarian effort is not seen as neutral.

And I must say, as an old soldier of this business, my blood still boils almost as much when politics keeps us away from those we should help and tips us into one-sidedness. But it also boils when we end up being a kind of useless people in the middle failing to grip the political realities of the different conflicts we're dealing with.

So my basic point is that, through actions of our own, the growth of the humanitarian work, the greater focus on tackling the root causes that have created these humanitarian problems, we have steadily compromised the simple neutrality which underpinned our efforts of old. But, of course, that steady erosion of standing has been rapidly accelerated by the events of 9/11 and Iraq and the general, polarisation of the world between the West and Islam which, whether or not you accept its reality or not, the sorest, most open wound dimension of it is found on the kind of frontline of conflicts where these humanitarian and peacekeeping operations both often happen.

Let me just say a word therefore to bring together this issue of the consequences before talking about what we can perhaps do about it. First for the humanitarian, it's not so much the danger to the lives of staff – we protect them as best we can and people who sign up for this work know they are taking risks, there are safer jobs and vocations to pursue. But it is that the need to ensure them the best reasonable security we can means that increasingly we cannot allow them to visit huge civilian populations in great needs of assistance, and it's those victims who obviously concern us the most. And let us not underestimate the numbers, when, for example, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, there was a chaotic period over recent years, it was hunger and disease not bullets that killed most of the several millions of people, maybe as many as four million who died, and IRC at the time did some enormously important work on the nutritional health and mortality status of that population.

So assistance matters. But perhaps witness matters as much because when relief workers can't reach populations at risk, it is exactly when governments and rebel forces collect the nerve to do really terrible things to those people - in the darkness without the media there to cover it, without international or other relief workers there to observe it. It is there, under

those circumstances, that the terrible things happened in Cambodia in the early 70s or happen to this day in Myanmar and elsewhere.

So how do we begin to try and turn this around and rebuild a humanitarianism and, for that matter, although it's not so much the principle focus tonight, a peacekeeping capability which enjoys universal trust and is seen as acting for people and in the name of universal agreed values and not as serving the interests of only particular countries? Let me start at the local level. I and the Secretary General and many others, many of you in the room here tonight, have pressed in recent years for this right to intervene when a government attacks its own population - the so-called Responsibility to Protect, which requires us indeed to intervene when a government commits the equivalent of war crimes or mass abuse of human rights against its own citizens. And we have seen an emergence of groups like the International Crisis Group, as well as the IRC and many others, who have become a lobby for effective intervention in these situations, of which Darfur is just one.

But we have to find a way of winning universal, global understanding and support for this concept. We have to work amongst the nations of Africa, for example, to build acceptance of this. A wise observer of the UN told me only this weekend that, while this doctrine had been adopted in the Millennium Plus Five summit of 2005, that only 50% in his view of countries seriously accepted this doctrine of a right to intervene to protect human rights of those being abused on a mass scale. Well, it needn't be those numbers. When I meet with African leaders and African civil society even more, they are appalled at what they see as happening to their brothers and sisters in Darfur. Africa has a real interest as a continent in this doctrine. Whatever the suspicions of individual African countries, Zimbabwe and one or two others, that somehow this is the thin end of a wedge which will be used against them, we have to win their support to support this doctrine by assuring them of its international political neutrality. It's to protect the rights of people, not to promote particular forms of government.

We have to also think very hard, and organisations like IRC are grappling with this all the time, of the relationship between the military and relief workers. In Sierra Leone and in Kosovo, we saw brilliant partnerships between British armed forces and British and other NGOs where the army provided extraordinarily important logistic support and indeed has a lot more logistics capability than most NGOs. Even in north Afghanistan to this day it works quite well where the British Army has provincial reconstruction teams which go out and act like an NGO in khaki in terms of giving relief and community help. Go to southern Afghanistan or go to Iraq and you see a dangerous politicisation of the whole concept of the relief worker; because the civilians are gone, it's too dangerous to deploy unarmed people. So the only version of a relief worker they often see is one who comes from a NATO or a coalition army, carries a gun and brings help in the other hand. And we really need to weigh carefully whether or not that works as a neutral form of relief delivery or whether it risks persuading whole populations that relief is a tool, or humanitarianism is a tool, of pacification.

But we also in the UN need to work out whether really we can, under the same flag, out of the same offices, run humanitarian and political operations. Does one compromise the other? How could we get some distance so that people would see that when we were bringing humanitarian assistance, it was without a political agenda of any kind? And I think there are a lot of those issues that need to be worked through.

But all of them sit as small actors and players in the bigger scheme of things, under the great issue that we have all had to struggle with since 9/11 – a divided world where the war on terror has become the great organising dimension of too much of foreign policy and certainly of too much of humanitarian assistance and relief. And we have seen the efforts to get at the root of political problems, to facilitate and mediate solutions between populations,

instead become seen as efforts to impose democracy or impose Western market economies on societies. And this has stoked up the fears and resentment of outside interference so that, instead of humanitarian and other work being seen as politically neutral, it is, as I've said before, starting to be seen as the agent of a Western agenda.

And it filters down to have all kinds of consequences. When Sérgio Vieira de Mello, who I mentioned before, was working in Afghanistan or in Kosovo or in East Timor, in all of these places and many others, he had no compunction of shaking hands with Taliban commanders or Palestinian leaderships and many other groups. And he would often laugh that if he worried about who he'd shaken hands with that day, he'd never sleep at night. But his fundamental point was that, by talking to them to negotiate humanitarian access, you were in no way condoning or recognising them as a legitimate political force – you were just finding a local means of delivering help and assistance.

