

IN AMERICA this has been a week for the drawing up of lists of the virtues of Barack Obama, lists of big names for his administration, lists of big tasks for his bulging in-tray. But in Congo this week a million hungry and terrified refugees are in desperate need of food and protection. The two things are connected, in a way that may surprise, and dismay, Mr Obamas admirers. If he is to prove worthy of the near-universal exaltation with which his election has been greeted, he has to prepare America and the world for the possibility of further American military interventions overseas.

This is not to say that it is America that has to provide the 3,000 extra peacekeeping troops the United Nations has asked for in Congo. The French have troops available, and America is in no mood for new entanglements. With an overstretched army and an economy on life support, most Americans reckon this is a time to rebuild at home, not embark on new adventures in far-flung places. Most foreigners probably agree. In their eyes, George Bushs wars were a disaster, if not a crime. They think that whatever Mr Obama says about winning in Afghanistan, he was elected to practise war no more.

A lovely sentiment. The trouble is that history does not take a holiday just because America needs a breather. Mr Obama will sooner or later face a question that has plagued all recent presidents. Forget about wars launched in the name of defeating terrorism, stopping nuclear proliferation or pursuing some other direct American interest. What should the worlds strongest and (still) richest country do when famine or conflict strike places whose own governments will not or cannot help, where America has no direct interest, but where averting a humanitarian disaster may require military intervention?

The answers of previous presidents have depended on temperament and circumstance. George Bush senior sent marines to feed Somalia. Bill Clinton used force to stop the ethnic cleansing in Kosovo but not in Rwanda, where Hutus killed close to 800,000 Tutsis. The junior Bush decided against intervention in Darfur, even though his own administration called the ethnic cleansing there a genocide and the killing goes on.

It remains to be seen where Mr Obamas temperament will lead, but it is easy to see how circumstances might dull any appetite for intervention. (...) America did not invade Afghanistan and Iraq out of altruism, but those wars have shown how hard it is to rebuild broken countries. Congo itself is an example; even with the UNs biggest peacekeeping operation it is still in danger. For several years The Economist has repeated like a stuck gramophone needle a call for intervention in Darfur, but we acknowledge the law of unintended consequences. In all such cases, the use of force should be the very last resort.

And yet a strong moral case remains for forceful outside intervention in desperate cases. Would the world still do nothing if it had a second chance to avert genocide in Rwanda? (...)

From the Balkans to Liberia to Sierra Leone to Kosovo, armed intervention has, on balance, helped to end or forestall catastrophes. Though imperfect, the UN operation in Congo has helped to end a war that killed millions: it should be reinforced immediately, preferably by troops from Europe, not local ones. Too often in Congo, neighbours promising help stay to plunder.

Two jobs for a new president

As for Mr Obama, he has a chance to restore Americas moral leadership. That is not something he should do by scouring the world in search of new monsters to slay. Nor, though, can a war-weary America turn its back on people threatened by ethnic cleansing or genocide. Since 2005 the UN has accepted a **responsibility to protect** people in such cases, so this is not a burden for America alone. But since the UN has no army, and no other countries have the military resources America boasts, there may be times when only the superpower can move soldiers swiftly where they are needed.

Should that call come, Mr Obama will need the courage to respond, notwithstanding Americans fatigue. In extremis, if the danger is great and veto-wielding members of the Security Council block the way, he and others might have to act without the Security Councils blessing, as NATO did in Kosovo. Far better would be an early effort by Mr Obama to reach agreement on the rules to apply and forces to earmark so that the UN can actually exercise its collective **responsibility to protect**

That will be hard, but Mr Bush was actively hostile to such work. How fitting if the next president made possible a genuinely global response to the next Rwanda, Congo or Darfur.

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