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It is difficult to recall a contribution to the German political debate that has been as roundly ignored, both in Berlin political circles and by the wider public, as President Horst Khler's comments on the unrest in the Democratic Republic of Congo. In November 2008, Khler argued that "if we are serious about the values we all stand for," then Europeans must be prepared to "provide soldiers to put a stop to these murders." ()

Yet however it is defined, national interest cannot serve as the sole basis for decisions regarding participation in interventions abroad. The international community of states, and thus in principle every nation, has long accepted the fundamental obligation to intervene in cases of grave violations of human rights -- even if their prevention does not promise any party an economic or geopolitical advantage. In 2005 the United Nations accepted the principle of "**responsibility to protect**," which in essence argues that if a state is not willing or able to protect its population from serious violations of human rights, the world community must intervene. This does not have to entail military intervention, but the latter cannot be excluded as a final option. While the "**responsibility to protect**" has not been explicitly codified in international law, its adoption by the United Nations has given it quasi-legal status. ()

Lessons of the Recent Past

() The current situation in Congo has revealed once again that democracy cannot be guaranteed simply by holding free elections. Following the Congolese elections, EU troops were rapidly withdrawn without any safeguards in place against a relapse into civil and gang warfare. Such safeguards should have included exerting diplomatic pressure on neighboring Rwanda to prevent it from meddling in Congo's problems. ()

The crisis in Burma in the summer of 2008 presented another facet of the challenge posed by humanitarian disasters. While Burma's autocratic regime did not cause the humanitarian crisis brought about by Cyclone Nargis, the junta exacerbated it by obstructing the delivery of international aid. ()

If the West intends to seriously entertain the idea of intervening in a country against the will of the national government, it must accept both the necessity of military means and the risk of violent confrontation with local power holders. It must also accept that such action may lead to a decline in relations with powers -- such as China and Russia -- that usually see humanitarian intervention as a masked attempt to extend Western influence. Moreover, in order to ensure the establishment of sustainable political and social structures following the disempowerment of a regime, the intervening powers must move rapidly from directly providing emergency aid to a program of nation building. This can take years, if not decades, of intensive engagement and

requires enormous material investment. ()

The fatal consequences of this development are not limited to Congo. For years now they have been evident in the approach to the Sudanese province of Darfur. In order to avoid intervening itself, the West has sent in a poorly equipped African Union protection force, which is unable to do more than merely observe the murderous campaign being conducted by the Sudanese government and its militia allies against the country's black African population. ()

Trial and Error

In historical terms, humanitarian interventions are still a new phenomenon. It is only since the 1990s that the international community has broken with the dogma of classical international law that prohibits interventions in the internal affairs of sovereign states. Since then, conceptions of international law have gradually shifted in the direction of international civil rights. However, the enforcement of such rights remains largely based on an arbitrary principle of trial and error -- with fundamentally uncertain outcomes. Of course, there can be no master plan tailored to deal with all the humanitarian catastrophes that could conceivably occur. However, more conscious, systematic foresight; more international coordination; and a more targeted division of labor in the prevention and pacification of conflicts are goals that are not only possible but indispensable if the international community is to avoid repeatedly being taken by surprise by crises. ()

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