So we've lost that ability to connect. I very much doubt that any UN official, and someone may hopefully correct me on this, has spoken to a member of the Taliban in a year or so. Whereas when last time they were out fighting their way to Kabul, there were regular contacts with them and nobody at that stage confused this with the UN somehow recognising the Taliban.

But as we look to how we can correct this, I think, as I've implied, to just go back to the naïve ideas that I took out as a young man to Thailand in 1979 is probably not the way. To go back to a simple relief assistance of rice and clinics is not credible or even particularly effective. We need a doctrine. We need to recognise these human rights imperatives of the need to intervene under certain circumstances. We have to, as I've said, persuade governments of the moral importance and overwhelming need to allow this as a doctrine. And we have to situate it though in a new global politics which looks for a resolution of those issues which have so polarised the world, of which the Middle East and Iraq obviously are at the top of the list.

But in doing that and settling some kind of resolution to these conflicts, some kind of end to them, we need to move to reposition this humanitarian work as being about humanitarian intervention to protect people and get people's lives back on track; to yes, offer them food but also offer them human rights protections. But to insist that it is not about regime change. It has to be about an assertion of rights, the rule of law, about accountability of those who perpetrate genocide to an international court system. But it cannot be a blunt weapon for overthrowing governments and instituting those more to our liking.

And within it, there's got to be a code for relief workers who commit to certain kinds of behaviours, certain kinds of neutrality. But I think it's got to be one which goes beyond my old rice and clinics formula in some interesting ways. In Darfur and elsewhere, there's a huge yearning for the international community to not just hand out relief but engage as honest brokers at the village level to try and reconcile and mediate agreement between divided communities. There's a huge interest in going beyond these very expensive annual relief operations to do as IRC is trying to do, to tackle those roots of poverty. I'm sure all of you have heard the argument that, in many ways, Darfur is as much about the environment and poverty as it is about religion and tribe. In many ways it is a region whose population is growing, whose amount of fertile land is therefore being borne on ever more heavily by that population. And in many ways, this is a war between cultivators and herders, where herders are trying to expand the control of the land to make sure that the cultivators don't drag them in turn off it.

And unless one has strategies which tackle those kinds of roots which create a sustainable agriculture for both herders and farmers, which combine it with an effort to reconcile communities, not only will our efforts not be as effective as they might, but they will go on

meeting this resistance because they will be seen not only as very political but very expensive and not necessarily always as relevant as they should do.

Now I want to come to Iraq. I think by this point you probably think that we put the word Iraq in the title to just fill the seats, but I've saved Iraq for last because, in a way, it is at this moment the kind of nemesis of humanitarianism. There are almost no NGOs, if any, active at least with international relief workers in Iraq. Yet it is a country with two million probably internally displaced at this point and two million refugees in its neighbouring countries, particularly Jordan and Syria. There is a huge level of internal violence, higher than anywhere else in the world. And I must say, although there is a debate about the number of Iraqi casualties I, who have used this methodology used by John Hopkins University in the States, am inclined to believe that there have probably been 5 or 600,000 Iraqi lives lost in violence; and all of this in a country of 40 million. So these numbers are huge by any scale.

And yet at the moment, there is very little acknowledgement of either a humanitarian or a refugee crisis. On the refugee side there is coverage because journalists can reach them but there is an official silence almost about it because, of course, a refugee flow on this scale points dramatically to the crisis of policy faced in Iraq today. And levels of casualty on this scale point to an internal breakdown of law and order and an inter-communal violence on an even greater scale than we have been able to gather from the journalism that we see day by day.

So the first thing is for groups like us tonight to acknowledge the scale of the humanitarian problem, to not allow the refugees to politely be ignored. Not ignored because there has been generous help from both the UK and the US governments, but there isn't perhaps the full recognition that this is the biggest refugee flow of its kind in many, many years, and there isn't the level of attention to it or effort towards it that it would seem to merit compared to other flows on this scale. But second, the humanitarian community, and this I think is the provocative bit given what I've said about security and other issues, has to ready itself to go back into Iraq as the coalition soldiers leave. If we can assume that they will only leave when some kind of internal peace of some kind has been shored up, we who believe in humanitarianism I think have to go back at that point, to demonstrate in the way that we tried to do after the Vietnam war that, whatever the divisions that had brought us into that war, there was now a common front in helping rebuild Indo-China.

And surely Iraq cries out for that same commitment, that same people-to-people repair after the events of the last few years? And Iraq is perhaps the only place dramatic enough to allow that kind of global repositioning in the eyes of sceptics in the Muslim world and elsewhere, that this really is a new chapter that we're starting together, where we come in peace and in partnership to work with Iraqis to rebuild their country. And obviously that day can only come when there is some kind of political solution and the possibility of beginning to think about a new future for Iraq, and planning for it. Because at the moment, in a sense, the situation has become so difficult that I think we're all in a kind of numbed silence about it, exhausted by the lack of good options, dismayed by what has happened, seeing very little chance for us to influence events in the future.

And I would therefore in closing just say that humanitarianism, for that matter peacekeeping, and so many aspects of the modern international engagement that we see, depends on this global acceptability. It should not be an apolitical neutrality which gets into this naïve innocence of just a food and a clinic but a profound understanding that you don't help people unless you tackle the economic and political roots of their problems. It should be a humanitarianism which is founded on respect for peoples to make their own choice about their futures, which rests on values of human rights and a rights based approach to these issues, rather than allowing ourselves to become the wedge or pawn in political changes

which we cannot in any way control or be responsible for, but which have sadly and tragically coloured our efforts so frequently in recent years.